Anning, Mary (1799-1847) Encyclopedia Article

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English paleontologist

Mary Anning, a self-educated fossil hunter and collector, was eventually credited with the first discovery of the plesiosaur.

Anning was born in Lyme Regis in Dorset, England and remained single all her life. Lyme Regis is famous for its Jurassic ammonites and dinosaur remains. Her claim to fame was firmly established when she, along with her brother, found and extracted a complete ichthyosaur skeleton, subsequently sent to a London Museum. At the time she was only 12 years old. Anning also found a nearly complete skeleton of a plesiosaur in 1823, and made her third great discovery in 1828 of the anterior sheath and ink bag of Belemnospia. In 1929, she discovered the fossil fish Squaloraja, thought to be an ancestor of the shark and the ray. Her last major discovery in 1830 was the Plesiosaurus macrocephalus, named by Professor William Buckland.

Aning was born to a poor family and taught her initial trade by her father who was killed in an accident when she was 11 years old. However, over the next 35 years Anning knew and became known to most of the famous geologists of the time by collecting and running her fossil shop first with her mother, and then later on her own. Her knowledge of ammonites, dinosaur bones and other marine **fossils** found on the beach at Lyme Regis gave her fame, but not fortune. Towards the end of her life she was however, granted a government research grant in 1838 to help with her work. Because she was a woman, Anning was never allowed to present her work to the Geological Society of London.

Anning also never published any of her findings. Many of her discoveries are now displayed in museums although her name is rarely mentioned, as most the fossils carry the name of the donator, not the discoverer.

During her lifetime, in 1841 and 1844, Anning had two fossils named after her by **Louis Agassiz**, the Swiss exponent of the **Ice** Age theory. After her death, Anning was recognized by the very society that had failed to admit her during her lifetime, the Geological Society of London. She was an accomplished paleontologist, largely self-educated, and a highly intelligent woman even teaching herself French so that she could read Georges Cuvier's work in the original French. Today, scientists recognize Anning as an authority on British dinosaur anatomy.

See Also

Fossil Record; Fossils and Fossilization; Jurassic