

ENGLISH · Y5

Biography — Year 5

WAGOLL: Mary Anning — Fossil Hunter

Introduction

MARY ANNING — THE FORGOTTEN FOSSIL HUNTER Mary Anning was one of the greatest fossil hunters the world has ever known. Despite never going to school and despite being treated unfairly because she was a woman, she made discoveries that helped scientists understand the history of life on Earth. Today, more than 200 years after her birth, scientists still build on the work she began.

Early Life

Mary Anning was born on 21st May 1799 in Lyme Regis, a small fishing town on the south coast of England. Her family was very poor. Her father, Richard, was a carpenter who collected fossils to sell to tourists, earning a few extra pennies for the family. When Mary was just a baby, an extraordinary thing happened. A neighbour was holding her under a tree when lightning struck and killed three other adults. Mary survived, and her family always believed that the lightning had given her her remarkable abilities.

First Discoveries

Mary's father died when she was eleven, leaving the family even poorer than before. Mary and her brother Joseph began hunting fossils on the dangerous Lyme Regis cliffs to sell to wealthy tourists. In 1811, when Mary was just twelve, she made her first major discovery. She and Joseph found the skull of an enormous sea creature buried in the cliffs. It took Mary several months to dig out the rest of the skeleton. The creature, which she had discovered, would later be known as an ichthyosaur.

Scientific Discoveries



Over the following decades, Mary made many more important discoveries. In 1823, she found the first complete plesiosaurus skeleton — a strange long-necked sea reptile that scientists at first refused to believe was real. In 1828, she discovered the first British pterosaur, a flying reptile. Many scientists travelled to Lyme Regis to buy fossils from her. Although they used her discoveries to make their own names famous, Mary was rarely given credit. As a working-class woman, she was not allowed to join scientific societies or publish her own findings.

Legacy

Mary Anning died of breast cancer in 1847, aged just 47. Although she had been ignored by many in her lifetime, in 2010 the Royal Society named her one of the ten most influential British women in science. Today, her story is celebrated by museums, books and even a famous tongue-twister: 'She sells seashells on the seashore.' Without Mary Anning's discoveries, our understanding of dinosaurs and ancient life would have come much later. She showed the world that important science can come from anyone, anywhere — even a poor girl from a tiny English town.

Notated features

What makes this a strong Y5 bi

- TITLE WITH SUBTITLE: introduces person and significance
- INTRODUCTION: states why this person is worth reading about
- SUB-HEADINGS: organise the life chronologically (Early Life / First Discoveries / Scientific Discoveries / Legacy)
- THIRD PERSON: 'Mary,' 'she,' 'her' — never 'I'
- PAST TENSE: 'Mary Anning was born,' 'made,' 'discovered'
- TIME PHRASES: 'In 1811,' 'In 1823,' 'Over the following decades,' 'Today'
- SPECIFIC DATES and PROPER NOUNS: '21st May 1799,' 'Lyme Regis,' 'plesiosaurus'
- CONJUNCTIONS for nuance: 'Although,' 'Despite,' 'However'
- BALANCED TONE: presents achievements AND injustices fairly
- TECHNICAL VOCAB: 'ichthyosaur,' 'pterosaur,' 'Royal Society'
- LEGACY PARAGRAPH: explains why the person still matters today



Writing prompt

Write your own biography. Choose someone famous (Florence Nightingale, Marie Curie, Rosa Parks, Mahatma Gandhi, David Attenborough) or local (a relative, a teacher, a community figure). Include: a title with subtitle, an introduction, four sub-headings (Early Life / Big Achievement / Later Life / Legacy or similar), specific dates, and a final paragraph on why the person still matters. Aim for around 350-450 words.

