



Hugh's News

Magazine of
The Friends of Hugh Miller

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FIRST IN-PERSON AGM SINCE 2019: ***DO JOIN US!***

The Friends of Hugh Miller AGM
Saturday 21st May at
The Old Brewery, Cromarty

Members and interested parties are most warmly invited to attend our AGM, preceded by a fossil hunt on the Cromarty shore led by our chairperson, Bob Davidson. Bob will also give a talk on an intriguing Miller-related fossil mystery after our AGM in the afternoon. Again, the talk is open to all, and the public are most welcome to attend.

Full details:

10am - Noon:

Fossil walk led by Bob Davidson, leaving from the Old Brewery at 10am, taking in Cromarty shoreline for a fossil hunt before heading back round the loop to the St Regulus' graveyard. All welcome.

2pm

Annual General Meeting

3pm

Talk by FOHM chairperson Bob Davidson:

Detecting 'fake news' in Geology - past and present

Free coffee/tea and shortbread will be provided during the afternoon



Bob Davidson discussing a fossil on a previous beach fossil hunt

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OFFICIAL OPENING CEREMONY AND DEDICATION OF ELIZA'S PATH

Stephanie Kulesza

On 12th September 2021, the Friends of Hugh Miller finally managed to celebrate the official opening of our Eliza's Path project at the St. Regulus' Burial Ground in Cromarty. As you will know if you read *Hugh's News* Issue 49 (p15-18 Eliza's Path – The Full Story), this was the last FOHM project completed by our former Secretary, Martin Gostwick, and his wife Frieda. Martin had arranged the date for the official opening before his sudden death in June and so 12th September became a very significant date for us all.

The day dawned rather dreich, but luckily by the time we all gathered at 2pm the weather had improved. There were around 20 souls who braved the weather, including Martin's widow Frieda, FOHM Chairman Bob Davidson, four direct descendants of Hugh Miller (Stephanie Kulesza, Sue Rider Busby, Miranda Kitchen and Anna Gordon) and several other FOHM members. It was wonderful to be able to walk up the new path (thank you Martin Gill of Avoch) with the beautiful railings designed and built by bespoke blacksmith Sam Barlow of Mooreworks, Lairg.

We gathered around Eliza's grave (the gravestone carved by Eliza's grieving father, Hugh Miller) and Bob Davidson gave a short welcome and background to the Friends of Hugh Miller and this project in particular, emphasising the huge part Martin Gostwick played in raising the £16,000 required - obtaining all the official permissions and commissioning Sam to design and make the railings. Bob particularly thanked the House of Fraser Foundation, The Highland Council, the Friends of Hugh Miller (who donated 25% of the funds) and some very generous anonymous donors. He then dedicated the Opening to Martin's memory, and we held a minute's silence to remember him, after which Bob Davidson announced that a dedication plaque to Martin would be erected there in due course.

Stephanie Kulesza then spoke about little Eliza and the circumstances surrounding her sad death on 25th August 1839 at the age of only 21 months. Eliza, Hugh and Lydia's firstborn, arrived on 28th November 1837. Hugh wrote in *Schools and Schoolmasters*:

"We had been visited, ten months after our marriage, by a little girl, whose presence had added not a little to our happiness." Lydia wrote that "she was a delight and wonder to Hugh above all wonders. Her little smiles and caresses sent him always away to his daily toil with a lighter heart."

In 1839 Hugh contracted smallpox which kept him away from his beloved daughter for many weeks. Lydia wrote:

"But the great privation was that he could not see her. We ventured when he was mending, to open the room and allow her to stretch out her little arms to him."

Just as Hugh was beginning to recover, Eliza became ill for many months



Bob Davidson addresses the gathering on September 12th
(Photo: Sidney Johnston)



The railing at the entrance to St Regulus' Burial Ground



Eliza's grave (Photo: Gavin Berkenheger)

and tragically died 25th August 1839 at the age of only 21 months. Lydia wrote: *"her father was prostrate in the dust before God in an agony of tears"*. Hugh and Lydia decided to bury Eliza in the ruins of the old chapel of St Regulus, rather than in the East Kirkyard – perhaps because they had walked there so much when courting. Hugh carved the beautiful headstone himself. Hugh wrote: *"We buried it beside the old chapel of St. Regulus, with the deep rich woods all around... and where the daisies which it had learned to love... and where birds, whose songs its ear had become skilful enough to distinguish, poured their notes over its little grave. The following simple but truthful stanzas which I found amongst its mother's papers, seem to have been written in this place – sweetest of burying grounds – a few weeks after its burial."*

Sue Rider Busby then read the following verses from a poem written by Lydia for her daughter:

Thou'rt 'awa, awa' from thy mother's side,
 And 'awa,awa' from thy father's knee;
 Thou'rt 'awa' from our blessing, our care, our caressing,
 But 'awa' from our hearts thou'lt never be.

And art thou 'awa' and 'awa' for ever, -
 That little face, - that tender frame, -
 That voice which first, in sweetest accent,
 Call'd me the mother's thrilling name?

And does my selfish heart then grudge thee,
 That angels are thy teachers now, -
 The glory from thy Saviour's presence
 Kindles the crown upon thy brow?

