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Ichthyosaurs : A History of Fossil 'Sea-Dragons'
by S R Howe, T Sharpe and H S Torrens
Published by the National Museum of Wales. 32 pages. Price 90p

I first looked at Ichthyosaurs in detail while studying geology at University College, Cardiff and ever since that time these dolphin-like reptiles have held a particular fascination for me. This was, however, unknown to our editor when he asked me to review this latest product of the presses of the National Museum of Wales.

The booklet follows the same format as previous N.M.W. publications such as 'Plants of the Coal Measure Swamps' and 'Plant Hunting in Wales' but unlike it's predecessors which were reprinted from 'Amgueddfa' (Bulletin of the N.M.W.) this one was specially written to "expand the theme of an exhibit in the Department of Geology". One legacy of 'Amgueddfa' is the use of two columns of text on each page which I find difficult to read comfortably, especially when illustrations are also included in the columns. However, this does not detract from its usefulness. The booklet contains 33 black and white illustrations from many sources which show some of the collectors, early fossil finds and a series of reconstructions which clearly show how the scientific and popular image of ichthyosaurs has changed over the years as more information has come to light. Indeed, it is probably as examples of the interpretation of fossils using well tried biological techniques that ichthyosaurs are most useful to the biologist. If Phil Doughty's survey of geology collections is anything to go by, there can be few 'Biology Curators' who have not some responsibility for geological material. Here is a perfect example of the continued use of old geological collections often from inland sites which are no longer accessible and without which the science could not have progressed. How often too have you been asked by school children for details of some "prehistoric monster" ? So why not give Tyrannosaurus a rest and use the ichthyosaur - its a common fossil in most Mesozoic sediments, it's skeleton and skin are known in detail as is its habit of giving birth to live young. Even it's droppings are common fossils so we know what it ate. Compare it with the dolphin, better examples of analogous structures are hard to find. It all makes a great lecture.

It's plainly obvious that I'm hooked on ichthyosaurs (shame there are none in Perthshire !) but read the booklet and perhaps you will be too. And it is not without its moral tales. The stamp of Hugh Torrens is clear on the historical anecdotes one of which concerns the collection of Samuel Day which was dumped into the family duckpond c.1816 from where parts of it were retrieved about 30 years ago. Biology collections are not usually quite as durable !

All in all a most worthwhile publication - and very reasonably priced .

M A Taylor
Perth Museum & Art Gallery