

Mary Anning

This is the true story of Mary Anning, who lived 200 years ago. Mary was born in 1799 and was one of the first people to hunt for fossils. She lived in a seaside town in England called Lyme Regis.

At the time when Mary lived, many people did not know what fossils were, and called them 'Curiosities' instead.

When Mary was young, she adored her father, who worked as a carpenter. One Saturday, Mary's father took her down to the cliffs by the crashing sea. Mary held tightly to his hand because she knew how dangerous it could be. The cliffs were soft as melting chocolate, and Mary had sometimes seen huge slabs of land slipping and tumbling to the beach below.

When they reached the cliffs, Mary's father reached into his pocket and, to Mary's surprise, took out his steel hammer. He knelt beside a large rock and began carefully tapping away.

"What are you looking for?" asked Mary, dancing about on the sand. "Just be patient," laughed her father. Mary bent closer. There was something hidden inside the rock!

At last Mary's father pulled the thing free and handed it to Mary. "It ... it's TREASURE!" she gasped. "It's what we call a Curiosity," smiled her father. "A present for you, Mary girl."

The Curiosity was the most beautiful thing Mary had ever seen. Her father polished it and hung it on a string for Mary - like a perfect necklace.

That night Mary couldn't sleep. Her head swirled with thoughts. "The cliffs are full of treasure," she whispered over and over again. From that day on, Mary spent every spare moment searching for Curiosities. She had sharp eyes and found them everywhere, in every shape and size - tiny shiny ones, others straight as stone fingers or delicate like plants.

One evening, some rich ladies came to visit her father. Mary knew who they were - the Philpot sisters who lived together in a fine house above the town. Scientists, people said.

One of the ladies, Annie Philpot, wanted Mary's father to build her a cabinet. "To display Curiosities," she said.

Mary couldn't believe that someone else was interested in

Curiosities. She nervously showed the Philpot sisters her collection. "Oh!" gasped the ladies. "What wonderful fossils!" Fossils? Mary had never heard the word. "I'll tell you what, Mary," said Annie Philpot. "Why don't you come and visit us? We could have some tea and then we will show you our collection."

Mary was amazed by the Philpots' fine house. But most wonderful of all was their collection of Curiosities. The Philpot sisters explained that the fossils were the remains of ancient sea creatures that had been preserved in the clay.

Then Annie Philpot showed Mary a huge tooth she had found. "From a great sea monster," she said. She told Mary she believed the rest of the creature was still out there, hidden in the cliffs. "If anyone could ever find that, Mary! That would be the greatest treasure of all."

That winter was cold, wet and stormy. Sadly, Mary's father fell ill and died. Mary and her mother needed money, and after a while, Mary found that she could sell the Curiosities to holiday-makers.

One day, Mary found a little dog, who followed her home. From that moment, Mary and the dog were never apart.

All summer, Mary searched for Curiosities for her shop. As she searched, Mary thought more and more about the giant sea monster. She imagined fantastic landscapes and extraordinary creatures.

One morning, Mary was so busy day dreaming, she didn't notice that her dog had wandered away. She ran along the beach, calling for him, but he was nowhere to be seen.

At last, she heard a faint barking and, looking up, she saw her dog high on the sloping side of the cliff.

Mary called for him to come down, but the little dog wouldn't move. He was furiously scratching at something in the clay.

Mary began slowly to climb the rock face. At last she reached the little ledge where the dog was standing. She couldn't believe what she saw ... Grinning up at Mary was an enormous skull. The little dog had found the sea monster!

The sea monster was far too big for Mary to carry on her own. Leaving the dog to guard the monster, Mary climbed carefully down to the beach, then ran as fast as she could to the town. "I've found it!" she shouted. "I've found the sea monster!"

In less than ten minutes, Mary was leading a group of men carrying picks and shovels up the side of the cliff. The news spread like fire through the town. An excited crowd gathered on the beach to watch the excavation. The Philpot sisters arrived and made a tremendous fuss of Mary.

As the evening sun melted into the sea, six strong men carefully carried the bones of the sea monster back to the town. It was as long as a tree and more than one hundred and sixty-five million years old. The skeleton was laid out for all the world to see. For months afterwards, visitors came to meet Mary - "The Fossil Girl" of Lyme Regis. The sea monster was the most important fossil ever found, people said.

They called the monster *Ichthyosaurus* - "the fish lizard". The museum that bought it paid enough money for Mary and her mother to live happily for the rest of their lives.