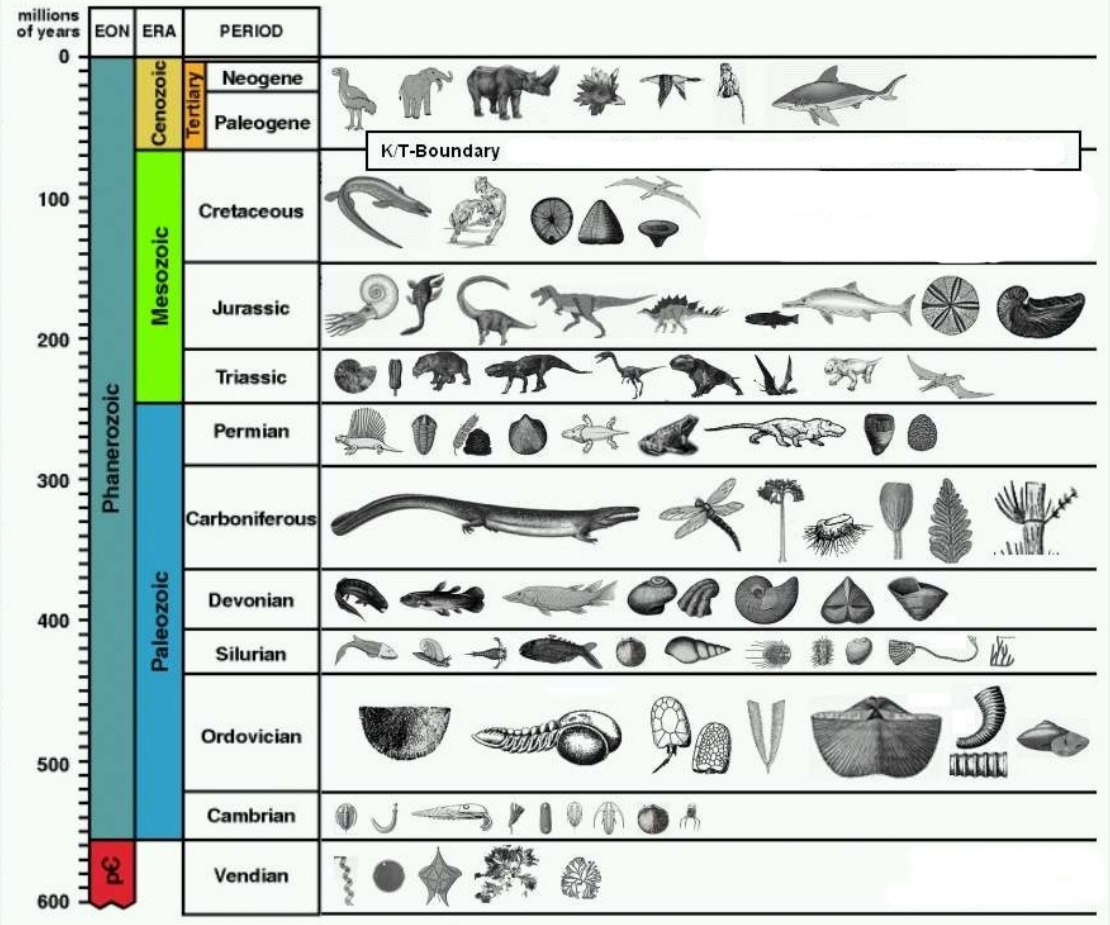
Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

FOSSILS X1/F

The word fossil is derived from the Latin *fossilis*, which means 'dug up'. Fossils are the remains of creatures which existed long ago. Fossils range from thousands of years to many millions of years in age. The earliest fossils date from around 600 million years ago. However recent reports suggest bacteria may have existed up to 3,000 million years earlier. To put this in context, the dinosaurs became extinct just 65 million years ago. The earth itself is about 4,570 million years old. Geologists divide this vast time into various units according to events which took place in each period. The chart below gives the names of these periods, from the time of the first complex fossils through to the present. It also shows some of the living organisms (mainly animals) that lived in each period.



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Not all former life was preserved as fossils. The vast majority of living things simply vanished without trace. Fossils come in a variety of sizes, from the microscopic through to large dinosaur skeletons and are formed in a variety of ways.

