



# The Lyme Regis Fossil Festival – Public Engagement in the Birthplace of Paleontology

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## Abstract

Lyme Regis is a small town on the south coast of England, widely regarded as ‘The Birthplace of Paleontology’ due to by the many influential early paleontologists who lived and worked in the area (e.g. Mary Anning, William Buckland, Henry Thomas de la Beche, William Daniel Conybeare). It is situated towards the western end of the Jurassic Coast UNESCO World Heritage Site and is world renowned for its paleontology from the marine Early Jurassic rocks. It draws hundreds of thousands of people to look for fossils each year and there are few major museums in the world that do not hold fossils from the coast around Lyme Regis. The first Lyme Regis Fossil Festival occurred in 2005 and was intended to be a one-off event, but its success meant that it became an annual event. The festival was developed to support earth science engagement in its widest form -it presents everything from scientific lectures to circus performances. Each year the festival has a broad theme, highlighting an earth science topic that underpins the programming of the festival. The festival has two public days over a weekend and a school education day on the preceding Friday. As the festival approaches its 20th anniversary, it has gone through cycles, from lows during the global COVID pandemic and times when funding has been hard to secure, to highs of becoming the largest free public paleontology and earth science engagement event in the world.

**Keywords:** Paleontology, Lyme Regis, Mary Anning, Museums, Public Engagement, Fossils

## Lyme Regis and its place in paleontology

Lyme Regis is a small coastal town situated on the south coast of England, at the western edge of the county of Dorset, on the boundary with Devon and in the center of Lyme Bay (Fig. 1). Originally a fishing and trading port, with a safe harbor created by the famous Cobb seawall, it has attracted tourists for over 200 years because of its beauty and charm and the natural wonder of the cliffs and coastline.

The coast from the west of Lyme Regis and eastwards beyond the neighboring village of Charmouth exposes one of the world's best successions of fossiliferous Early Jurassic marine interbedded mudrocks and limestones. The cliffs are subject to

repeated storms that create many landslips, including the largest landslip in Western Europe below the hill known as Black Ven. Such landslips and daily erosion release fossils onto the beach where they can be found when the tide recedes. This conjunction of geology and geography has been exploited by locals since the mid to late 17<sup>th</sup> century when the fossils were collected and sold to tourists as ‘curios.’ The limestone beds are exposed as wave-cut platforms at low tide and they were quarried from the foreshore as the raw material for making hydraulic cement, so revealing more fossil specimens. Gentlemen paleontologists would visit Lyme Regis to buy specimens for their cabinets of curiosities and later for scientific study.

Three of the most influential scientists in the early



**Figure. 1.** The town of Lyme Regis looking East. The marquees of the fossil festival can be seen in the foreground, at the bottom of Lister Gardens. The Lyme Regis Museum and Marine Theatre are the buildings to the far right on the seafront. The Early Jurassic cliffs and the largest landslip in Western Europe, at Black Ven can be seen in the distance.

19<sup>th</sup> century had strong ties to the area. William Buckland was born in Axminster, about 7 km from Lyme Regis, Henry Thomas de la Beche was schooled in Ottery St Mary, about 25 km from Lyme Regis, and at times lived in Lyme Regis and Charmouth, and William Daniel Conybeare served as a Vicar in Axminster. Other noted paleontologists and geologists visited Lyme Regis, including Agassiz, Owen, Birch, Philpot, Hawkins, Murchison, Sedgwick, Mantell, Henslow, Egerton, Enniskillen, Miller, Sowerby, Parkinson, Webster, Forbes, Bristow, Ussher, and Day (Goudie & Brunsten 2023). This level of interest over 200 years ago confirms why

Lyme Regis has been called ‘the birthplace of paleontology’.

The most notable paleontologist associated with Lyme Regis is Mary Anning (1799–1847). She has been the subject of many books, mostly for children, as well as TV programs, Hollywood films, postage stamps, and coins, and is a regular subject of teaching in UK schools as she appears

in the non-statutory part of the English school curriculum for 6–11-year-old children. The Royal Society in 2010 recognized her as one of the ten most influential women in British science history. Her residence in Lyme Regis was the main reason so many eminent scientists visited (Most influential women in British science history 2010).

Mary Anning’s fame came from her exceptional ability to collect and prepare fossils, and her skills in understanding the anatomy and biology of these creatures were entirely self-taught. She, with her brother, discovered the first complete ichthyosaur skeleton that was scientifically described, the first complete plesiosaur, and the first British pterosaur. Her life and accomplishments are well documented (e.g. Sharpe 2020).

