

CHARLES NEWMAN

Fossil Hunter, Collector and Curator



Without doubt, small children will always be interested in dinosaurs and mythical monsters, I was no exception. Putting bones back together and fleshing them out is something that I have been interested in ever since I was a child. One of my earliest memories was aged four, when my dad Raymond took me in his rucksack to Freshwater, with my sister, Mary. He left our gear on the ledges, we became absorbed in exploring the cliffs nearby, only to find on return a couple of hours later, my wellies and all our belongings floating in the sea. Pub hours meant that Sunday afternoons were put aside for a trip; Chapmans Pool, a Victorian bottle dump in Corfe, or to explore the woods or visit the castle. Dad took us to look for crocodile teeth and turtle remains in the Purbeck Beds up at Durlston and each year we went to Blackstone – Cavelshard, between Chapmans Pool and Kimmeridge for our annual holiday. Fossil hunter David Sole lived in Langton and as kids

Jed Corbett

PURBECK PRINTS ARCHIVE 1976-2018

we were forever rummaging through his waste pile, four foot of debris, the remains of his fossils which if you were lucky you might find a casualty which was worth keeping. Experiences all of which contributed to our passion for collecting.

In 1963 dad was fossiling at Chapmans Pool when he discovered a number of vertebrae (later Identified as the remains of a Pliorsor). Too much to contemplate bringing home he decided to try and hide it by covering it over... a habit which I have inherited!! Over the course of time a few locals removed the odd vertebra I think Reggie Prior had one, Martha Mac used hers as a door stop for many years and Trev Haysom transported his find back to the sheds by boat, taking them to the county museum where Paul Ensome the curator was particularly interested to see the gastrolyths, samples of which they did not have in their existing collection. In time a mud flow covered the remaining fossilized bones and it was not until 34 years later that they began to reappear. I took it upon myself to excavate the site and paid Johnny James for ten days to help me and a few other friends. We shifted a large volume of soil and clay, it was like finding a jigsaw puzzle with no picture to guide us and half the pieces missing.

Steve Etches, a fellow collector, whose experience and knowledge of the subject proved invaluable drew my attention to these gastrolyths or quartz pebbles in its stomach. The pliorsor was a creature, similar in form to a crocodile and it is thought that they may have been the result of

secondary digestion. The exact process on ingestion remains open to debate.

To date I have found a number of fossils 'out of context' on iron age or Romano British sites, Early evidence of man's collecting habit! One collects for the aesthetics; symmetry in nature, Subsequently the Victorians were obsessed in collecting. It is very interesting to find an unusual sample; disruptions to the shell, evidence of the creature being attacked or infected by disease, the healing and its survival. Like being a detective, piecing together a story.

Concertinaed into Purbeck there is a lot of Geological time; Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous beds, all of which are rich in fossils. The shales, clays, gravels and limestone I know of another six specimens coming out of Egmont and more recently I have collected further afield; along the north Devon coast, inland up to Ill Minster and Whitby – Scarborough, the same geological period which covers the last 300 million years.

There are obvious dangers associated with fossil hunting; I remember once visiting a site at Egmont with some friends and five dogs. We stood back; discussed and surveyed an area of cliff, before getting to work, when suddenly, immediately in front of our eyes, within ten seconds 1,000 tons of cliff, an area the size of the pub, slid into the sea. A narrow escape! Within two weeks the sea had removed the lot.

Just recently I thought I must look in the upper Kimmeridge and Portland beds, something I rarely do. To my surprise, I soon found a femur or

humorous (large paddle bone). Sometimes I get the feeling that whatever it is I'm looking for I am being guided, I'll find say five nice pieces of roman artefacts, say a coin, a couple of brooches in a small area, then perhaps I'll return to that same spot at a later date and carry out a more systematic search which rarely yields more finds. I have my dad to thank and regularly hear myself doing so.

Only within the last ten days I have found a femur, three vertebrae, a Napoleonic coin, a bronze ring and a small Roman Coin. Mary is as keen a fossil hunter as I and as her namesake Mary Anning of Lyme Regis. Over the years, she has amassed an impressive collection which consists largely of sea urchins (4,500) Along with some fine examples of fossilized wood. Most of which she keeps in large jars on her kitchen shelves! Like dad, she likes to collect from the Wealdon beds, good for Iguanodon bones and from the chalk beds, home of the urchins.

Of course, one driving force is the remote possibility of finding something unique. Each day is new, especially in the winter the beach is fresh, the sea has removed all signs of anyone ever being there. Collecting fossils is my hobby whilst sharing my finds is my business.

Excavating the remains of the Pliosor which dad first discovered in 1963 was a great link. Together we shared the idea of creating a museum, which he first set up in the coal shed out the back of the pub, over the split door you could peer in at an arrangement of his early finds. The fascinating range

of his finds spread to every spare corner of shelf at the back of the bar. When the brewery sold up and dad bought the freehold, we converted the front sitting room into a proper museum, opened in 1998. Regularly looked at by local and visitor alike, which dad would have liked very much.