

Mary Anning – Fossil Hunter

Guest curated by Tracy Chevalier

30 January - 2 May 2027

Though she rarely travelled outside of her native Dorset, Mary Anning's fossil discoveries have inspired countless imaginations across the world. That is why in 2027, 180 years after her death, a major new exhibition, guest curated by the best-selling author Tracy Chevalier, will commemorate Mary's life and remarkable legacy.



Though she was a familiar figure on the shoreline of Lyme Regis during her lifetime (1799-1847), Mary Anning has only recently become more widely acknowledged as a skilled palaeontologist and fossil hunter. Her discoveries, made in the early 1800s, brought scientific attention to a world of extinct marine reptiles, at a time when, led by religious beliefs, few people thought animals could become extinct.

Not only did Mary find fossils, but she also cleaned, sold and studied them, coming to understand their anatomy as well as any university-educated man. Her work opened new thinking about the age of the world. All this by a woman from a poor family, in what was then a remote Dorset seaside village.

The Dorset Museum & Art Gallery exhibition will evoke Lyme Regis and centre around the two key arenas of Mary's life, the beach and the town.

It will include striking fossils found by Mary and others, as well as an impressive cast of the first Ichthyosaur skull discovered by 12-year-old Mary and her older brother, Joseph. There will also be a recreation of a Jurassic beach in which visitors can discover hidden fossils. Supplemented by letters and drawings revealing Mary's character and conflicts, the exhibition will also lay out the social and scientific context in which she lived and worked.

From the very beginning, Mary's personal story was worthy of a Tracy Chevalier novel. It literally started with a bang when, as a toddler, the woman holding Mary was struck by lightning and killed along with two

others nearby. Later, Mary's parents declared the huge electrical jolt had made their daughter unique, with the gift to find fossils and interpret them.

She began her career at the age of five or six by accompanying her father, Richard, an amateur fossil collector, on his forays onto the local beach - an almost unfathomable activity for a young girl in the Georgian era.

Around 1811/12, the Anning family fortunes began to change when Mary and Joseph discovered a complete Ichthyosaur and sold it to a local landowner. This was the first specimen to be scientifically studied and described. It eventually made its way to the Natural History Museum in London.

Just over a decade later (1824), Mary came across a complete Plesiosaur. By this time, she understood the importance of extracting the specimen exactly as it was found rather than 'correcting' it by placing the bones where it was thought they should go. Plesiosaur specimens and drawings of that first Plesiosaur will be on display.

Despite her growing reputation for finding and identifying fossils, the scientific community remained hesitant to recognise Mary's work. Moreover, male scientists – who frequently bought the fossils Mary would uncover, clean, prepare and identify – often didn't credit her discoveries in their scientific papers. The Geological Society of London refused to admit her and didn't allow women to become Fellows until 1908.

Mary was close, possibly romantically linked, to Henry De la Beche, who drew *Duria Antiquior – A More Ancient Dorset* (1830), a rendition of the various ancient creatures Mary had discovered in fossilised form, selling print versions to raise money for her. The watercolour and lithograph will feature in the exhibition.

Tragically, her most loyal friend, a spaniel called Tray, was killed in a landslide just a few feet from Mary. Fittingly, he was depicted in the only known portrait of Mary, which will be on display at the exhibition.

The entrepreneurial side of the Annings' fossil hunting will be vividly demonstrated by a recreation of their shop. It will not only show how the family sold what they found as curiosities and mementoes to tourists but also provide an opportunity to handle some of the fossil types the Annings were discovering and selling.

In stark contrast to the esteem with which she is regarded today, Mary died in poverty, of breast cancer in 1847. Fossils were no longer fashionable and her name disappeared due to changing interests and preoccupations. However, since the late 20th century her story has been resurrected and she is now, rightly, celebrated in many ways. Schoolchildren learn about her; she was named one of the ten most important women in science by the Royal Society. In 2018, an 11-year-old school pupil named Evie sparked the *Mary Anning Rocks* campaign, to erect a statue in her heroine's honour. In May 2022, the statue was unveiled, and visitors to the exhibition can see Denise Dutton's original maquette for it, along with a video of Evie describing what she said to her mother that in turn inspired the creation of the artwork.

The exhibition has been guest curated by the acclaimed author, Tracy Chevalier. She became world-famous after the breakthrough of her second book, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, and celebrated her love of Dorset and fascination with Mary Anning in the novel *Remarkable Creatures*. She is also a trustee of Dorset Museum and Art Gallery.

Tracy explains: *"I do a lot of research for my novels since they are mainly set in other times and places. If possible, I like to do what my characters do, as then it's easier to understand it and describe it. So, I tried painting when I wrote Pearl Earring; needlepoint for A Single Thread; glass beads for The Glassmaker. For Remarkable Creatures I spent many hours looking for fossils on the beaches near Lyme Regis, following in Mary's footsteps."*

She adds: *"In the space of a few years, Mary Anning has transformed from local heroine to national treasure. She is a firm fixture on primary school curricula, a statue in Lyme Regis has been raised for her, and she was named as one of the 10 most important women in science by the Royal Society. It's high time the nation celebrated with an exhibition devoted to Mary, and I'm honoured to be part of the team bringing her life and work to life."*

Claire Dixon, Executive Director of Dorset Museum and Art Gallery say: *"It is really exciting to be working with Tracy Chevalier to bring such an important female figure to life, whose work was invisible for so long. We will be able to showcase our own collections, some of which have not been displayed before, alongside internationally significant Dorset artefacts from national institutions. Our exhibitions are a great way to encourage visitors to keep coming back to Dorset Museum & Art Gallery. The fascinating story, important new research findings and interactives created by Arts University Bournemouth will come together to ensure there is something for everyone."*

Dorset Museum & Art Gallery is raising funds to support this exhibition.

The public can help to bring Mary Anning's extraordinary story to life by donating, [every penny raised through this campaign](#) will be used to reveal the remarkable tale of a woman whose scientific legacy changed our understanding of the world.

NOTES TO EDITORS

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Portrait of Mary Anning, oil, possibly by William Gray, 1842. Trustees of the Natural History Museum

Dorset Museum & Art Gallery is the only museum in Dorset that tells the story of the county in its entirety, showing the relationship between the land and its inhabitants, and how this relationship inspired ingenuity, exploration and creativity. Covering 250 million years of history, their collections are of international significance and demonstrate the breadth of the Dorset story and its relevance to all. The Museum holds four permanent galleries and typically offers 3-4 major temporary exhibitions, touring or

home-grown, a year in their designated special exhibitions space. For more information about exhibitions and events at Dorset Museum, www.dorsetmuseum.org

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND INTERVIEWS

Tracy Jones, Brera PR - tracy@brera-london.com / 01702 216658 / 07887 514984 / www.brera-london.com