Permineralised fossils are organisms which became covered by sediment soon after death. As the organism slowly decayed, water infused with minerals passed through it, replacing the chemicals in it with rock-like minerals. Over millions of years the original organism was completely replaced by these minerals and what remains is a rock-like copy of the original. The fossil has the same shape as the original object, but is actually rock. This process results in loss of original colour. The photograph on the right shows the fossil of a huge tree that was formed by the permineralisation process.





In other cases the original remains of the organism completely dissolve and all that is left is an organism-shaped hole in the rock. This kind of fossil is called a mould fossil or typolite. If this hole is later replaced by new, unrelated minerals, it is called a cast fossil. In some cases replacement occurs so gradually that tiny features are preserved despite the total loss of original material. The photograph on the left shows a mould fossil of a shell.

Finally, there are trace fossils: marks in the rock which result from the activities or presence of animals and plants. Examples of these traces include footprints, burrows, root tunnels and even animal droppings (which are called coprolites) and vomit (regurgitaliths). The photograph on the right shows a fossilised dinosaur footprint.



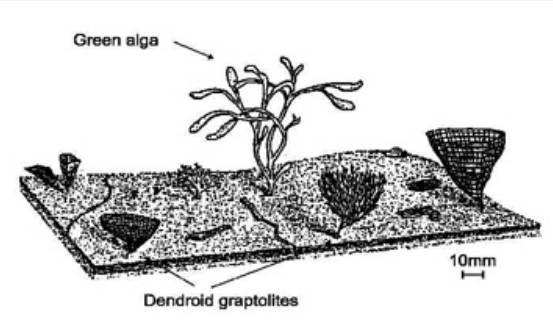
Graptolite



Graptolites are the fossil remains of small colonial animals that lived from 520 to 320 million years ago. Their skeleton is made of collagen, a complex protein similar to the material that forms finger nails. The tiny individual animals lived in a series of tiny, cup-like structures organised along the length of the graptolite skeleton. Individuals formed colonies, a bit like individual coral polyps that live together and create larger organisms. After death the colonies disintegrated and only the resistant collagen skeleton material is preserved as fossils. The name graptolite comes from the Greek *graptos*, meaning written, and *lithos*, meaning rock, as many graptolite fossils resemble hieroglyphs written on the rock.

There were many different species of graptolite and it is not certain what colonies of these creatures would have looked like. Some were attached to the sea-floor by a root-like base, others drifted on the surface of ancient seas, others were attached to floating seaweed by means of a slender thread. The drawing below suggests something of how some of them may have appeared.

For much of the time that they lived graptolites dominated the upper layers of the ocean. They lived by the countless billion and their skeletons are preserved today in vast numbers in varied strata in every continent. Because of their diversity they are very useful to geologists when they are trying to date rocks.



Two Coal Measure Fossils



Although the environment that produced coal looked similar to that of Brazil today, the kind of plants that flourished in the Upper Carboniferous Period were, in fact, very different from those found in a modern rainforest.

Tree-sized plants dominated, but these were largely club-mosses - extremely fast-growing plants adapted to nutrient-poor, waterlogged soils. It has been estimated that their 1-2 metre wide stems could grow upwards at several metres per year, to a height of 40 metres. They were not seed plants as are most large plants growing today; they reproduced by means of spores. Unlike a true tree their trunk contained relatively small amounts of wood. Instead, much of the trunk consisted of soft tissue called periderm, which enabled the plants to grow much more quickly than woody trees. They grew into mature plants, reproduced, and then died. Most modern-day trees, in contrast, reproduce for many years after reaching maturity. For this reason, many palaeontologists call these extinct plants giant herbs rather than trees.



Other plants also grew in the forests, but mainly in the less waterlogged areas, such as on the raised banks of rivers that threaded their way through the swamps. There were tree ferns, looking very similar to those growing today in places like New Zealand. There were also some seed plants belonging to a number of now extinct groups such as the cordaites (distant relatives of today's conifers) and the seed-ferns (distant relatives of the modern cycads).

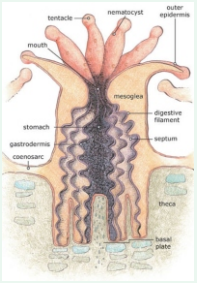


These two fossils are witness to this lush, long-since-vanished landscape. One of them has an impression of fern-like leaves. The other is probably a fossilised calamites stem. Calamites were a group of extinct tree-like horsetails to which the modern horsetails (right) are closely related. Unlike their modern cousins, calamites were medium-sized trees, growing to a height of 10 metres (31 feet).

