

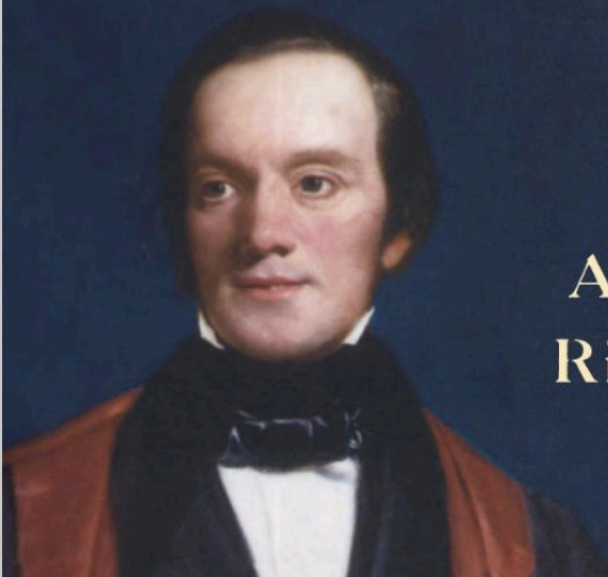
THE DINOSAUR HUNTERS

(Cadbury, D.,
2000: 324)

'This is a wonderful book.' *Observer*



DEBORAH CADBURY



A True Story of Scientific
Rivalry & the Discovery of
the Prehistoric World

worlds' buried in the clays of England.

Mary Anning's first *Plesiosaurus* retrieved from the shore at Lyme in December 1823 is also mounted in this gallery: no. 22656. The apparent break at the base of its greatly elongated neck – which nearly cost Mary her livelihood when Georges Cuvier declared such an improbable creature could not exist – is plain to see. The fossil can be found opposite the museum restaurant, above the spot where parties of children sit to eat their packed lunches, unaware of the little piece of history mounted above their heads.

Gideon Mantell's Brighton collection, one of the first museums of giant land reptiles on which he pinned such great hopes of success, no longer exists. Originally twenty thousand fossils, some have been sold or lost, and many are archived underground, superseded by much more dramatic discoveries. The famous *Iguanodon* tooth, which Charles Lyell took to Cuvier in Paris, is now item MNZ GH 004839 in the Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa. Many other fossils which Mantell's son Walter took to New Zealand have lost their labels or been dispersed, the very outcome that Gideon Mantell most dreaded. Many were placed in the Colonial Museum, Wellington, and later transferred from one site to another as the Colonial Museum became first the Dominion Museum and later the National Museum.

In London, in the Natural History Museum, the 'Mantell-piece' unearthed from a quarry in Maidstone in 1834, which provided Mantell with the first connected portions of the *Iguanodon* skeleton, has been placed by the exit of Gallery 21. Opposite is a print of Mary and Gideon Mantell, and on a shelf below, perhaps symbolically placed between them, is an *Iguanodon* tooth, not unlike the very first that Mary found on the roadside. Still embedded in the rocks of the Weald that proved so hard to interpret, it is a poignant symbol of Mantell's painstaking struggle to understand a vanished world, a world so compelling that he sacrificed his marriage and his professional practice to this one bewitching interest. Now eclipsed in this gallery of wonders by the towering skeletons of the dinosaurs themselves, the tooth makes almost

Gideon Mantell's own spine, twisted into a macabre injuries, remained on display at the Royal College of Surgeons a century and even inspired the odd scientific paper on the pathological deformities of the backbone. In 1926 the specimen, no. 4808.1, was painstakingly remounted, described and catalogued. Some years later, during the Second World War, it was obliterated by German bombs at the height of the London blitz.

As for Richard Owen, his presence still haunts the Natural History Museum that he created in South Kensington. His imposing statue, unnoticed for the most part, commands the sweeping double staircase beyond the *Diplodocus* in the entrance hall. From this suitably pivotal position, his bronze eyes look down on a transformed world, one in which the vision of natural science is far removed from his own. The echoing stone floors and cathedral-like halls that he designed as a monument to God's wisdom and Divine natural laws now resonate to very different themes: gallery after gallery illustrates the evolutionary ideas of his rival.

It is the familiar, and enlarged, image of Darwin's face that hangs like a banner in the entrance, beneath the Gothic stained-glass windows. An entire floor is devoted to describing his ideas in the *Origin of Species*, which Owen reviewed so unfavourably. The natural world is laid out exclusively in terms of evolution – from the corals and sponges of primitive seas to the evolution of Man himself from ape-like primates. The dinosaurs themselves are no longer the embodiment and proof of the guiding hand of God, but an assemblage of strange monsters arising from a mere accident of nature.

Only ruined terraces with bramble-covered colonnades remain to hint of Joseph Paxton's former creation, which was razed to the ground by such a raging fire in 1936 that the flames could be seen over eight counties. A television transmitter, the Crystal Palace Stadium and a car park now dominate the crest of the hill.

As for Owen's rhinocerine dinosaur models that inspired the Victorian imagination in 1854, they can still be seen in the grounds of

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(Cadbury, 2000)

1836

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the Crystal Palace at Sydenham in South London. Once the proud trophies of a newly discovered science glimpsed through the splash of fountains in the gardens of the Crystal Palace, they have been stripped of their nineteenth-century glory. Chipped and broken, their paint long since faded, they seem strangely out of place: monstrous, gargoyles peeping out at the twenty-first century from rampant undergrowth, a bizarre reminder of forgotten hopes and forgotten quarrels. Caught up in some uniquely British bureaucracy, they have been classified as Grade One listed buildings.

Notes and Sources

For details of those publications for which author's surname and short title are given here, see the Select Bibliography on p. 363.

CHAPTER I

Professor Hugh Torrens, geologist and historian of science at the Department of Earth Sciences, Keele University, is a leading expert on Mary Anning and has undertaken extensive searches of the available archives. He has summarised his research in 'Mary Anning of Lyme; the greatest fossilist the world ever knew', *British Journal of the History of Science*, vol. 28 (1995), pp. 257–84, and in an inspiring talk as keynote speaker at the Mary Anning Bicentennial Celebration in Lyme on 2–4 June 1999.

Many details of Mary Anning's background have also been gathered by the science historian William Lang (1878–1966). A comprehensive account of her life can be found in his 'Mary Anning of Lyme, Collector and Vendor of Fossils', *Natural History Magazine*, vol. 5, no. 34 (1936), pp. 64–81. In addition, Lang published many articles in the *Proceedings of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society*. The papers cited in this chapter include 'Mary Anning and the Pioneer Geologists of Lyme', vol. 60 (1939); 'Three letters by Mary Anning', vol. 66 (1944); 'More about Mary Anning', vol. 71 (1949); 'Mary Anning and Anna Maria Pinney', vol. 76 (1956); 'Mary Anning's Escape from Lightning', vol. 80 (1959); 'Mary Anning and the Fire at Lyme', vol. 74 (1959);