What the papers say

**Egyptian dinosaur possibilities rediscovered**

Egypt doesn’t feature very often in these columns, but it’s now here with a vengeance, for Mark Henderson (The Times, 1 June 2001) reports the discovery there of *Paralititan stromeri* (Fig. 1), the second-largest dinosaur ever found (after *Argentinosaurus*). The location was the Bahariya Oasis, in central Egypt 290 km south-west of Cairo, where from 1915 to 1936 the first excavations were carried out by the Bavarian palaeontologist Ernst Stromer von Reichenbach (after whom the new dinosaur is named). Von Reichenbach discovered four new dinosaurs there – three theropods (*Spinosaurus*, *Carcharodontosaurus* and *Bahariasaurus*) and one sauropod (*Aegyptosaurus*) – all of whose bones, alas, were destroyed in an Allied bombing raid on Munich in 1944. But back to *P. stromeri* (a sauropod, by the way): the estimated length, height and weight are, respectively, 30 m, 15 m and 75 tonnes. Bahariya Oasis had been almost forgotten for 60 years, but evidently not by Joshua Smith of the University of Pennsylvania, who led the discovery team. The site, now an inland desert, would have been a tidal mangrove swamp near the coast when *P. stromeri* lived in the late Cretaceous. Ironically, *P. stromeri*, the herbivore named after von Reichenbach, would have been threatened by the very three predators he discovered. This story was also covered in The Daily Telegraph (1 June 2001) by Roger Highfield, who added that the skeleton had apparently been scavenged; the bones were scattered around, they weren’t separated at the bone sutures, the pelvis had been ripped apart and the predator, probably *Carcharodontosaurus*, had left a large tooth behind.

**Not many dead**

Under the fascinating headline ‘Quake rocks Devon: budgie injured’, Simon de Bruxelles (The Times, 2 June 2001) drew attention to the ‘significant’ earthquake that had ‘rocked’ Devon and Cornwall the previous (early) morning. All this is relative, of course. The only damage reported was three cases of cracked plaster and a budgie that had fallen from its perch, although the police received over 40 calls, including one from a man who thought there had been a nuclear explosion! The epicentre was 40 km west of Bude, in the Bristol Channel, and had a magnitude of just 3.6. ‘You don’t know whether you are going to die in your bed’, a Ms Williams is quoted as saying. David Derbyshire, writing in The Daily Telegraph the same day, was able to add that the shock lasted 25–30 s. There are several hundred quakes a year in Britain, but on average only 30 are felt (17 in 2000). See Quote–unquote 1, below.

**Meteorite sales and exchanges**

More seriously, perhaps, according to Chris Gray (The Independent, 4 June 2001) South African ‘conservationists’ are up in arms at the supposed fact that the Natural History Museum (Britain) has sold to a dealer the Cold Bokkeveld (CM2) meteorite that fell in Cape Province in 1838. In truth, as Monica Grady of the NHM points out, only a 4-g fragment was disposed of and that ‘traded’ with, rather than sold to, dealer Mike Farmer. Unfortunately, Farmer offered it to a Sunday newspaper in South Africa for £704. Several interesting points arise from this. First, the selling of historical artefacts (including meteorites, which stretches the definition of artefact somewhat) is illegal in South Africa, a policy monitored by the South African Heritage Resources Agency; but there is not much the Agency can do about material offered on the Internet from abroad. However, presumably it is also illegal to...
buy such material, which means that the newspaper would not have been able to acquire Farmer’s wares. The second point is that we don’t know why the fragment was traded by the NHM. Museums do exchange specimens from time to time, but surely it’s unusual to exchange with a known dealer. And what, in this case, did the NHM get in return? Thirdly, this must be a mini-Elgin Marbles case. South Africa claims that as the meteorite fell there it belongs to South Africa; the NHM shouldn’t even have it, let alone exchange/sell a bit of it. The NHM was given 700 g of the Cold Bokkeveld meteorite by Sir John Herschel in 1839.

Stonehenge 2 According to Richard Savill (The Daily Telegraph, 13 June 2001), the Marquess of Bath has built his own ‘Stonehenge’ on his Longleat estate (Fig. 2). It comprises 22 granite blocks designed and shaped by Paul Norris, nine of which are over 4.5 m tall and the largest of which weighs 19 tonnes. Lord Bath is quoted as saying that ‘these magnificent stone sculptures evoke and reflect that awesome natural beauty [in the section of his estate known as Heaven’s Gate] without imposing upon it ... Despite their great size and enormous weight, when the moon is full tiny crystals and metals embedded within the stones reflect the moonlight. This makes each sculpture appear to glow and shimmer, adding to the magic and mystery.’ The granite came from a quarry alongside the De Lank river on Bodmin Moor.

