

Mary Anning

(1799 - 1847)

She Sells Seashells...

Mary Anning made significant contributions the world of geology and the history of the Earth at a time when there was little evidence to challenge the biblical story of creation and the Great Flood.

Anning grew up in Lyme Regis, a coastal town in southern England surrounded by limestone cliffs rich in Jurassic fossils. The daughter of a carpenter and occasional fossil collector, she had very little formal education. The family lived in poor circumstances for most of their lives, surviving by selling fossils. In the early 1800s, Anning and her brother Joseph, still young children, discovered the first known specimen of *Ichthyosaurus* subsequently acknowledged by the London Geological Society. By the mid-1820s, Anning had taken charge of the family's fossil business and established her reputation within the fossil-collecting community.

Anning went on to discover several more ichthyosaur skeletons, but her most important find is considered to be the first known specimen of a plesiosaur, *Pleiosaurus microcephalus*, found in 1823. George Cuvier, the famous French anatomist, at first doubted this discovery, but his eventual recognition of the significance of the find helped establish Anning within the paleontological community. She later uncovered the first British flying reptile, *Pterodactylus macronyx*, and a fossil fish that is a transitional link between sharks and rays, *Squaloraja*.

It has been speculated that Terry Sullivan's lyrics "She sells seashells" was based on Mary Anning:

*She sells seashells on the seashore
The shells she sells are seashells, I'm sure
So if she sells seashells on the seashore
Then I'm sure she sells seashore shells.*

Despite being recognised by her own community, many of Anning's finds have ended up in museums and private collections without attribution to their collector.

One hundred and sixty three years after her death, the Royal Society belatedly recognised Anning's contributions when she was included in a list of ten British women considered to have most influenced the history of science.



Main image: Mary Anning with her dog Tray and the Golden Cap outcrop in the background, (Natural History Museum in London, Public Domain-Art).
Background: Autograph letter concerning the discovery of plesiosaurus (Public Domain).

Scale One inch to each Foot

*I have endeavoured for a rough sketch to give
you a right in
thinking that I said it was the supposed plesiosaurus, but its remark-
able long neck and small head, shows that it does not in the least
resemble
their conjectures; in its analogy to the Ichthyosaurus, it is large and
heavy, but one thing I may venture to assure you it is the first
only one discovered in Europe. Colonel Bosc offered one hundred
guineas for it unseen, but your letter came five days past before*