Mary Anning had her own entry in the Dictionary of National Biography from 1901, a remarkable achievement when only 3% of the 30,000 or so entries were women, and most of these, unlike Mary, bore titles. In 2021 a statue was erected to honor her and her achievements (Pearson 2024).

Tickell (1996) sums up Mary and her importance as follows:

She was no dainty heroine from children's tales, no conventional creature of fantasy, no mere local prodigy, no defender of women's rights, no petrified handmaiden of science. Instead, she was a tough, practical, complex, generous, sometimes prickly, independent-minded person of great intelligence, who surmounted the obstacles of her sex and circumstances to help lay the foundations of a new science of the earth.

## Lyme Regis Museum

Lyme Regis Museum (Fig. 2) is a small independent accredited museum that is a charity and is run by a board of Trustees. Mary's story is central to the museum's public engagement, and more widely, the museum tells the story of the town and has strengths in the geology and paleontology of the Jurassic coast. tua, and specifically site of the

The museum was built in 1900–1901 by Thomas E.D. Philpot, a former mayor of the town. Building a new museum in such a small town is unusu-



**Figure 2.** Mary Anning reenactor engaging with a school group within Lyme Regis Museum as part of the 2023 Lyme Regis Fossil Festival Education Day.

al, with its population of just over 2,000 in 1901, and still only 4,000 today. In the UK, larger towns of course had their civic museums that had been established in Victorian times.

Thomas Philpot (1859–1918) was the great-nephew of Elizabeth Philpot (1779–1857), a contemporary, friend and benefactor of Mary Anning. Elizabeth Philpot was an outstanding paleontologist in her own right (Goudie & Brunsden 2023).

After her death, her extensive collection of fossils, including many purchased from Mary Anning, was donated to the Oxford University Museum of Natural History.

From its completion in 1901, the museum stood empty and unused for nearly 20 years. In 1920, Thomas Philpot's niece, Caroline, gave the Museum to the Borough of Lyme, and in March 1921, two rooms were opened thanks to the efforts of Dr

Wyatt Wingrave (1858–1938), formally confirmed in 1927 as the museum’s first honorary curator.

He added local objects to his own collections and virtually created the museum single-handedly. The museum guide and report issued by Wyatt Wingrave in 1923 listed the objects displayed in the two rooms, devoted to geology and archaeology. Several of the exhibits are familiar to visitors today.

The museum also benefited enormously from the work of Cyril Wanklyn (1864–1943), historian of Lyme. A further crucial contribution to the Museum’s development was made by Dr William D. Lang FRS (1878–1966), former Keeper of Geology at the British Museum (Natural History), who retired to the neighboring village of Charmouth. Wanklyn and Lang served as joint honorary curators after Wingrave.

From 1939, the museum suffered a severe decline. The Borough took over the building during the Second World War, storing the collections upstairs, using the ground floor as an Air Raid Precautions report post and the cellar as an air raid shelter. There was no curator from 1945 to the early 1960s. For a time, the museum was opened daily in the morning by someone from the Town Hall and locked again when it got dark. The building was also deteriorating badly. Signs of this were most obvious in the exposed east wing, which finally reached such a state of dilapidation that the Borough Council had to demolish it on grounds of safety. Its utilitarian replacement was completed in 1969.

Renowned author John Fowles (1926–2005) was appointed as Honorary Curator from 1978–1988. He set up and generously funded the Friends of the Museum who provided the volunteers to man the desk and welcome visitors. In 1988 Liz Anne Bawden MBE took over as Honorary Curator and the museum trustees decided to redevelop the

museum because of the dilapidated state of the building. A Patron’s Group was set up, and John Fowles and Sir David Wilson, then Director of the British Museum, agreed to become patrons of the museum. They were soon joined as Patrons by Sir Crispin Tickell (1930–2022), then Warden of Green College, Oxford, formerly British Permanent Representative at the United Nations and President of the Royal Geographical Society, an eminent spokesman on the environment, and a great-great-great nephew of Mary Anning.

The refurbishments were completed in the summer of 1999 and the ‘new’ museum was opened by Sir David Attenborough FRS. Later that year, the refurbishment culminated in the presentation by the then Prince Charles of the Gulbenkian Prize, later known as the Museum of the Year award. This is an annual prize awarded to a museum or gallery in the United Kingdom for a “track record of imagination, innovation and excellence”, in our case to “the best small museum in the country”. After all the years of closure, neglect, and mismanagement, this was a stunning achievement, and a great tribute to John Fowles, Liz-Anne Bawden, Jo Draper and all the many volunteers and professionals who brought about the metamorphosis.