Selling Walking Adam Sherwin (The Times, 15 June 2001) reports that the BBC is to licence its Walking With Dinosaurs brand to theme parks internationally. ‘Rides and interactive attractions will allow viewers to re-live the award-winning series.’ Negotiations are taking place on where the first of the theme parks will be, but most likely it will be at Alton Towers, opening in the autumn of 2002.

Dinos need no planning permission A dinosaur exhibition of another sort is vexing certain people in Newark-on-Trent, Nottinghamshire (Maurice Weaver, The Daily Telegraph, 16 June 2001). Brian Gulliford bought from the Philippines a 3-m-high glass-fibre model of T. rex and set it on his lawn ‘to brighten up his home’, but his neighbours in his ‘luxury housing development’ don’t like it one bit. One of them is quoted as saying that the model ‘reflects the mentality of the people who live there’. The neighbours have complained to the council, but it turns out that nothing can be done about it because the model is on a trolley that can be moved around the garden. No permanent fixture; no planning permission required, it seems. The Telegraph item on all this was quite short; but thanks to Gerald Lucy we are able to reveal that Daily Mail readers got a whole page of it, complete with pictures of the offending T. rex (‘Nottingham’s answer to the Lost World’) and of its owner’s girlfriend. The paper’s view is that the model ‘purports to be a Tyrannosaurus Rex but looks more like an undernourished velociraptor’. On the other hand, the Mail quotes Chris Perrett, the director of planning for Newark and Sherwood District Council – outed by the paper as a geologist! – as saying that ‘I think it is a good representation of a Tyrannosaurus Rex. It is different from having a gnome in your garden.’

Told you so (no. 493) In The Times (19 June 2001), Penny Wark highlights the plight of the residents of Chace Field, Farringdon, Hampshire, who have been evacuees from their own property for over 7 months. Chace Field was flooded in December 2000 and remains flooded [at June 2001] because – you’ve guessed it – the houses were built on a flood plain. Nor is this a one-off misfortune: the area has been known as one of regular flooding for decades or even longer, as the accompanying picture of 1946 (Fig. 3) and a diary entry of 1822 show. Actually, ‘flood plain’ may be the wrong phrase here; the area is not affected by river overflow but by a rise in the water table after heavy rainfall – the water oozes up through the ground/floor. Still, the effect is the same. The builders of Chace Field decided to ignore the problem as did the council, which granted planning permission even though it had refused it several times before in recent decades. Remedial options are said to
be (1) raising the houses (£832 000), (2) providing a gravity outlet for excess water (£436 000) or (3) proving a permanent pumping system (£600 000). Or perhaps the site should now be abandoned (about £1.8 million as the original market value of the houses). Of course, with proper geological/geomorphological advice, the houses would not have been built there in the first place. This farce is being repeated all over the country.

**BBC too** When the BBC made the programme *Live from Dinosaur Island* on the Isle of Wight, ‘pneumatic drills and mechanical diggers were used by the corporation to tear into a stretch of coastline that is protected and prone to erosion’ (David Lister, *The Independent*, 23 June 2001). Some of the locals, especially fossil collectors, are up in arms about it (this seems to be becoming an ‘up in arms’ reporting period). In fact, the BBC reinstated the sites before it left, but as fossil hunter Hazel Underwood is quoted as saying: ‘I have known these beaches for years and I am concerned that the BBC may have contributed to the erosion of these cliffs. To use big machinery against fragile cliffs is crass. People here are likening it to rape and pillage of the countryside.’ The Isle of Wight Council has also complained to the BBC, but mainly on the grounds that the corporation may have carried out activities that required planning permission. The BBC’s viewpoint is that (a) it first consulted English Nature, Crown Estates and the National Trust (but not local people?!) and (b) ‘the area being dug would have succumbed to natural erosion within a year in any case’. So that’s all right then. (See also Quote–unquote 7, below.)