Coral



Coral is the common name for a number of tiny marine animals closely related to sea anemones and jellyfish. What appears at first sight to be a single piece of coral is, in fact, a colony formed of thousands of individuals, each of which is only a few millimetres in diameter.



A diagram of a typical, but much magnified, individual can be seen on the left. The individuals which make up the colony are usually referred to as a polyps. The colony functions as a single organism, gradually getting bigger as each generation grows on the skeletal remains of previous generations, forming a structure that has a shape characteristic of the species.

Although corals first appeared in the Cambrian Period, 542 million years ago, fossils are extremely rare until the Ordovician period, 100 million years later. In life corals can be extremely colourful (right).



Two Shells



One of these fossil shells belonged to a mollusc similar to a cockle or a clam. The other is the shell of a gryphaea, a genus (group) of extinct oysters also known as Devil's toenails. They are common fossils in many parts of Britain and date from the Jurassic Period.

Gryphaea lived on the sea bed in shallow waters, possibly in large colonies. Complete gryphaea fossils consist of a larger curved shell (the 'toenail') and sometimes a smaller, flattened shell, forming a lid. The animal occupied the cavity between the two shells, just like modern oysters. The shells also feature prominent growth bands. The larger, curved shell sat within the mud on the sea floor.

Crinoid



The period between about 360 and 300 million years ago is called the Carboniferous Period. This is in turn divided into two parts called the Lower (earliest) and Upper (later) Carboniferous. In Britain the rocks of the Lower Carboniferous Period were laid down under the sea, while those of the upper period were made on dry land.

Much of the coal that is found beneath the landscape of Britain was created in the Upper Carboniferous Period. At this time Britain and much of northern Europe was hot and covered by a rainforest which looked similar to that found in Brazil today. When trees die in a stagnant peat swamp environment low oxygen levels prevent their complete decay by bacteria. If these masses of undecayed trees are later buried under sediments (mud and sand swept over them by a river or the sea) then coal will form.

These two pieces of limestone, however, formed under the sea. Limestones can form in many places, including river floodplains and lakes, but they are usually formed in clear tropical waters. Limestones are being made today in such places as the waters of the Bahamas and the Great Barrier Reef off Australia. In such locations the remains of countless sea creatures pile up on the sea bed over millions of years, then slowly change into rock as their chemistry alters. In some places beds of limestone are thousands of metres thick. Huge beds of limestone can be found in the Pennines in northern England, witnesses of the warm tropical waters that once covered the area.

This piece of limestone has acrinoid stem embedded in it. Despite their plant-like appearance, crinoids are animals that live in the sea.



They are often referred to as *sea lilies* (for crinoids that are attached to the floor) and *feather stars* (for free-swimming crinoids). Organisms that have been identified as crinoids first appear in the Ordovician period (488 to 444 million years ago) and there are several hundred species of stalked and unstalked crinoids in the modern world's oceans, although this is just a tiny fraction compared to their abundance in past ages. The photograph to the right shows the passion flower feather star (*Ptilometra australis*), which lives off the coast of Australia. The fossil crinoids in this box were probably once equally brightly coloured.

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Generally the stalked forms inhabit the deeper oceans, while stalkless forms are commonly found in shallower depths (including the shallows of coral reefs). Crinoids are characterised by a mouth on the top surface that is surrounded by feeding arms. There are usually five or a multiple of five arms, which may be repeatedly branched. Grooves in the arms channel food particles floating in the water to the mouth. They have a U-shaped gut, and their anus is located next to the mouth. Some ancient sea snails developed a symbiotic relationship with crinoids - they would sit on the crinoid anus and feed on the excrement as it was ejected (which was obviously rich in nutrients).



The drawing on the right shows a crinoid species. Often the disc-shaped sections of the stalk would break apart after death. These fragments are often found off the coast of north-east England, where they are known as St Cuthbert's beads.

Conglomerate of Bivalve Shells & Polished Marine Fossils



Sometimes fossils can be found in immense numbers, silent witnesses of a once-thriving ecosystem. In some cases the rock in which they are embedded is hard and can be polished to create attractive building stone. Look out for fossils in the floors and walls of buildings around you!

Flint Nodule



Chert and flintstones are common in the soils around Reading. Most beds of chert are formed from the ooze that covers the deep ocean floor. The ooze is built up from the constant rain of plankton that drops to the floor when these small creatures die. Once the ooze is buried it solidifies into chert.