In 2000, Max Hebditch, retired Director of the Museum of London, was appointed as Honorary Curator and supported by Jo Draper as paid Assistant Curator on a limited part-time basis. In 2008, Mary Godwin, was appointed as the Museum’s first full-time paid professional staff member, originally as Curator but then Director. In the same year, a paid part-time Education and Learning officer was appointed – Chris Andrews held this post until 2023, and a paid part-time Geology Curator which was undertaken by Paddy Howe until 2021. In 2012 David Tucker was appointed Director, with the challenge of ensuring a Heritage Lottery Fund bid to extend the museum, build an education room and undertake a refurbishment

of the galleries. This was completed in 2017 and again the ‘new’ museum was opened by Sir David Attenborough FRS.

In 2022 Bridget Houseago was appointed Director and the transformation from a failing volunteer-run museum just after the war to a thriving, award-winning, major museum was complete. It is now one of the top visitor attractions in Dorset and on the whole Jurassic Coast in terms of visitor numbers. The museum today has a full-time Director, a part-time Geology curator (3 days per week), a Marketing officer (3 days per week), an Education and learning officer (full time), a Front-of-house manager (full time), a Finance officer (2 days per week) and an Engagement and collections officer (contract – full time). The museum now has three paleontologists on staff (all of the collections and education staff) and utilizes its place on the coast to maximize the impact of the collections, exhibitions, education and engagement. The Lyme Regis Fossil Festival is one aspect of this work, and it is through the museum that the festival continues today.

### **History of the Lyme Regis Fossil Festival**

The Jurassic Coast was inscribed as a World Heritage Site (WHS) by UNESCO in 2001, and it remains England’s only natural World Heritage Site (the other natural WHS in the UK is the Giant’s Causeway in Northern Ireland). The management of the site was initially delivered by the World Heritage Site Management Team. In 2003 they contracted the Natural History Museum, London (NHM) to produce an interpretation scoping study for the WHS to allow them to deliver a consistent strategy (Bowers & Davis 2003). Part of the study involved meeting the organizations, existing museums and heritage centers already delivering interpretation of the geology and paleontology. During a break in the meeting with Jo Draper and Liz Anne Bawden from Lyme Regis Museum, the author of this article suggested that what Lyme

Regis needed was a fossil festival or roadshow. Over a meal later that evening with the WHS Team (Richard Edmonds and Tim Badman) and Marcus Dixon from Lyme Regis Development Trust, the idea was fleshed out further and the basic concept for the festival was born.

With the support of the WHS team, Lyme Regis Museum and the NHM, Marcus Dixon secured funding and support and then developed the concept further. The Lyme Regis Development Trust were the lead organizers of the festival from 2005 to 2022. The festival was fixed as a two-day event at the weekend (Saturday and Sunday) so families could attend either for one day or two. The Easter Public Holiday weekend was chosen as the date for the first festival. This is because the Friday (Good Friday) and the following Monday (Easter Monday) are public holidays in the UK. It was chosen for two reasons. First, because it is based on the lunar cycle (Easter Sunday is the first Sunday after the Full Moon that falls on or after March 21), meaning that it always coincides with low tide in the middle of the day, allowing access to the beaches for fossil collecting and geology tours. Easter is also close to the Spring equinox meaning that high tides are very high and low tides are unusually low. Second, Easter is the beginning of the tourist season in the UK, and when the festival started tourist visits to Lyme Regis before and at Easter were low. It was planned then that a fossil festival held at Easter would extend the tourist season, which encouraged Lyme Regis Town Council and Dorset County Council to support the first festival. This meant that the festival would be free of charge for the public, a principle that still holds today.

The first Lyme Regis Fossil Festival was held on the 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> March 2005. The weather was kind, and the festival was small, with the majority of the festival centered around the Marine Theatre and marquees placed between the the-

atre and museum. The main exhibitors were the Natural History Museum, Lyme Regis Museum, The World Heritage Site Management Team and the Geologists' Association. There were also trade stands from local professional fossil collectors and dealers. There were scientific talks and lectures and there were a few small art-related activities. Approximately 2000 people enjoyed the festival. The event was deemed a success, and it was then decided that this should be an annual event. Under the organization of the Lyme Regis Development Trust a festival director was appointed, with Marcus Dixon, Fred Humphreys, Kimberly Clarke, and Jon Doody serving in this role from 2005–2022.

In 2006, the festival was moved to the May Day public holiday weekend, preceding the first Monday in May. This was to ensure that the weather would be better, but this date is not fixed by the lunar calendar, and in some years the tides were not suitable for events on the beaches, such as guided fossil hunting walks.