**Firms ousted from Dartmoor** Robert Mendick (*The Independent on Sunday*, 1 July 2001) records that two mining firms, Imerys and Watts Blake Bearne, have given up their long-standing planning rights to mine china clay at three sites on Dartmoor. As a result, 600 acres will be ‘saved’ from ‘one of the biggest holes in Europe’. The two companies have, of course, caved in following a sustained campaign by environmentalist and other groups. Whether the net result is better or worse for Britain is unclear. [Thanks to D. Nowell]

**Putting the boot into a work of art** A 100-tonne boulder of Portland Stone, entitled *Untitled Boulder*, was installed in the Capability Brown park of Compton Verney, Warwickshire, for several weeks during the summer to enable novice climbers to get practice, especially on the 45°-overhanging ‘north face’. They were there at the invitation of ‘contemporary artist’ John Frankland. (Maev Kennedy, *The Guardian*, 19 July 2001)

**Russia leaks fossils (continued)** The question of the theft and sale of fossils from Russian museums since the collapse of the Soviet Union has been discussed here before, but the problem continues, and not just with high-profile vertebrates. Patrick Cockburn reports (*The Independent*, 23 July 2001) that when Larisa Doguzhaeva of the Palaeontological Institute in Moscow was asked by the Ministry of Culture to check out a collection of 11 000 ammonites for which a Russian company was seeking an export licence, she found that an expert at her own institute has already certified them as scientifically worthless even though they were beautifully preserved. The chance of there being no scientifically useful
samples in a collection of 11 000 is remote. The collection must have been from a museum, probably the Institute, and was clearly being sold by, or with the collusion of, higher-level officials. Larisa Doguzhaeva has been a tireless opponent of illegal Russian fossil sales (mainly to the west) but has experienced great hostility from the heads of her institution, from which thousands of fossils have disappeared. It’s clear why. (PS. During the recent summer, a single Russian ammonite was being offered on the Internet for £2900.)

**Jubilee sinking** Jasper Capping and Rajeev Syal (*The Sunday Telegraph*, 29 July 2001) claim that at least three Grade II listed buildings in London have suffered more than £2 million worth of damage because of tunnelling for the Jubilee Line. As an example, they publish a picture of the inside of St Thomas’s Hospital Museum, complete with wall bracing. London Transport has failed to secure the long-term stability of buildings above parts of the Jubilee Line and admits it, although it has paid no compensation. The worst damage is near London Bridge, where up to 15 cm of subsidence has occurred, as a result of which the 300-year-old Church of St Thomas Apostle has had to be closed and cracks have appeared in other listed buildings. St Thomas’s Hospital Museum, with walls braced, has also had to surround itself with nets to catch falling masonry. London Transport says that the damage ‘is in the process of being assessed by our loss adjuster’. [Thanks to David Nowell]

**Barnstorming** Terry Fletcher (*Dalesman*, July 2001) notes that over the past 12 years or so a special programme has helped to restore almost 200 barns and over 20 km of drystone wall in Swaledale, Arkengarthdale and Littondale. And thanks to English Heritage, the National Lottery and Yorkshire Forward, another £300 000 has been made available to continue the conservation just at a time when foot-and-mouth disease has made less money available. About 2000 barns and unknown lengths of drystone wall are expected to need repair over the next 10–15 years. The system of barns and drystone walling in the Yorkshire Dales is the area’s most conspicuous use of geological materials.

**Protecting the Yorkshire coast** In *Dalesman* (July 2001), John Dean meets Alistair Bowden, who last year was appointed the first Yorkshire Dinosaur Coast Project Officer. Charged with the task of educating people about the history of the Yorkshire coast and protecting it and its fossils. The post is a joint initiative between Scarborough Borough Council, Whitby Museum, the North Yorks Moors National Park and the Yorkshire Museum Council, with 50% funding from the European Union. Alistair himself worked in museums in Lancashire and the British Geological Survey before coming back to his boyhood haunts, ‘the best piece of geology in Britain’. One of the problems with the Yorkshire coast is that ‘Decades of collecting have taken their toll because of the way some people have thoughtlessly hacked and smashed the prized fossils from the rock, causing widespread damage’. Part of Alistair’s plan therefore is not to discourage amateurs from collecting fossils but to encourage them to take only those that have already weathered out. To that end, the Project has set up the Yorkshire Coast Fossil Forum for interested parties to have their say on how to preserve the area, especially that around Robin Hood’s Bay. Safety is also a major issue, for the accelerated erosion encouraged by thoughtless collectors poses dangers to walkers and other collectors beneath the cliffs. Education, education, education is the message, via beach events, fossil-hunting trips, coach excursions, boat trips and touring exhibitions, etc. Some of the activities also centre on Whitby (Fig. 5) and Scarborough Museums, which between them have some 350 type and figured specimens. (PS. The article says that William Smith ‘spent his last four years in the town [Scarborough], dying in 1835’, thereby contriving to give the impression that he died in Scarborough in 1835. In fact, he died in Northampton in 1839.)