Not all chert is biochemical in origin. Sometimes the calcite crystals in limestone are gradually replaced by silica. Flints, the nodules of black or toffee coloured rock, are an example of this process. Sometimes, when these nodules are split open, they are found to have a cavity in the centre in which there are fossil remains, very often of a sponge. Who knows what might be in this one.

Two Ammonites



Ammonites were marine animals that ranged in size from under an inch (2cm) to about 9 feet (3m) in diameter. They were protected by a shell (usually spiral-coiled) that contained many air filled chambers. As the animal grew, new chambers were added behind the outer chamber. The animal lived only in the outermost chamber.



Despite the fact that they look like snails, ammonites did not move by crawling across the ocean floor. Air in the unused shell chambers allowed the animals to float and they moved by jet propulsion - expelling water through a funnel-like opening to propel themselves in the opposite direction. The modern nautilus (right) gives us some idea of what a living ammonite would have looked like.

Ammonites probably lived for about two years. A nautilus creates a new chamber in its shell at a rate of one every four weeks, equal to 13 each year. Using this as a guide an ammonite shell containing 26 chambers could be assumed to have housed the creature for two years. Evidence suggests that some female ammonites grew up to 400% larger than the males.

Ammonites began life as tiny planktonic creatures less than 1mm in diameter. In their infancy they would have been vulnerable to attack from other predators including fish. They quickly assumed a strong protective outer shell that would shield their soft interior from damage. However, fossilised adult ammonites have been found showing teeth marks from ichthyosaur attacks.



On the other hand, ammonites were themselves predators, feeding on most living marine creatures including molluscs, fish and even other cephalopods (octopuses, squids etc.). By analogy to modern cephalopods, their method of attack probably consisted of silently stalking their prey, then rapidly extending their tentacles to grasp the target. The photograph on the right shows a nautilus capturing a crab. Once caught the prey would be devoured by the ammonite's powerful jaws located at the base of the tentacles, between the eyes.

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Much of an ammonite's life was spent in shallow waters. The evidence to support this includes their diet, which could be found in the greatest volumes in the warm shallows. It is also unlikely that their shells could withstand the high pressures present in deep water (over 100 metres). Another theory based around their assumed social behaviour suggests that their shells were decorated by an array of patterns, indicating that colour/good light played a large part in their lives.

Ammonites first appeared in the late Silurian to early Devonian Periods (about 400 million years ago) and were abundant in the seas for 300 million years. At several points in this long history they faced major extinction events, with often only a few species surviving. Each time, however, this handful would diversify into a multitude of forms. Ammonite fossils became less abundant during the latter part of the Mesozoic Era (from 251 to 65 million years ago), with none surviving into the Cenozoic Era.

Two Sea Urchins



Living sea urchins (below) are covered with spines, but these usually decay quickly after death leaving a shell, which is also called the test. Fossilised sea urchin tests are relatively common. The earliest sea urchins are found in the Ordovician Period.

In folklore, fossilised sea urchins were thought to be thunderstones which fell from the sky during storms.





Three Belemnites

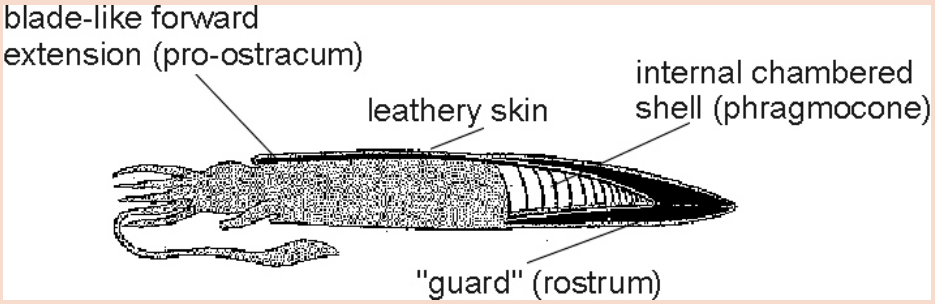


Belemnites are an extinct group of marine animals, similar in many ways to the modern squid and cuttlefish. Like them, the belemnites possessed an ink sac, but, unlike the squid, which has eight arms and two tentacles, they possessed ten arms and no tentacles. Also, unlike the modern squid, whose arms have suckers, belemnite arms carried a series of small hooks for grabbing prey. Belemnites were carnivores that caught small fish and other marine animals with their arms and ate them with their beak-like jaws. Belemnites themselves appear to have formed part of the diet of marine reptiles such as ichthyosaurs, whose fossilised stomachs frequently contain many belemnite hooks.