Oh no! to me earth must be lonelier,
 Wanting thy voice, thy hand, thy love;
 Yet dost thou dawn a star of promise,
 Mild beacon to the world above.

Finally, Bob Davidson gave those present a tour of St. Regulus' Burial Ground and filled us in on some of the wonderful stories behind the graves. The Friends committee are currently planning the promised plaque dedicated to Martin; more on this in an upcoming issue of Hugh's News.

BOOK REVIEW

BEASTS BEFORE US: THE UNTOLD STORY OF MAMMAL ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

by Elsa Panciroli (Bloomsbury Sigma, £20, ISBN 978-14729-8382-4)

Forget dinosaurs, think mammals! This author declares our mammal ancestors were "ecological pioneers, and anatomical wizards. They 'ruled the earth' when dinosaurs weren't even a twinkle in the planet's eye."

Forget Indiana Jones and his hat, says Elsa Panciroli. "What real palaeontologists carry with them is a laptop." She very thoroughly reviews how ever-advancing lab technology is enabling huge breakthroughs in fossils' analysis, like their diet, injuries, how they moved, and how they died.

(continued on p4)

She brings great clarity to her descriptions of the origins of a multitude of species, and differing theories about them, clearing up some misconceptions as she goes along.

She knows how to set a scene. One minute you are travelling with her along today's rocky, rugged Skye, the next standing much nearer the Equator in the Middle Jurassic, watching as droves of small mammals evolve in swampy tropical lagoons - ahead of, then alongside the big reptiles.

Or join her on the Trans Siberian railway, icy by night, "stupefyingly stuffy" by day, as she stands on a carriage partition observing "where the magnificent Ural Mountains now divide the great Asian continent in two, there once flowed a shallow sea called the Palæo-Uralian Ocean." The ocean closed, the land beneath crumpled, "the folds rose to form the Urals, a 250-million-year-old healed scar."

Geology is no longer the more or less exclusive preserve of white male Europeans and Americans. The stage is increasingly occupied by the palæontologists of China and South America. Women geologists are coming to the fore - like the author herself.

Two *Beasts Before Us* YouTube videos can give you a foretaste. The book is enhanced with colour pictures of some truly extraordinary specimens, and vivid illustrations by April Neander.

Hugh Miller once expressed the hope that his narratives would help his readers to "see what is not often seen, and know, in consequence, what is not generally known." That perfectly sums up what Panciroli has achieved for the lay reader with this most informative, entertaining presentation of burgeoning new earth science.

Martin Gostwick, June 2021



Elsa Panciroli with her book

BEES FOR US

By Martin Gostwick

Hugh Miller tells us when he was a boy, bees of every kind were so common that local boys - and foxes - "ruthlessly robbed" their huge nests. He would no doubt share the growing alarm today about their decline.

He wrote in his autobiography: *"The wild honey bees, in their several species, had peculiar charms for me. There were the buff-coloured carders, that erected over their honey-jars domes of moss; the lapidary red-tipped bees, that built amid the recesses of ancient cairns, and in old dry stone walls, and were so invincibly brave in defending their homesteads, that they never gave up the quarrel until they died; and, above all, the yellow-zoned humble-bees, that lodged deep in the ground along the dry sides of grassy banks, and were usually wealthier in honey than their cogeners (close relatives) and existed in larger communities."*

Do you have a project in your garden, or surrounding landscape, to protect and encourage bees, or help other vulnerable creatures (such as hedgehogs), or plants (like Scottish bluebells)? Write to us at:

editor@thefriendsofhughmiller.org.uk and tell us about it.



Honey bee



IN HUGH'S VEIN PRIZES TO BE WON!

Before Martin passed away last summer, he and his wife Frieda came up with the idea of including a regular creative writing spot in *Hugh's News*. I will leave it to Martin to describe his idea below – and as the new editor of *Hugh's News*, I look forward very much to curating this regular writing spot from here on in. All entries can be emailed to myself, Lara Reid, at: editor@thefriendsofhughmiller.org.uk

WELCOME to STRATA, our new cultural feature, which we present as a Creative Opportunity to stimulate, amuse and enlighten our readers. Its principal role is to publish good new writing and other material enhancing our understanding and appreciation of the natural world. We invite you to take the opportunity to send in your own pieces of work. **Items chosen for publication will qualify for a £20 book token. We hope in particular to encourage younger age groups to take part.**

Layers are about what this is all about, hence the STRATA banner - exploring layers in the bare earth, in rock, mountain, cliff, beach or quarry, and layers of human experience gained while out and about in nature.

Hugh Miller, “the supreme poet of geology,” is clearly intended to inspire you, but you can equally reference other great geologists, or write purely about your own rambles, explorations and discoveries. The work can be fiction or non-fiction, an article, essay, poem, diary or journal, or opinion piece on environmental issues. Prose pieces should be up to 1,500 words in length. Equally we will welcome artworks, such as a drawing, print, woodcut, poster, photo, painting, or other visual forms.

A VISION TO SHARE

I believe I share a vision with millions of others striving for a “Green Revolution,” in which we transition away from fossil fuels to renewables, achieve the preservation from extinction of threatened plant life and species, arrest the earth-destroying production of waste, and reverse the overconsumption of natural resources; above all, to win a world at peace.

