

MARY ANNING (1799-1847) AND THE PHOTOGRAPH *THE GEOLOGISTS* ASCRIBED TO WILLIAM HENRY FOX TALBOT (1800-1877)

M.A. TAYLOR¹ AND S. LEVITT²



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A photograph of 1843, titled *The Geologists*, has recently been suggested to portray Mary Anning of Lyme Regis, and Henry De la Beche of the Geological Survey. This, and another of the same outcrop, were taken about 1843 at Chudleigh, Devon, almost certainly by William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877). The photographs are reviewed in the context of contemporary geology, costume, and photography. The female is most unlikely to be Anning. A suggestion that De la Beche commissioned the picture as a trial of landscape photography, with the Survey in mind, cannot be confirmed. His interest, so far as it is known, was in photographing specimens to help prepare published illustrations. In the context of Talbot's work, *The Geologists* remains ambiguous. It can be interpreted as a whimsically named joke photograph, or a serious artistic tableau intended to show geological activity, just as much as a pair of actual geologists. The locality might have been selected as a popular tourist spot, with accessible and romantic scenery, rather than, or as well as, for its geological interest. *The Geologists* remains an intriguing photograph, perhaps the earliest purportedly of West Country geological activity, or of a woman engaged in geology.

¹ School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester and Department of Natural Sciences, National Museums Scotland, Chambers St., Edinburgh, EH1 1JF, Scotland, U.K.

² Head of Arts and Museums, Leicester City Council, Town Hall, Leicester, LE1 9BG, U.K.
(E-mail: mat22@le.ac.uk)

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INTRODUCTION

Pilaar Birch (2013) suggested that Mary Anning (1799-1847), the notable fossil collector of Lyme Regis, and Henry De la Beche, F.G.S., then director of the Geological Survey, might be shown in *The Geologists*, a photograph in the collection of William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877). Her article was headlined when the search engine *www.google.co.uk* adopted "Mary Anning's 215th Birthday" as theme for its home page on 21 May 2014 (*www.google.com/doodles/mary-annings-215th-birthday*, accessed 3 December 2014). This, of course, reflects the great public interest in Anning's story with its mix of fossil collecting, social class and romantic Regency resort. We review Pilaar Birch's suggestion, given its importance for public interpretation as well as for more academic studies, and give a more general assessment of the photograph as an early image of a woman engaged in geological activity, as highlighted also by Pilaar Birch.

Repositories and abbreviations

Unless stated, birth, marriage and death information is from standard sources via *www.ancestry.co.uk* and *www.familysearch.org*. Abbreviations: ACNMW, De la Beche correspondence, Amgueddfa-Cymru, National Museum Wales, Cathays Park, Cardiff CF1 3NP, numbering as Sharpe and McCartney (1998); BRSMG, City of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Queens Road, Bristol BS8 1RL; CWHFTP, *The Correspondence of William Henry Fox Talbot Project*, *http://foxtalbot.dmu.ac.uk/index.html*, numbering as therein, accessed 29 May 2015; GSL, Geological Society of London,

Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1J 0BG; NHM, Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 5BD; NMeM, National Media Museum (part of the National Museum of Science and Industry), Bradford, West Yorkshire BD1 1NQ; NUL, Special Collections, University Library, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU; Schaaf, *Catalogue Raisonné* in preparation, *http://foxtalbot.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/*.

PROVENANCE AND LOCALITY

In the original internet posting of Pilaar Birch (2013), an editorial error ascribed the photograph generally called *The Geologists* to "Dorset", presumably with Lyme Regis in mind, but this was later corrected to "Devon" (S. Pilaar Birch pers. comm. 2013). There can be little doubt that the photograph was taken at Chudleigh in Devon. The image is described as "*Chudleigh 1843*" by the NMeM (Figure 1; a close variant, NMeM 1937-1611, 1937-1612, Schaaf 1918, also exists, the negative inscribed in pencil by Talbot as "*Chudleigh*", L.J. Schaaf pers. comm. 2014, 2015). The usual title "*204. The Geologists: A Scene of Rocks at Chudleigh, Devon*" actually comes from Nicolaas Henneman's printed sheets of titles which were cut up into individual title blocks for pasting onto the verso of the boards of prints for sale at his Reading Establishment and later in London (set of uncut sheets in Talbot Collection of NMeM, and a mounted example of the print with this label, NMeM RPS25215; L.J. Schaaf pers. comm. 2015). It is not clear where the date of 1843 comes from, though this dating is plausible.