The festival grew in impact and size between 2006 and 2019, with its zenith during the late 2000s when visitor numbers reached 15,000 over the two days.

In 2006 it was decided to introduce a theme to each year's festival, for two reasons – it helped in fund-raising as each year the festival appeared 'fresh', and the theme helped identify core elements of the program. Notable themes include the Rising Seas as part of the UNESCO Youth Climate Change Summit in 2007, and in 2012 the festival was part of the Jurassic Coast Cultural Olympiad which was part of the London 2012 Olympic Games, for which the sailing events were held along the Jurassic Coast at Weymouth.

From 2006, it was also decided to have a dedicated education day on the Friday (as it was now not held at Easter the proceeding Friday was not

a public holiday) where schools could come and bring pupils to engage with the exhibitors and activities. This allowed many of the exhibitors to justify their presence at the festival in meeting school outreach targets, a key aim especially for the Natural History Museum in London. The festival allowed them to bring a large team of not only paleontologists and earth scientists but also a team from their Learning Department who were experienced in providing activities for schools. The Education Day was also useful for the festival organizers as it allowed a 'soft launch' of the festival activities before they were opened to the wider public.

### **Near Loss of the Festival**

In 2020 and 2021, the festival had to move online because of the Covid pandemic, but it lacked all the strengths of the previous festivals. When the festival returned as a physical event in 2022, it was a shadow of its former self, with fewer exhibitors and activities than before. The festival therefore was in a perilous position and the new Director of the Lyme Regis Development Trust, David Tucker (the former Director of Lyme Regis Museum and a supporter of the event) made the decision to cancel the 2023 Festival about 12 weeks before the event (Lyme Regis Fossil Festival canceled for 2023 due to lack of funding, 2023).

This led to an outcry on social media and locally. After some difficult discussions and rapid appeals for funding to the Lyme Regis Town Council, Jurassic Coast Trust (the successor to the WHS Management Team), Geologists' Association and Palaeontological Association, Lyme Regis Museum decided to run the festival for 2023 and to cover any financial shortfall from the secured funding. Therefore, only eight weeks before the event was due to take place the funding was secured and the festival saved.

The delivery team comprised the Lyme Regis

Museum staff (Bridget Houseago, the author, Eleanor Wentzell) working in partnership with Nick Meacham of The Etches Collection Museum of Jurassic Marine Life (a purely geological museum sited in Kimmeridge, Dorset at the other end of the Jurassic Coast site) with support from the staff (particularly Chris Reedman) at the Jurassic Coast Trust. The festival was a resounding success, with over 10,000 visitors over the two days, and over 2,000 people per day entering the museum. The festival had recaptured the engagement, size of audience and atmosphere that had not been seen since the late 2000s.

The 2023 event was also filmed for national public broadcast television as part of a series on Dorset Coast & Country for Channel 5 (the TV trailer is available at [https://youtu.be/6tx2Y6E\\_uxY?si=VQYqbPz5QiqS\\_7a4](https://youtu.be/6tx2Y6E_uxY?si=VQYqbPz5QiqS_7a4)).

The success of the 2023 Festival encouraged all in Lyme Regis that it should continue, but the Lyme Regis Museum team decided that they could not

risk significantly funding it each year from its operating budget. A Community Interest Company (CiC) was set up, with a Board of Directors made of Trustees and Staff of the Museum (Wayne Earp, Jonathan Evans, Phil Williams, Bridget Houseago, and the author) and one member of the local community (Alan Vian). The festival now has a distinct separate identity, and the 2024 event secured funding from a wide variety of charitable and grant sources as well as sponsorship and income generated from selling trading space at the event and advertising in the printed and online program.

Breaking a founding principle of the festival, there were some paid for ticketed events at the 2024 Festival. This enabled the CiC to balance the books, but also allowed for blockbuster events such as the world premiere screenings of the ‘Mary Anning and The Dinosaur Hunters’ biopic film and the US documentary ‘Why Dinosaurs?’ (Fig. 3). The ticketed events also allowed the CiC to bring the filmmakers and the key players to the event and engage with their audiences.



**Figure 3.** Dr Jonathan Evans, Chair of Trustees of Lyme Regis Museum and Member of the Board of Directors of the Lyme Regis Fossil Festival CiC introducing the US Documentary ‘Why Dinosaurs?’ at the private invitation showing – the evening before the 2024 Festival.