Hugh Miller warned us in his time that what is now called the “Age of Man” had begun to take control of the planet from natural agency and to unleash the forces of its destruction. I am certain if he were an editor today, he would powerfully support the green agenda. I hope it will be reflected in the contributions we receive.

Serious issues aside, our main aim will always be your enjoyment. So, lap up some good reading, and do please send us some of your own best words and pictures.

ESSENCE

We aim to publish work which celebrates Hugh Miller's spirit. Here are two gems, one from maker Jim Mackintosh, Sutor Glower, which I first received in a Christmas card! The second, a poster poem of several years ago, is by Lynn Baxter, Eathie Vision (our title), with Hugh's monument in between. Lynn was Cromarty Arts Trust's Artist in Residence at the time, and we happily learn she continues to be creatively active today.

Sutor Glower

Jim Mackintosh

A film of light
of leaf,
of stone, split open
to reveal new dawns
lifted from the sheer water crust
and thin bone skins of silence
huddled underneath a Sutor glower,
where Miller shrugs his plaid close -
wandering, picking footsteps surely
back to the fire glow of fresh thought!

Eathie Vision

Lynn Baxter

Hugh Miller
hovers over
the
tree
tops,
scans a
skyline,
eyes the way
to Eathie

A Place Called Nature

Rosie Guy

*Our first piece of new creative writing comes from **Rosie Guy**, who has just finished as a student at Fortrose Academy and is starting a university degree course in English and French. It is exactly the kind of fresh, honest and entertaining piece we are looking for, and she is accordingly the first winner of our book token prize.*

In my mind, I know this place not by its true name, but by associated countries and fictional scenes. My whirring imagination has always compensated for my lack of directional skills, but I do know that geographically, this place is a minuscule part of Cromarty, on the Black Isle. It is a black and rocky cliffside overlooking the ocean. An ocean shared with Norway, according to my step-dad, who told me so as we sat among our friends and family on this cliffside staring out past the turquoise waters. Waters, surprisingly belonging to Scotland and not Greece. Despite not knowing the name that this cliffside held - or if it is even named anything at all - I do know that amongst the various place names that I have since associated with it, it ignited a finer appreciation of the present and real beauty of the nature of Scotland.

I have been on many walks across the Scottish countryside, many of which were forced upon me (my sulking up Fyrish Monument comes to mind) by the same family and friends who accompanied me on this cliffside journey one sunny day in August. As a result of my previous demotivating experiences in walking with my family, I was hesitant to accept their proposal to go to Cromarty for a day. That was until they mentioned Cromarty's famous ice cream, a notion strong enough to sway any tentative teenager. So, I left the comfort of my bedroom and joined my parents and friends (another family of three) as they began to leave in the car, speeding past emerald forests and rolling fields, we ventured towards Cromarty's ferocious ocean.

We arrive. Clambering out of the car, the sea-salt air fills my lungs, replacing the petrichor scent I'm used to at home. The sun's light peeking through the silver clouds landing on my face, making my hair golden. A summer's day seems to affect me like no other; and this time was no different. With each wail of a seagull and drift of the breeze on my skin, my mind became more accustomed to the idea of submitting my body to yet another painful hike. After taking in the striking ocean and grassy hills, we began walking. It always starts like this: we stride with determination and purpose, savouring the hot sun beating down on our heads. Child-like curiosity at what this new path may reveal becomes stronger with every step. We laugh at the 'moos' of the cows and 'baas' of the sheep, and enjoy each other's company. Then, our pace slows and we stop enjoying the rare heat of the sun and instead complain about the uncomfortable beads of sweat forming on our skin. The hundredth time we hear a cow 'moo' it forces our lips into scowls rather than smiles. You see, my constant state of pessimism towards any form of exercise prepares me for the downfall of energy that seems to shadow our every walk. I believed this mindset would cling to me for the rest of this hike, just as it had with every other one. Then we spotted a secret pathway.

The path was hidden amongst the vast array of ferns covering the area. Their curving leaves seemed to be pointing to us the secrets that lay ahead if we were to follow this promiscuous trail. At first, we were reluctant, the heat had made us lazy. Then, the five of us watched our family-friend's twelve-year-old daughter bound into the ferns. She leapt over the rocks and holes scattering the path, the top of the ferns skimming her head, leaving a debris of green specs on her hair as she ran. Next it was her parents who decided to walk the dirt path, then my own parents and finally, myself. I remember it feeling like a tunnel of green; with the ferns curling right next to our faces and insects buzzing next to our ears for what seemed like miles. The familiar smell of the sea intensified with every step, and in turn, my curiosity. My complaining mind seemed to quiver back into the dark corner of my brain, a sense of wonder taking the

stage. I began to hear the beating of waves upon rock, and as the last of the ferns skimmed our hands, we finally emerged onto a cliffside. The gasps of my company filled my ears.