**Quote–unquote 1** ‘What we needed yesterday was a geologist with a good knowledge of unstable earth conditions, as the language of the election turned from issues to fissures and the relative merits of political landslides, rockfalls and even avalanches ... Friday’s earthquake in Devon could hardly have been more timely as everyone, including an archbishop, pitched in with their views on whether the country would benefit from being buried in Labour votes or just coated in a thin victorious layer.’ – Martin Wainwright, *The Guardian*, 4 June 2001.

**Quote–unquote 2** ‘Scientists have found a way to prevent our planet overheating: move it to a cooler spot.'
All you have to do is hurtle a few comets at Earth, and its orbit will be altered. Our world will then be sent spinning into a safer, colder part of the solar system ... The idea comes from a group of Nasa engineers and American astronomers who say it could add six billion years to the useful lifetime of our planet – effectively doubling its working life. – Robin McKie, The Observer, 17 June 2001.

Quote–unquote 3 'It strikes me that there is plenty of scope for more quirky applications [of seismometry]. Apparently one researcher at the Berkeley University, California, has already shown that it is possible to study kangaroos in the Outback by analysing seismic records of their bounces. Perhaps readers would care to generate their own seismic disturbances by pacing up and down and thinking up some more oddball suggestions.' – Robert Matthews, The Sunday Telegraph, 24 June 2001.

Quote–unquote 4 'The mystery of the Loch Ness monster has been solved, if scientific research is to be believed: Nessie is an illusion caused by earthquakes under Britain’s largest lake ... Seismic activity in the Great Glen Fault, which runs the length of Loch Ness, is almost certainly responsible for the legend of its monster, according to an Italian geologist.' – Mark Henderson, The Times, 27 June 2001 (see Fig. 6).

Quote–unquote 5 'The hypothesis that sightings of the Loch Ness monster can be explained by earthquake activity along the Great Glen Fault ... is contradicted by all the evidence. There are no signs that the Great Glen Fault is still active and the 1934 earthquake that Dr Piccardi uses to explain the 1933–4 sightings originated in the Torridon area and had nothing to do with the Great Glen ... I would say that Scottish people are well able to tell the difference between an earthquake and a monster.' – Roger Musson (BGS), letter in The Times, 30 June 2001, [Thanks to David Nowell]

Quote–unquote 6 'An archaeological excavation near East Yorkshire’s Whitby Abbey on a site that threatens to slip into the sea has turned up an unpres-

edented amount of detail about life in Britain’s Dark Ages ... The remains of a substantial settlement lie beneath a headland 150ft above the North Sea. Much of it is encroached upon by the erosion that ravages the Yorkshire coast and eight years ago sent a four-star hotel crashing into the sea 20 miles south of Scarborough. Engineers have placed thousands of tons of rock around the cliff base to protect the Benedictine abbey from going the same way.' – Ian Herbert, The Independent, 30 July 2001.

Quote–unquote 7 '“FANTASTIC!” – that was the catchphrase of the latest BBC pseudo-science history programme Live from Dinosaur Island. And truly fantastic – in the sense of being based on fantasy – much of it proved to be ... While the dynamic duo of tabloid telly dinosaurs Bill Oddie and Adam Hart-Davis cavorted around the beaches of the Isle of Wight, their antics in search of fossil remains were given credence by [the] local palaeontologist and dinosaur museum curator, [who] at the end of the week’s dig ... found himself ridiculed by fellow dinosaur experts for having shown viewers a “fantastic” fragment of dinosaur skull that turned out to be fossilized wood, plus an equally “fantastic” prehistoric crocodile tooth, genuine all right, but actually from Morocco ... A clue to the fact that it had been introduced to the site ... was that it had some very 21st century glue on it.’ – Private Eye, 13–26 July 2001. [Thanks to D. Nowell]

Quote–unquote 8 ‘Teenagers [in China] whose legs differ in length by more than two inches or whose spine is curved by 1½ inches will be barred from courses as varied as geology, law and civil engineering.’ – Damien McElroy, The Sunday Telegraph, 24 June 2001. [Thanks to D. Nowell]

Endpiece

Import savings When classical pianist John Briggs of Keighley, Yorkshire, wanted to pave his conservatory in Italian marble, he naturally turned to marble dealers close by in Leeds. They quoted £7420 for the quantity needed. When Briggs complained to an Italian friend that, at that rate, all marble quarriers in Italy must be millionaires, he was quickly put right. Italians have marble floors because it’s cheaper than carpets, his friend told him. So Briggs went on an Internet search, quickly finding Roni Marble at <versilia.toscana.it/roni/store/store.html>. Roni Marble supplied him with the required amount of its product at £1699.62, including shipping costs. Evidently, it’s the marble dealers in Britain who are the millionaires. Incidentally, as the marble came from ‘the quarry that Michelangelo used’, it was presumably Carrara.

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