



9 October 2024

# From the ‘first dinosaur’ to the scientific legacy of a 19th-century power couple

*Breaking Ground*

Oxford University Museum of Natural History

Opens 18 October 2024

- ***Breaking Ground* exhibition tells the story of major developments in our understanding of the history of life and Earth**
- **Over 100 objects on display, including the iconic jaw of *Megalosaurus* – the specimen that defines the first dinosaur to be scientifically named**
- **First display of the newly acquired archive of William and Mary Buckland, a couple at the centre of ground-breaking palaeontology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century**
- **Featuring a specially commissioned poem by poet laureate Simon Armitage to mark the 200th anniversary of the naming of *Megalosaurus***

From the first ever scientific description of a dinosaur to the revelation that Earth is much older than the Biblical 6,000 years, the 19th century saw a network of naturalists forge new ways of thinking about the history of life and our planet.

*Breaking Ground*, a new exhibition at Oxford University Museum of Natural History, charts these major developments in palaeontology and geology through a cast of characters – both the celebrated and the unsung – who helped to establish new scientific methods and

ideas. Centred on an Oxford couple – William Buckland, geologist and palaeontologist, and Mary Buckland (née Morland), a scientific illustrator, it explores some of the most historically important dinosaur discoveries ever made.

Marking the 200th anniversary of the first description of a dinosaur, *Breaking Ground* presents fossil material from the first three dinosaurs to be scientifically named – *Megalosaurus*, *Iguanodon*, and *Hylaeosaurus*, including the iconic jaw that started it all. Alongside these historic specimens are more than 100 other objects including fossils, skeletons, casts, and models. There is also archival material such as lithograph prints and watercolour paintings beautifully documenting the fieldwork, landscapes, and discoveries made during this fertile period of early palaeontology.

While celebrating these important scientific developments, *Breaking Ground* also investigates some inequalities of the period. William and Mary Buckland were married in 1825 and worked together to lay the foundations of modern palaeontology, though history tends to remember their contributions differently.

Familiar names from 19th-century palaeontology are typically those of powerful people associated with certain institutions and publications; lost to history are workers in other, often colonised, countries who dug for specimens, lower-status miners and quarriers around the UK, and most women regardless of class or wealth. These include Mary Anning who, though more recently celebrated, faced financial struggles for most of her life and, as a woman, was unable to join the Geological Society of London, or present her own ideas. This is despite making some of the most important fossil discoveries of the century, several of which will be on display in the exhibition.

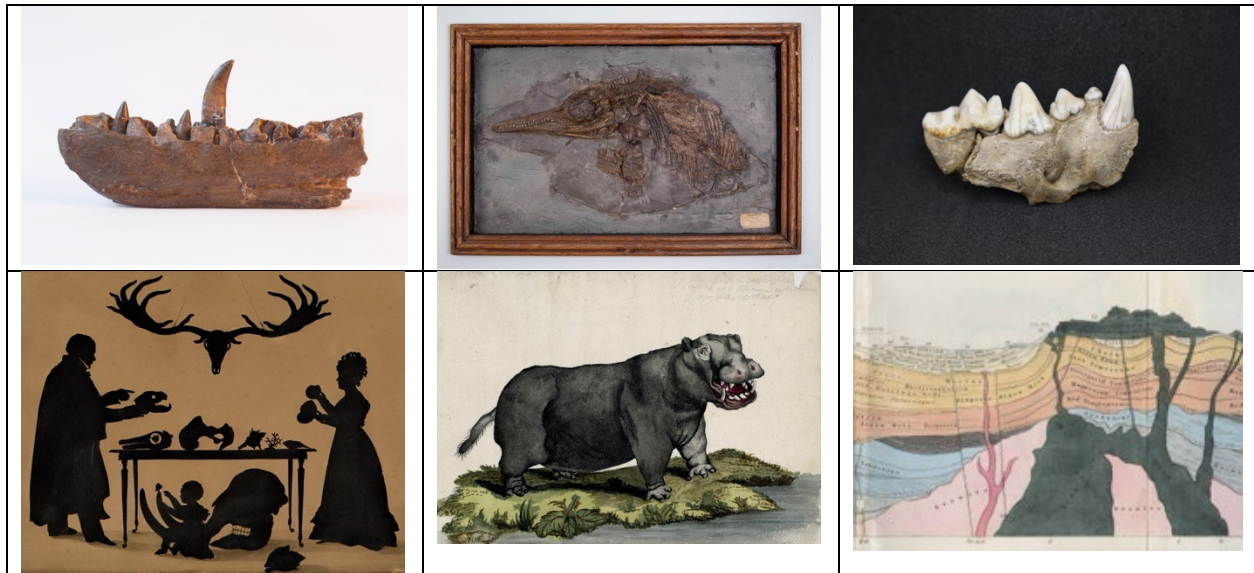
*Breaking Ground* will also offer the first showcase of items from the newly acquired Buckland archive. Drawings, prints and paintings made by Mary Buckland include those used in the description of *Megalosaurus* by William Buckland in 1824. As these illustrations helped to spread understanding of extinct groups of animals and plants among the 19<sup>th</sup>-century scientific community, they challenged any literal interpretations of the Bible. A much older planet was revealed, one that had undergone periods of glaciation – a controversial idea at the time – and in which hyaenas once populated the caves of Britain.

Complementing the exhibition is a sculptural installation by British artist Angela Palmer. *Torus of Time* is a visual and tactile symbol of the deep time that was being uncovered by these pioneering 19th-century palaeontologists. An elegant ring of 16 quarry stones drawn from across the United Kingdom, the piece represents three billion years of geological time.

The 200th anniversary of the description of *Megalosaurus* is also celebrated in a specially commissioned poem by Simon Armitage, the poet laureate. The poem, *Megalosaurus*, will appear in *Breaking Ground* for the first time, both in print and as a recorded reading by the poet.

Janet Stott, Interim Director of Oxford University Museum of Natural History, says:

*“As we celebrate the 200th anniversary of ‘the Oxfordshire dinosaur that started it all’ in 2024, Breaking Ground is a perfect opportunity to exhibit some iconic specimens and reflect on the history of 19th-century palaeontology. Using the recently acquired archive of William and Mary Buckland, the story revealed is one of wide networks of people, many of whom have historically remained unrecognised. The exhibition attempts to redress this balance by showing the fabric of people and places that together changed the way we understand the history of life on the planet.”*



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Notes to editors

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**About Oxford University Museum of Natural History**

Founded in 1860 as the centre for scientific study at the University of Oxford, the Museum of Natural History now holds the University's internationally significant collections of entomological, geological and zoological specimens. Housed in a stunning Pre-Raphaelite-inspired example of neo-Gothic architecture, the Museum's growing collections underpin a broad programme of natural environment research, teaching and public engagement.

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