At first, I couldn't see anything, for my hair had been blown in front of my eyes, but this only made for a more dramatic entrance. I parted the curtain of hair from my face, and took in the view. The same wind that ruffled my hair made ferocious waves on the ocean water. It flaunted a shade of turquoise that I had never seen before in Scottish waters; only that of exotic countries such as Greece. A black cliffside came to a point a few metres to where we stood, various protruding rocks dotting across its surface. Contrasting patches of green grass sprawled out across the rock, tiny flowers swaying in the breeze. The girl who had first bounded amongst the ferns now hopped down into the rockpool on the right side of where we stood. I stepped towards the furthest point of the cliff, where a patch of grass lay as a cushion, the ocean directly beneath me. I sat, sandwiched between the risen, rocky points scattering the surface. Running my fingers along the rough surface of the yellow, white, and green algae that spotted the dark stone, I was shocked at how this magical place could exist in somewhere like Scotland. With each new violet or yellow flower I saw in the grass and the astonishing cyan tinge of the water rolling metres below me, I also realised my ignorance. Up until this unexpected moment of peace, I had been unaware of the beauty Scotland possesses as a country.

I've lived here all my life, and have been able to appreciate the odd scenery here and there, but never to the same extent that possessed me in this moment. I would normally have been disgruntled by the sharp wind battering and stinging my face, or by the uncomfortable and spiky rock I was perched on. Instead, I found it not to be a source of pain, but comfort. Comfort in how the nature in this small spot could remain so serene and unaffected by humanity. I thought of the sea below interrupted by a bulging red oil rig, of the girl's father's drone buzzing above my head, and of the flowers being trampled on by walking boots. And then, my imagination enlightened me. I pictured crabs still crawling up the legs of the oil rig, the buzz of bees replacing that of the drone, and the flowers slowly raising up once more, undefeated by a mere human stomp. The perseverance of nature continues to comfort and shield me from our modern and technological society, acting as a constant force of stability and purpose in my life. Although I clung onto the fantasy of sitting on a beach in Greece or being able to somehow see Norway from my spot on this cliff, this realisation of nature's ability changed me. Even now, hearing the familiar chirp of the birds or the creak of the trees as they sway in the wind, brings me back to a reality untainted by mankind, and temporarily banishes my daily worries from my mind.

After we reluctantly left our peace at the cliffside, we continued on our walk, a new spring in our step likened to our first burst of energy. The rest of our adventure found us climbing up the many steps in the forest, smiling through breathlessness. We strode past the field of cows and named them each based on the coarseness and colour of their fur. We snickered and peered through holes in the walls of people's gardens, half expecting to see a gaggle of fairies or pixies scattered around majestic greenery. We did buy some ice-cream, after all. Although this technically fulfilled our purpose for visiting Cromarty, I couldn't help but feel that it hardly added anything to the trip, for in this time we had visited many incomparable exotic places.

Sitting on the cliffside next to turquoise waters in Greece, almost seeing Norway's border if you looked closely enough, a garden of fairies revealing themselves to our corrupted minds. Despite the joy these foreign and fictional places gave me as they formed in my mind at this cliffside, I learned also to appreciate what I have, not what I do not. I cannot easily travel to a foreign country to escape my monotonous reality, but I can step outside and take a walk amongst the emerging flowers and budding trees. I can visit the rocky beach nearby with its own unique shade of waters and pick up stones I think fossils may be hiding in. I can always come back to this cliffside, and take wonder, inspiration and gratitude in this place called nature.



Banner artwork by Izzy Thomson

CROMARTY COURTHOUSE MUSEUM EXTENDS A WARM WELCOME TO ALL

Liz Broumley

The Cromarty Courthouse Museum is back to “normal” after the last two tough years. We reopen on Easter Sunday and will stay open every day until at least the beginning of October. Our opening hours are from 12.00 noon until 4.00pm.

If you didn't get the chance to come and listen to our new trial recordings and other soundscapes last year, then there's plenty of opportunity to do so this season. Our performers are local voices who bring some of the unique Fishertoun dialect words to life.

As 2022 is Scotland's Year of Stories, we are enthusiastically developing exhibitions, displays and digital content. The Cromarty Camera Club has taken up our challenge to mount a show entitled “Every Picture Tells a Story”. There will be other events during the season – so keep a look out on our website:

www.cromarty-courthouse.org.uk

During 2021, after a boost of funding from Museums Galleries Scotland, we had a new website designed by Plexus Media. This has created the foundation of what we hope will become an exciting and dynamic resource that complements the physical museum. It is open 24/7 and gives access to people who might not be able to visit the Courthouse itself.

For those who are interested in Cromarty's unique Fishertoun dialect, you can access a dictionary of over 500 words and phrases from the site, complete with the English definitions and recordings so you can hear the pronunciation. Learn how to make a Scram Scone Chielachie and read the delightful story of the one that got away. We have created a digital Learning Zone, with materials for schools based on real legal cases. There is guidance for teachers on how these activities map onto the Scottish curriculum.

Outside our wildflower garden and community orchard are maturing nicely. We don't use fertilisers or weed killers and we cut the grass ‘creatively’ to ensure that we don't mow the North Marsh orchids that are establishing themselves there. It's become a popular place for people to sit and enjoy some peaceful space.

And finally, the museum shop stocks a range of books and a variety of locally produced products. These make lovely Cromarty-themed gifts suitable for all ages!

