

He slices seashells on the seashore

An experienced fossil hunter at Charmouth in Dorset infects Vicky Liddell with his enthusiasm

It's 9.30am on a cold Sunday morning and I'm standing on what was, 195 million years ago, a Jurassic sea bed. The tide is on the way out and, despite the bitter weather, there is a constant stream of people coming and going with long shovels and probes. Others are moving like molluscs, with their eyes fixed on the beach. As the Lyme Regis fossil festival approaches, we are in Charmouth, Dorset hunting for these fascinating relics.

Fossils are distinctly fashionable. After a landslide here last December, hundreds of people turned up looking for ammonites and some of them even had to be rescued when they got stuck in the mud. A local row ensued about safety and damage to the environment.

Ebby has moved in on the act with pages of fossils that are traded all over the world and, earlier this year, a new gallery, Ammonite, opened in London's Chelsea. On display is a fantastic collection of geological treasures. Prices rise with the size of the specimen. A large 2ft tall ammonite, at £1,100, will make quite a dent in your bank balance.

Fortunately, smaller specimens are still freely available on the West Dorset beaches, where the natural erosion of the coast is constantly revealing new crops of petrified remains. Early spring is a good time for fossil collecting after the high tides and mud flows of winter, so I've come to Charmouth to take part in a guided fossil walk with the local geologist Chris Pampin.

Chris has been collecting fossils for 27 years and has an infectious enthusiasm for his subject. He can spot a belemnite at 20 paces and can pick out a microscopic fragment of Jurassic snail. And, after a short talk, he shows us where to look for Fool's Gold ammonites around the large grey boulders that litter the beach.

Some of the fossils are incredibly small and it takes a while to adjust the eyes. "It's all about looking in the cracks and crevices," explains Chris. "Think of it as beachcombing." Half an hour on and a little wiser, we are filling our pockets with crinoids, fossilised driftwood, bullet-shaped belemnites and ammonite fragments.

Charmouth and



DOUGLAS TAYLOR



Look here: Chris Pampin shows the group how it's done; (above) he holds part of an ammonite

neighbouring Lyme Regis have been world famous locations for Lower Jurassic fossils ever since Mary Anning unearthed an ichthyosaur in 1811.

Most of the fossils are contained in the dark grey clay rocks known as marls, which were formed in a stagnant sea, undisturbed by sea-floor predators. When Chris slices one open he finds an unusual "smooth" ammonite, *Trigophylloceras locombi*. This fossil is quite rare and has come from the Green Ammonite Beds at the top of the cliff, but the best is yet to come. As we reach our walk's end, close to Lyme Regis bay, Jason, one of the party, finds the prize specimen of the day – three ichthyosaur vertebrae joined together and covered in grey mud. Ichthyosaurs were marine reptiles, rather like dolphins, that could be 10 yards long.

Complete specimens are rare, but Charmouth Fossil Shop has an entire ichthyosaur skull, which was found by

the shop owner, Tony Gill, after the storms in Easter 2001.

Around the same time, David Sole, another fossil hunter, found the skeleton of a scellidosaurus, one of the earliest dinosaurs, which was collected in parts over six months.

Will the fossils ever run out? "No," says Chris, "but the supply does dry up in the summer. Rain is the key."

Any fossils that you find on the Dorset beaches are yours to keep. New discoveries are still being made, and many are by amateurs. If you do find anything unusual, go to the Heritage Coast Centre in Charmouth, which will record important finds before you take them away. Alternatively, take your finds to the fossil festival next weekend.

Hammers are not essential on the beaches because loose fossils can be picked up easily among the boulders. As long as you stay away from the unstable cliffs, fossil

FOSSILFACTS

■ Ammonites prouetted through the seas for more than 300 million years. During their evolution they experienced three catastrophic events that eventually led to their extinction 65 million years ago.

■ They ranged in size from the tiny 1cm *Promicroceras planicosta* to the giant *Titanites giganteus* from Portland in Dorset that reached more than 1 metre in diameter. If unrolled, some of these larger specimens would have been 12.5 metres long.

■ Ammonites boasted a wonderful array of shell designs, with males and females of the same species often looking completely different. During the Cretaceous period, in a final fling before extinction, they produced ever more fantastic forms, including uncoiled and partially-coiled varieties.

■ The name ammonite originates from the Greek ram-horned god called

Ammon, in Whitby, North Yorkshire, where there is an abundance of them, ammonites are known as St Hilda's serpents after a legend in which the Abbess St Hilda was so plagued by snakes that she turned them all to stone.

■ Ammonites were cephalopods like the octopus, squid and cuttlefish. They moved by jet propulsion, expelling water to move themselves backwards. Their closest living relative is the Nautilus, which managed to escape extinction and swims in the Pacific Ocean today.

■ Ammonites were usually coiled, with shells made up of a series of connected chambers. The main body of the creature was contained in a large, open-ended section. It was from this that the prying tentacles would extend.

FIND OUT MORE

www.fossilwalks.com
Lyme Regis fossil festival, April 28-30
www.deepmine Lyme.com

collecting is a safe and conservation-friendly activity. And the lively international trade in fossils means that specimens can end up anywhere. But, as Chris

points out, "The world is getting smaller. If a fossil from round here ends up in a Japanese swimming pool, it is better than it being lost for ever."

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