Normally only the back part of the belemnite shell (called the guard or rostrum) is found. The guard is elongated and bullet-shaped, being cylindrical and either pointed or rounded at the rear end. The front of the guard would have been hollow and would have enclosed a chambered section of shell. This section, which seldom survives, was divided into chambers that were gas-filled and which caused the animal to remain buoyant. The diagram below shows the structure of a typical belemnite. The picture on the right shows what a belemnite may have looked like in life. Like ammonites, belemnites moved by squirting out a jet of water which propelled them forwards.

Belemnites reached their greatest abundance and diversity during the Jurassic and early Cretaceous Periods, but, like the ammonites, disappeared at the end of the Cretaceous Period.



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Plesiosaur Vertebra



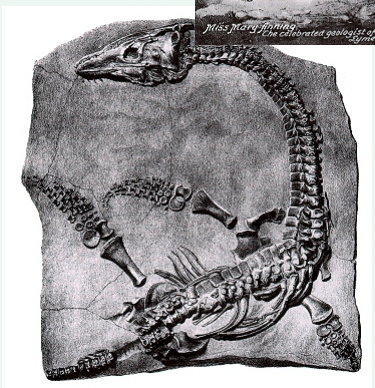
Plesiosaurs were aquatic reptiles that existed from the end of the Triassic Period 220 million years ago until the end of the Cretaceous 65 million years ago. Their remains have been found on every continent.

A typical plesiosaur had a long neck, a broad body, four large flippers and a relatively short tail. The smallest were about 2m long as adults, the largest were up to 20m long, comparable in size to sperm whales.

Occasionally stomach contents are found inside well-preserved fossil specimens. This evidence shows that some fed on belemnites and ammonites. There is also a wide range in tooth shape, showing that they were adapted to feeding on different types of prey. Long, slender teeth may have been used to rake through sea-floor sediments in the way a swan dabbles on pond bottoms. Larger, more robust teeth seem to be adapted for feeding on armoured fish and cephalopds (squid, octopuses etc.). Some of the bigger members of the family had enormous, dagger-like teeth which were probably used to attack their smaller relatives. Other specimens show bite marks from larger predatory forms.



Plesiosaurs were discovered by Mary Anning in 1821, the famous professional fossil collector from Lyme Regis, Dorset. The fossil she found was subsequently described, by William Conybeare as *Plesiosaurus dolichodeirus* and is the holotype - the defining example - of the species. Mary Anning can be seen on the right, along with the specimen she found. Specimens are still found in south-west England and in 2002 possibly the finest ever known was discovered on the coast of Somerset by someone fishing from the shore.





Above: An illustration of what one of the many species of plesiosaur - Cryptocleidus - may have looked like.

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Ichthyosaur Vertebra



Ichthyosaurs were giant marine reptiles resembling fish and dolphins. They appeared about 250 million years ago (earlier than the dinosaurs, who put in an appearance about 230 million years ago) and became extinct about 90 million years ago (about 25 million years before the same thing happened to the dinosaurs). Ichthyosaurs evolved from as-yet unidentified land reptiles that moved back into the water in a development parallel to that of dolphins and whales. The late Triassic and early Jurassic Periods were the heyday of the ichthyosaurs, which are represented by four families and a variety of species, ranging from one to ten metres in length.



Ichthyosaurs are important in the history of palæontology (the study of prehistoric life forms), as their fossil remains are relatively common in southern Britain and they were one of the first groups of extinct species to be studied. They were first described in 1699 from fossil fragments discovered in Wales. The first complete ichthyosaur fossil was found in 1811 by Mary Anning in Lyme Regis, along what is now called the Jurassic Coast. She subsequently discovered three separate species. The ichthyosaur skeleton on the right was found in Dorset.

Wooly Rhinoceros Tooth



The woolly rhinoceros lived during the Neogene Period, surviving into the last ice age. It lived in northern Europe. This tooth was found in Kent It had a flat horn that enabled it to push aside snow in order to graze, thick fur and a layer of thick fat to keep it warm in the cold conditions it endured. Early humans painted pictures of it on cave walls, but they may also have contributed to its extinction through hunting.