WEAVING WITH WORDS: A SEASON OF MAGICAL STORYTELLING AT THE HUGH MILLER BIRTHPLACE COTTAGE AND MUSEUM

Alix Powers-Jones

As the Museum opens for the season after the winter break, we have a wonderful series of new walking tours courtesy of Museums and Galleries Scotland funding for the nationwide Year of Storytelling. The grant, totally £5000, has enabled us to put on the walking tours, which will depart from outside the Museum at lunchtimes (12 noon to 1pm) every Saturday and Monday from 23rd April until 31st October 2022.

Taking inspiration from Miller's life and work, participants will be invited to walk in the footsteps of the town's inhabitants from earlier ages and explore how life in this part of Scotland has changed over the centuries. The walks will run on a rota, and will cover three distinctive, fascinating themes:

Cromarty's links to slavery and colonialism

Looking back at life in the Victorian Highlands, this tour will explore stories about trade and travel, the migration of people, and movement of ideas, and how this shaped the region.

Women's Lives in Cromarty

This tour examines the experiences of Lydia, Hugh Miller's wife, as well as the expectations for women of all classes and many occupations living in 18th and 19th century Cromarty, when it was a remote fishing community dependent on the herring "drave".

Cromarty's links to war times

This tour looks at the town's 20th century links to engagement, warfare and defence in the First and Second World Wars, when Cromarty Firth was a focus of military activity.

All tours will start at Hugh Miller's Birthplace Museum. Information and booking details will be available on the National Trust for Scotland's website very soon.

The Year of Storytelling grant has also enabled us to add to our resources at the Museum and online. We have created two Story Boxes, using objects to tell stories by and about Hugh Miller. One story box is aimed at primary school early learners, and the other for adult groups. Both boxes will be designed to be suitable for a diverse audience including those with a neurodiversity such as autism or neurological conditions such as dementia. We are looking to roll out these loan boxes starting in the autumn term 2022. These two boxes will hopefully be the start of a whole range of different Story Boxes which will be loaned out to schools and groups in the area.

And finally, we also have a fantastic new selection of storytelling films which are now live on the NTS website: <https://www.nts.org.uk/stories/fireside-tales-scottish-folklore-for-children>. Local storyteller Lizzie McDougall and harpist Siannie Moodie weave magical stories in the Birthplace Cottage; these short films really are splendid and are suitable for all the family!

We look forward to welcoming you to Cromarty this year, and hope you can join us to learn fascinating new insights into our local history and heritage.



Birthplace Cottage and Museum in Miller House, Cromarty



VESTIGE: FILMING UNDERWAY!

Lewis Coates

Backed by the British Film Institute and multiple palæontology and geology associations including the generous Friends of Hugh Miller, the short film *Vestige* began filming in February over two days in Halifax, West Yorkshire and one day on the sprawling beaches of Blackhall Rocks, County Durham. Our small crew worked very hard to capture the sensitive moments of a young fossil hunter and his grandfather as they rekindle their connection after the passing of Lucas' father.



FOHM committee member Gavin Berkenheger has kindly gifted us a variety of fossils to use as set design within the grandfather's house to show his love of palæontology and also a copy of *The Old Red Sandstone* to be used within the film. These have helped to give the piece extra authenticity and link our film to the magical past discoveries made by Hugh and modern fossil hunters. It is a film about discovery and acceptance so having these unique artefacts as part of the film is very exciting.



We have one more day's worth of filming on the beach of Blackhall Rocks to capture the final scenes of the film. This is where Lucas will find a very special fossil within the caves and use professional fossil hunting methods to unearth an exciting and mysterious secret that he thinks could be the final puzzle piece to his father's disappearance. We are filming this in mid-April.

We have already started editing the footage that we've captured and after the April shooting dates, we should have everything we need to finalise the film. We are aiming for a June completion and will keep you updated on our progress.

Thanks again for your generosity, we can't wait to show you our project.

Filming on the beach at Blackhall Rocks
Photos: Lewis Coates

FOSSIL HUNTING IN THE HIGH ARCTIC

John Armstrong

Inspired by Miller

“The pleasant month of July had again come round, and for full five weeks I was free. Chisels and hammers, and the bag for specimens, were taken from their corner in the dark closet, and packed up with half a stone weight of a fine soft Conservative Edinburgh newspaper, valuable for a quality of preserving old things entire.”

...Friends members will recognise these as the first lines of *The Cruise of the Betsey*, Miller's posthumously published travelogue. For me these words are a distillation of the excitement a palaeontologist feels at the start of an expedition – the thrill of discovery in the offing! Indeed, the packing list hasn't changed much, apart from the less conservative Guardian being my fossil-packing material of choice.

“The Fishers”

For the last twenty years or so, I have been lucky enough to follow in Miller's collecting footsteps with a band of friends and dedicated palaeoichthyologists, including Nigel Trewin, Bob Davidson, Roger Jones, Chris Moore, Mike Newman, Steven Waters, Alex Moore and Paddy Gavin (nearly all FOHM members!). Nigel christened our group “The Fishers” and we have collected Lower and Middle Devonian fossil fish from the classic sites in Scotland, Orkney and Shetland. Members of the group have had notable personal achievements over the years; Mike's discovery of the world's oldest air-breathing millipede at Stonehaven, Bob and Nigel's body of work on interpreting and re-evaluating the classic Scottish fossil fish sites, Mike and Roger's recent discovery of the earliest fossilised fish embryos in Orkney and Chris's many world-class finds on the Jurassic Coast and several TV appearances including Channel 4's “Beach Live” and a recent BBC Documentary with Sir David Attenborough.

