

## Robin Mills met Dr Paul Davis in Lyme Regis



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**M**y interest in fossils began on holiday in Mid Wales, when my family lived in a little village near Tamworth, Staffs. In WH Smiths in Aberystwyth, I bought a book on dinosaurs and was absolutely fascinated. I was about 5 years old, and until that point I had been determined to become a medical doctor. Ours had been a mining village and my dad was the first in our family not to go down the pit. I was brought up in nature, my mum encouraging me to notice and appreciate all forms of wildlife. She had some fossils that my granddad had found when he worked at a brick works after the pit had closed, which interested me. I would wander off, aged 5, as you did in those days, to a nearby building site thinking I might find some fossils in the clay soil, in which I promptly got stuck, losing my wellies. My parents then began to see that this obsession wasn't going to go away, so they asked me what I'd like for my birthday. The choice was a party, or to go fossil hunting. That was easy—fossil hunting please. Where would you like to go? Lyme Regis. Even back then, I knew it was the Mecca of fossils. My

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parents were delighted not to have a horde of 6-year-olds rubbing jelly and ice-cream into the furnishings, and they'd get to go on holiday. I think that was 1975, and every holiday after that involved fossiling.

I was lucky to possess a brain which found academic learning fairly easy, so after A levels I went to university to study geology. I picked Exeter because it was near Lyme and Charmouth, then did a PhD at Bristol, for the same reason, in the fossilisation processes of pterosaurs, the flying reptiles and birds. I then got a post-doc opportunity in Japan with a former colleague from Bristol, who was Japanese. We worked at the National Science Museum in Tokyo, where I lived for a year. In my working life I'm lucky to have worked in every continent except Antarctica, digging up dinosaurs and other amazing creatures in remote places all around the world. I've been collecting fossils for over 50 years, and as well as the UK and Japan I've worked in universities and museums in the USA. I also edited a volume for the Paleontological Association called *Fossils from the Lower Lias of the Dorset Coast* as well as writing other books on fossils.

Perhaps my most memorable find was at the end of my first year at Exeter, aged 19. I was due to go home, and my dad had driven down to collect me. He suggested we do a bit of fossiling on the way home. We went out past Monmouth Beach towards Pinhay Bay, and at the bottom of the cliffs I saw a skull. That was the first time my dad had heard me properly swear. It was a particularly nice specimen of an *Ichthyosaurus conybeari*, a complete skeleton 5ft 2in long, only missing the very tips of the nose and tail, which we dug out. It was March 1988, and it must have been recently exposed by a storm. That was the most memorable find for me, but there have been many other exciting ones, including an Iguanodon which I helped my friend Geoff, an amateur collector, dig out, finding and excavating the oldest known stegosaur in a quarry near Oxford, and fossil plants in the jungles of Belize. Of all these amazing expeditions and excavations, the ichthyosaur was the most special because I found it with my dad, and I still have a replica hanging on my wall in my lounge.

After I came back from Japan, finding a job wasn't easy. I had experience of the curation and conservation of fossil collections, which got me a job looking after the

geology collections in Surrey. From there I got a job at the Natural History Museum as a curator, and within 2 years I was running the collections across all disciplines, not just fossils, as Registrar. That was an amazing job, at a museum which possibly holds the world's best collections of pretty much everything, from beetles to meteorites. I was there for 12 years and had always told myself that the day I felt it was no longer the best job in the world would be the day I had to leave. And one day that happened; I was no longer dealing with the objects hands on, which was maybe an inevitable part of progress up the career ladder, but it no longer inspired me.

After I left the Natural History Museum, I started my own fly-fishing company. I was particularly interested in fly tying; I was tying flies for people, demonstrating fly tying, and went all over the world judging fly tying competitions. It was a completely on-line business called the Fly Tying Shop, which I ran for 10 or 12 years, but eventually it didn't involve enough of my time, so I was getting a bit bored, and annoying my wife because I was at home too much. She said I needed to do something worthwhile, and told me I could be a fantastic teacher, so why not do that? So, I retrained, in my 50s, and passed my qualifications. Even though I was an experienced lecturer it was without doubt the hardest thing I've ever done—hats off to every single teacher. Teacher training was harder than doing a PhD and becoming a world expert in a subject. Managing 350 people in a major museum compared to managing 30 people in a classroom, full of hormones and not really interested in what you have to say, is a doddle. I then taught in a comprehensive, in a sixth form college, then at a college teaching adults, who wanted to go to university later in life, teaching access courses which basically get you university ready in one year. That was really rewarding. I had always had links to Lyme and Charmouth; I had been an honorary patron of the Charmouth Heritage Centre for 20+ years and was involved with setting up the Lyme Regis Fossil Festival, now a major event in Lyme, which has been going for nearly 20 years. This year's festival will be on the 8th and 9th of June, and will feature guided walks, exhibitions, talks, creative workshops, and much more for all ages and for free. Ironically, when I lived in Surrey if I walked up the



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street, I'd see a couple of people I knew. Here, it can take me a couple of hours to walk through Lyme if I stop and chat to everyone I know. Lyme was always my spiritual home. I was regularly coming here to collect in the winter—which worked well with the fishing, which is a summer activity. The previous curator at Lyme Museum, Paddy Howe, was moving to Ireland, and asked me if I might be interested in taking over what was his job, which was for one day a week. I was working part time in the college, and I thought I could make that work. I would condense the one day per week into 4 days every 3 weeks, to reduce the travelling, and staying with friends. After a few months, the museum said they needed me 3 days a week, so I thought I would make this my “pretirement” job, as Curator of Geology, and we moved down here 3 years ago just after Covid and the lockdowns. I don't think I'll ever completely retire from it. I'll go with my boots on. I am incredibly fortunate

that my passions have been my employment. It's often said if you're doing what you love, you're not really working.

I used to do a lot of fossil walks for the museum, but now we're taking about 3-4,000 people a year, that means we've had to take on more people to lead them. There's no such thing as a typical day for me. Today for instance, I've been emailing invitations to a book signing event at the Fossil Festival, being interviewed, labelling some specimens, reviewing a book about Mary Anning, reading a paper on preserving ammonites, acquiring specimens for an exhibition, etc, etc. I don't sit around surrounded by piles of dusty rock, with a ledger and a quill pen. Although, there is a little of that, but it's great that every day is full of a diversity of interesting activities, and when on the beach I have the best 'office' in the world; the 'roof' leaks and it is draughty, but the views are fantastic! ☺