Who was Mary Anning?

*A cross-curricular project
for 8-11 year olds*

Introduction

Our project about Mary Anning arose out of a coincidence.

In 2001 I was the new Headteacher at Woodberry Down Community Primary School. I was looking for other Woodberry Downs on the Internet – and came across the Woodberry Down Activity Centre in Lyme Regis, Dorset. Before long the deputy and myself had visited the Woodberry Down in Dorset and this centre became – and remains – the base for our Year 6 school journey.

As I began to learn more about the area I inevitably came across Mary Anning and was fascinated by the story of a female palaeontologist in pre/early Victorian England. We began to teach children about Mary Anning and this project is a result of the continual expansion and refinement of our Mary Anning curriculum work.

In 2010 she is better known than ever before, not least because of Tracy Chevalier's 2009 novel *Remarkable Creatures*. But the number of people who are not aware of her significance seems to still outweigh the number that are; this seems to point to issues around gender.

One key point of the project is to develop good skills of historical enquiry. Considerable emphasis is placed on obtaining information from a range of sources, distinguishing between primary and secondary sources, categorising, evaluating reliability and so on. Later on in the project some of the children's books that recount Mary's life are introduced and children look at how these compare to the facts as we know them and to one another.

For children, the project on Mary Anning can be incredibly intriguing. The idea that they can walk along the same stretch of coast as Mary Anning, finding fossils themselves, is exciting. The idea that an eleven year old girl can discover the fossil of an ichthyosaur is incredibly powerful. The story around the death her dog Tray is equally so. The determination and sheer grit that made Mary Anning who she was – all these are aspects we should want children to be exposed to if our aim is to give every child the best possible start.

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