But there was something missing. During our evenings recuperating in various Scottish bars and hotels after hard days of hammering rocks, we would discuss the great Victorian palaeontologists, how they were “first on the scene” and how we were basically sweeping-up the crumbs from their table. What must it have been like finding a totally new, pristine, site or “Lagerstätte”, with a new biota of fossilised animals?...and that's when someone mentioned Svalbard!

In 2016, Mike Newman had been asked by Professor John Marshall to accompany him to Svalbard as a fossil fish expert to supplement their spore analysis (palynology) dating methods for some Devonian strata. Roger also joined the team and so was born the idea for The Fishers to mount their own expedition.

Why Svalbard?

Svalbard is an archipelago with the main island being Spitsbergen, which is situated at latitude 78 degrees north – it is only 800 miles from the North Pole. Svalbard is an Arctic desert, with no trees or grass and just a few arctic flowers, mosses and lichens, which means the rocks are totally exposed – making it a perfect location for our quest for new sites – apart from the obvious logistical issues around the weather, food, accommodation, polar bears, guns...and survival!

More on Svalbard

Svalbard is Norwegian sovereign territory, but is bound by the 1920 Svalbard Treaty which allows signatory countries to set up commercial activities with some degree of autonomy. Those activities have consisted mostly of coal mining throughout the 20th century, the remaining mining companies are the Norwegian Store Norske and the Russian Arktikugol company (of which, more later). The islands were first used as a base by whalers who sailed far north in the 17th and 18th centuries, but they ultimately abandoned the islands. Tourism is now the main activity on Svalbard (for adventurous types and visiting cruise ships). From 27th October to 15th February, Svalbard is plunged into continuous darkness (Arctic Winter) whilst the Arctic Summer sees 24-hour sunlight between 18th April and 23rd August. Svalbard's population is just 2,300, most of which resides in the “capital”, Longyearbyen. Wildlife on the archipelago (away from the sea) is mainly polar bears, arctic foxes and reindeer – there are more polar bears than humans living on Svalbard. There is a requirement in Svalbard Law that one carries a rifle whenever venturing out of Longyearbyen, because polar bear attacks are a fairly regular occurrence.

Preparation and Planning

It's July 2017 and The Fishers meet at Oslo, flying in from Scotland, England and Wales. It's taken a winter and spring of planning and logistics (mostly by Roger) to get to this point, Mike is clutching our "permission to collect" that he agreed with the Norwegian government – his credentials, including over 50 published scientific papers (someone give that man a doctorate!), standing him in good stead. Roger has rented a satellite phone with 40 minutes call credit – there are no landlines, mobiles, Wi-Fi, radio or TV where we're going! All of us have been on shooting courses in the interim – Steven and I live in Scotland, so we were initiated into using rifles by a couple of Perthshire gamekeepers, Roger and Mike had gone on a "Shooting Under Pressure" polar bear course near USAF Mildenhall in Suffolk. One of the most important pieces of preparation was of course the growing of beards before departure (with varying degrees of success, it has to be said). It is always important to look the part when exploring in the Arctic. We spent a hungry six hours in Oslo airport, waiting for our 22:30 flight to Longyearbyen, avoiding the cheapest meal on offer – burger and chips at an eye-watering 29.99 Euros . However, we did succumb to an 11 Euro glass of beer!



Southern Range of Svalbard

After three hours ploughing northwards from Oslo over the steel-grey and icy Norwegian Sea, our 737 makes landfall and starts its descent into Longyearbyen. The views of the southern range of Svalbard are spectacular - mountains, glaciers and snow as far as one can see. It's at this point that one's wonder is tinged with a little trepidation - most of what lies below is unexplored wilderness and WE are going to be exploring some of it! Such thoughts are dispensed with as we land and disembark. The sun is high and very bright as I descend the aircraft steps and I automatically reach for my sunglasses – I look at my watch – its 02:00 am.

Longyearbyen

We grab five hours sleep at our overnight digs in Longyearbyen. "The Coal Miners' Cabins" are pretty rudimentary accommodation as the name suggests. Rather unbelievably, they have a Radisson Blu hotel in town, but although they have the best steak sandwich in town (we can vouch for that!), there is little authenticity there.

The next morning, we head into town as we have a busy schedule before our onward journey. Longyearbyen feels like a Klondike town surrounded on all sides by hills dotted with ruined mines and aerial tramways which transported the coal in buckets from mine to ship. Instead of horses tied up there are sled dogs and skidoos – tourists are bringing in the "gold" these days. Svalbard is a tax-free zone and so the prices are cheaper than Oslo. We pick up our hired rifles (two) from the gun shop and then on to the supermarket for some provisions – shoppers are asked to leave their rifles in lockers provided before picking up their trolley!