The date of the 2024 Festival moved for the third time to early June, which was to avoid the Easter and May Day weekends, when tourist numbers were now high. The Festival was larger than in 2023, and venues spanned most of the seafront (Fig. 4). The diversity of events was now extremely broad (Fig. 5) with many organizations and exhibitors including museums, professional societies, charities, universities and government organizations. Retailers included fossil dealers, equipment suppliers, and vendors of crafts, arts, food and drink. There were also boutique food stalls. There were film screenings, expert talks, general family-friendly talks, panel discussions, book signings, pantomime shows, circus performances, theatre, parades, art workshops, fossil walks, boat trips, street performances, music and much more (Fig. 6). The size of the programming task is reflected in the 60-page festival program (available at [https://indd.adobe.com/view/ec6f98f5-d09c-](https://indd.adobe.com/view/ec6f98f5-d09c-4c61-9e1f-99e707b715a7)

4c61-9e1f-99e707b715a7). The 2024 event was the most successful ever, with over 20,000 people visiting the festival. Subsequent market research among the participants and visitors revealed that the blend of activities was exactly right and if anything, there was too much happening.

The Lyme Regis Fossil Festival is now, once again, the largest public earth science festival engagement event in the world, which is free to the public.

### Future of the Lyme Regis Fossil Festival

2025 marks the 20th anniversary of the festival. As for every year since its inception, the biggest challenge is to secure funding to enable the festival to happen (Views needed on £2000 fossil festival grant 2014). While the Festival is now under the stewardship of a Community Interest Company (CiC) with a board of directors, Lyme Regis Museum remains the major stakeholder. The cost



Figure 4. Map of the 2024 Lyme Regis Festival Site – taken from the 2024 60-page printed program.



**Figure 5.** Some of the indoor activities and events from the 2024 Lyme Regis Fossil Festival: crowds looking at stalls in one of the marquees; children love looking through the microscopes; making polished sections of real ammonite fossils; theatrical performance with a dinosaur

**Figure 6.** Some of the outdoor activities and events from the 2024 Lyme Regis Fossil Festival: Mary Anning and Charles Darwin re-enactors address the children; a 'living' dinosaur greets visitors outside Lyme Regis Museum; Rock Showman circus performance about evolution and marine reptiles; guided walk with a Mary Anning re-enactor to the Mary Anning statue and appreciative visitors; Youth Theatre parade performance commemorating the 200th anniversary of Mary Anning discovery of Plesiosaurus.



of ensuring the festival happens and remains free for most events is nearly £40,000. This does not consider all the time the Lyme Regis Museum staff to organize the event which, if cost, would at least double this sum. Note that in 2010 the festival cost £90,000, reflecting the costs of employed staff as well as the event – see Lyme Regis: Fossil festival needs £12k to avoid cutbacks (2010). The aim therefore is to develop a funding model that would achieve a surplus. However, Lyme Regis Museum takes the view that the festival is equivalent to a major temporary exhibition each year, and the Museum trustees therefore see it as a key priority for delivery each year, and it is part of the 5-year plan of the Museum. The CiC trustees are aware they need to develop a long-term arrangement with funders to achieve a three-to-five-year security. The CiC is committed to ensuring that almost all public events remain free and that the quality of the events remains as high as in the past two years. They are also committed to the widest range of delivery of events that give the festival a positive ‘vibe’ and family-friendly feeling.

### Conclusion

Most museums are located in cities well separated from the original localities of the objects they hold. Therefore, whilst they have objects and expert people, their public engagement efforts often lack the context of locality. Conversely, geoconservation paleontological localities often have context and expert people, but the key objects are often missing as these have been historically removed and placed in museums often at a distance.

Lyme Regis Fossil Festival is therefore unique in being able to place objects and people into context. It enables educators to engage the public and inspire, enthuse and educate about paleontology and earth science with both objects and context. It also enables the Lyme Regis Museum to think creatively. The museum is small and has limited space, but by expanding outside to the en-

vironment through the fossil festival it can engage with the public on an unprecedented scale. Also, by encompassing every possible way of presenting paleontology and earth sciences to the public, through avenues not normally considered by the academic community, the reach has been extended to the broadest possible audience.

### Acknowledgments

The author thanks everyone who has made the Lyme Regis Fossil Festival the success it has been over the last 20 years. This includes all the funders, sponsors, the people who have organized the festival, the people who have worked so hard to make the festival happen on the day and the people of Lyme Regis. There are so many organizations, exhibitors, traders, charities, volunteers, helpers, companies and individuals that come together to make the festival work – without you, it wouldn’t happen – thank you and long may you support us. It is also important to thank the public – the festival is for you and your support and attendance are truly appreciated. The author also thanks Mike Benton and the referees who greatly improved the text.

### Conflicts of Interests

The author is employed at the Museum which is the focus of this study.

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