

Mary Anning – Biography

The name Mary Anning is now synonymous with the world of fossils and fossil hunting. Despite her humble beginnings, she would go on to become one of the leading experts in these prehistoric artefacts and become regarded as a pioneering palaeontologist, dealer and fossil collector!

Early life

Mary Anning was born on 21st May 1799 to Richard Anning and Mary (known more commonly as Molly) Moore. Her parents were not wealthy and Richard often had to supplement his income as a cabinetmaker and carpenter by mining fossils from the coastal cliff-sides on the beaches at Lyme Regis – an English seaside town in the county of Dorset – and then selling these to tourists. The family also suffered immense heartbreak; of the ten children who were born, only two survived to adulthood. Whilst terribly tragic, the high infant mortality rate was not unusual for the time, with almost half the children born in the UK in the nineteenth century dying before the age of five. Residents of Lyme Regis suffered even more greatly due to the crowded living conditions, which increased the frequency of infant deaths from diseases such as smallpox and measles.

It seemed that Mary too was going to succumb to the same fate as her siblings. The young baby, when she was fifteen months old, was struck by lightning whilst being held by one of her neighbours. The neighbour and her friends had been standing under a tree whilst watching a show and all three women died. Miraculously, Mary survived – after being revived in a bath of hot water – but even more strangely, the incident appeared to alter Mary's personality, with many suggesting that the event had made her more curious, intelligent and lively!

Childhood

The Anning family were very poor; therefore, her education was extremely limited and she rarely attended school. However, this did not stop her from learning to read and write. Every week, she was able to attend a Sunday school, where she could learn basic literacy skills which she then practised at home.



From a young age, Mary demonstrated a keen interest in fossils and took every opportunity to visit the nearby beach with her father and brother – Joseph. At this time, Lyme Regis was becoming a popular seaside resort due to the outbreak of the French Revolutionary Wars; travel to mainland Europe was regarded as dangerous so many of the wealthy and middle-class tourists headed to the coastal towns of Britain instead. This was excellent news for the Annings, who were able to sell their ‘curiosities’ – what we now know as fossils – to these wealthy tourists on a table outside of their home. Fossil collecting was seen as very fashionable in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, initially as a pastime, but gradually transforming into a science as the relevance of fossils in the geological world became better understood.

Mary, her brother and her father would spend vast amounts of time hunting for fossils; however, this could be a perilous task and severe injuries or even death were not uncommon. This was especially true during the winter months, when the rain caused landslides, making the cliffs unstable and dangerous to navigate. Yet, it was precisely these conditions that attracted collectors to this stretch of Jurassic coastline because the landslides often exposed new fossils.

One day, a fossil expert, who was called Elizabeth Philpot, visited the area and saw Mary’s fossils. She showed Mary her own collection of fossils, which was far more extensive than Mary could ever have imagined, and provided the young collector with a range of books to read. Through studying this literature, Mary discovered that scientists thought that the ‘curiosities’ she had collected were actually creatures that had lived a very long time ago. She learnt of the new ideas that were being shared. This ignited her love and curiosity in fossils even further and she became determined to increase her own collection of fossils.

When Mary was just twelve years old, her father tragically passed away after suffering from tuberculosis and injuries he had sustained after falling off a cliff. His death left the family with large debts and no savings, which meant the money they made from selling the fossils was even more essential. From then on, Mary spent every day on the beach searching for her treasured fossils, which proved to the world that life had existed on Earth millions of years ago!



Fossil Hunting

Soon, Mary and her brother made a marvellous discovery, which would change their lives forever! They found a skull of a strange creature poking out from a large slab of slate by one of the cliffs on the beach. It had not been immediately obvious that there would be anything within the rock, but Mary was adamant that something incredible was lying in wait inside! Unable to move the rock on her own, Mary enlisted the help of some local quarrymen, who were familiar with Mary's presence on the beach, and they helped her to carry it back to her workshop.

At first, the siblings thought it might be a crocodile's skull due to the large eye but, after carefully working on the rock for many weeks, her determination and hard-work paid off when she finally revealed the creature! It was actually an ancient reptile called an 'ichthyosaur' (meaning 'fish lizard'), which Mary had never seen before. She knew that this was an important discovery and requested that Elizabeth Philpot visit her to help identify the ancient reptile.

Success!

News of her discovery had spread amongst scientists in London and many of them were amazed! When Elizabeth Philpot arrived, she brought with her an important man of science, who was astounded by Mary's discovery. To Anning's amazement, the man – Henry Hoste Henley – paid her £25 for the fossil and for the first time in her life, Mary and her family did not have to worry about money! This fossil was later sold to William Bullock – a well-known collector – who displayed it in London and in May 1819, it was sold for £45 and five shillings at an auction.

The ichthyosaur was just the beginning: Mary continued to search for fossils and found a variety of fossils on the beach at Lyme Regis! Her most famous discoveries include a plesiosaur (giant sea reptile), a flying reptile and a prehistoric fish! Many of these were taken to London and put on display in the British Museum; however, it was not revealed who had found them which demonstrates the nature of science at the time and the disregard that was held for women.

In 1847, Anning died of breast cancer. Whilst her career had numerous highs and lows, and despite not receiving the recognition she deserved for many years, she will now always be remembered and celebrated as one of the greatest fossil hunters to have ever lived!