A rather macabre story about Svalbard is that it's often said that it is illegal to die in Svalbard. Obviously, no-one is immortal, but there is a rather gruesome reason underlying this suggestion. Burials in Longyearbyen cemetery were stopped in 1950 after it was found (I'm not sure how), that bodies buried over the years were still perfectly preserved by the permafrost. Then the rather worrying, and today quite topical, notion arose that some of those bodies were victims of the 1918 Flu Pandemic and that the virus might be similarly preserved. So, people are encouraged not to die in Svalbard, but if mortality intervenes, bodies are exported to mainland Norway for "disposal".

Pyramiden

Our base for the next two weeks is Pyramiden – 60 km further north at the end of Bille Fjord. Pyramiden is a Soviet era "ghost" mining town dating from the time of Stalin. The town was a showpiece of what communism could achieve – transporting the building materials, livestock and even SOIL from Ukraine to construct a town built in traditional Soviet style for a thousand-strong population, including a civic centre, school, hospital, KGB office, swimming pool, cinema and football pitch (cinder). The town was, in reality, a political foothold in the west, and various old radio antennae around Pyramiden support the view that it was also a cold-war listening post – after all, the coal was poor quality and a tiny proportion of Soviet needs. Miners and their families arrived for two year "shifts". Communist Party membership was a pre-requisite, not just to avoid defections to the west, but because these were jobs in a socialist utopia - the peak of any Soviet miner's career. Wages earned in one stint in Pyramiden could buy an apartment back home in Russia. The town was, and still is, owned by the Arktikugol mining company. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Pyramiden struggled on, but in 1996, a tragedy struck when a plane from Moscow carrying 141 miners and their families crashed during approach to Longyearbyen airport. Everyone on board was killed. Soon after that, Pyramiden was abandoned. However, Arktikugol have since converted a portion of one of the more recent accommodation blocks into a tourist hotel, running the ghost-town as a tourist attraction under the strap-name "Back to the USSR"!



*Setting out in the RIB from Longyearbyen for Pyramiden!
Left to Right – Roger Jones, Steven Waters, Mike Newman (already masked-up!), John Armstrong and Chris Moore (with our helmsman in background)*

Author's Note: In 2017, "Back to the USSR" was a rather snappy way of describing a fantastic opportunity to see a part of the USSR "preserved in aspic" with a clever alliterative reference to the old Beatles hit. Tragically, the recent invasion and war in Ukraine might be seen as bringing a more sinister meaning to that phrase. Of course the guides for the tour around Pyramiden celebrate the achievements of the men, women and children, who came (mostly from Eastern Ukraine) and settled this Arctic Tundra in a completely historic context. The idea of an actual "return" to the days of the USSR would be seen as preposterous. Pyramiden is evocative of the past and certainly, we must hope, not of the future.

Pyramiden is 4 hours by "steamer" (as Miller would have it!) or 2 hours by fast RIB (similar to an inshore lifeboat). We had splashed out on the latter and before long we were at Longyearbyen

quayside after donning our survival immersion suits. After two hours of sheer adrenalin, skimming the waves north up Bille Fjord, the pyramid-like peak which gives Pyramiden its name comes into view. We divert to visit the point where the Nordenskjold glacier meets the fjord and then we arrive in Soviet Pyramiden.

The team at the hotel are very welcoming and are from Moscow, St Petersburg, Kaliningrad, Ukraine and Georgia amongst other places. They are amazed we are staying so long! (and will become increasingly worried for our sanity, when we start bringing back lumps of rock each day). Most tourists stay one or two nights to "take the tour"



Abandoned potted plants in the miners' dining hall



Poster in the Civic Centre



The school



The old mine now home to seagulls



Steven and Chris ponder the politics of Palaeontology! (Abandoned Cultural Centre in background)

around the town. Each building is “preserved in aspic”. Pyramiden’s desolation is reminiscent of the Chernobyl area and its abandoned town. The mine offices are strewn with old documentation, mine plans, shift rotas and so on, as if the inhabitants have just “popped out”. The racks of heavy tools in the engineering sheds are still there, children’s exercise books lie on their desks in the school, the sports centre basketball court lies empty, as does the huge swimming pool, the cinema projection room has stacked spools of old Soviet movies, never seen in the west and there are Soviet propaganda posters and murals in the civic centre – a truly eerie place.

The search begins

We soon settle in. Each day we walk inland, systematically visiting outcrops in valleys and hills which are known to be Devonian in age. Why are we just looking at the Devonian? Well, The Fishers are “at one” with Miller and his contemporaries in believing this “age of the fish” is **the** most interesting period for study. Between 416 million to 358 million years ago, there was an explosion of fish species, culminating in the evolution of the first tetrapods and their gaining of a first foothold on land previously devoid of life.

The first part of every day's exploration took us down a rough road built by the Soviets, with various fast flowing glacial rivers bridged by structures built of Siberian wood. The Russians built their roads like the Romans - straight as a die – and whilst it provided us with the best method of getting inland, this unremittably uniform route quickly became known as the “road to nowhere”!

However, the scenery around us was on a grand scale, with majestic mountains and fast-flowing rivers carrying glacial meltwater. Getting anywhere in this landscape required careful planning and constant risk analysis (there is no mountain rescue here). Between us, we were carrying heavy hammers, chisels and pickaxes, guns (heavy), ammunition (very heavy!), cooking stoves and gas (absolutely essential in the climate) and of course plenty of newspapers (valuable for a preserving old things entire!). So, I am not ashamed to say that occasionally, when we saw the approaching dust cloud of the Arktikugol Toyota pick-up, we thumbed a lift!



A visitor to our site was this Arctic Fox. Recent tagging of one of these lovely animals showed that they can travel over 2000 miles in a year across the sea ice from Svalbard to Canada!

Each day, we were finding small fragments of fossil bone (at least we were looking in the right areas), but no articulated fish, no new “site”. As each day passed, we realised our chances of a significant find were receding. Each evening we would arrive back at Pyramiden exhausted, but after a couple of beers in the bar run by the lovely Alexandra, we soon got rid of any negativity. When you are exploring in the Arctic Circle, it seems rather frivolous to rate the food given strictures of the geography. All one can say is that you don't see a lot of obese Russians! The food was wholesome fare, probably authentically Soviet, leaning heavily on borscht, pork rissoles, potatoes and cabbage, done in a variety of very different ways. We soon got over the disappointment of realising that what we thought was a starter was in fact the main course, and that desert only came on Sundays. There was an admirable lack of fried or “fast” food (i.e. no western imperialist chips!). Any comments we may have had on the food was tempered by the cook's appearance, whose long black hair and even longer black beard, gave him a passing resemblance to Rasputin. Within a week, the bar's draft beer was consumed, and we began making inroads into their stock of various exotic Russian canned lagers. (Note: The bar is officially the most northerly bar in the world, as is the hotel, as is the town, and so on and so forth!)

Discovery!

The days rolled on. Every morning, we would haul our aching bodies out onto “the road to nowhere” and every morning Roger would as usual be far too cheerful “are we feeling strong today?” – needless to say, he rarely got a polite response! Roger is without doubt the driving force of the group – he made the trip happen. A single-minded determination to succeed is etched on his soul (and that's why his fossil collection is so much better than mine!). Maybe Roger pushed us because he had some premonition of discovery, who knows? But on day nine, the breakthrough happened!

Walking up a glacial river and inspecting a bank of shale, Chris saw a nodule in the shale. Now, this wasn't unusual, and many nodules had been split on this trip to reveal nothing much. But some nodules can sometimes contain fossil material, sometimes well-preserved and identifiable, but very occasionally they contain complete, articulated fish. Miller's Cromarty fish were all preserved in similar nodules and the classic sites of Moray, Tynet Burn, Lethen Bar and Gamrie are all nodular.



Chris Moore (left) and son Alex ("Big Al") scouring the rocks



Chris's nodule (after it was split open) revealing a large armoured head with the start of spine and "ribs" at bottom.

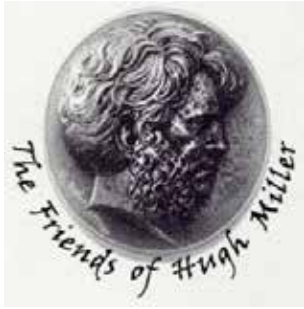
But it *is* also important to explain that within The Fishers, Chris holds a revered position as having an almost supernatural ability to find fossils. Back at home on the Jurassic coast in Dorset, he regularly notices lumps and bumps in the rocks, which others miss, revealing themselves to be Ichthyosaurs and Plesiosaurs. Friends may recall the recent BBC documentary "Attenborough and the Sea Dragon", where Sir David joined Chris in extracting his latest Ichthyosaur find out of a cliff. So when Chris swings his hammer at a nodule (as he did on this day), we take notice...

The hammer falls, the nodule splits and ...stunned silence follows, followed by ..."IT'S A PLACODERM!!" (expletives deleted!). What a moment! An armoured Devonian fish and it was articulated! Indeed, the fish Chris found was an arthrodire, related to Miller's *Coccosteus*.

The timing of the find was very fortuitous. I like to think that The Fishers' dogged determination and faith in our instincts would have seen us returning to continue the search in subsequent years, irrespective of this. But this find, and others found on this day, now made that an easy decision for us. And that's how we found our totally new, pristine, site – our "Lagerstätte". Our site is Givetian in age (387.7 million years ago to 382.7 million years ago) – one of two faunal divisions in the Middle Devonian. We believe it was deposited in a backwater marine environment, most likely a lagoon in an equatorial climate. There appears to be a marine influence, although a lack of marine invertebrate species may indicate the lagoon may have been part of an estuarine complex.

Since that day we have returned every year with various combinations of Fishers personnel and have found more new species. We have kept the site's location to ourselves in this period whilst we research it further. Mike, who is our scientific lead and academic author, has now completed and published three papers describing our finds, but there are still many more to be written – there is still a long way to go. It is indeed the find of a lifetime and the preparation and describing of the new species are similarly the work of a lifetime. In one of the first papers, Mike very kindly named a new species of ischnacanthid acanthodian fish *Serrandentus armstrongi* after myself (reported in *Hugh's News* Issue 46), whilst a new paper, soon to be published, will see the new species *Cheirolepis Jonesi* "erected" for Roger. Undoubtedly, there will be fish named after all of The Fishers.

It was wonderful that we were able to return home and report our finds to Nigel Trewin, our leader and mentor, who so sadly left us all later that year.



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