

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF LYME REGIS PHILPOT MUSEUM

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Lyme Beach (1900s)  
Looking toward the site of the Museum

## **Before the Museum**

The museum stands just above the old sea wall, now protected by the defence works completed in 1995. It was built in 1900-1 by Thomas E D Philpot, a former mayor of the town, specifically as a museum. This is unusual as although the great provincial cities built civil museums throughout the Victorian era, few towns the size of Lyme - its population just over 2,000 in 1901 (and some 4,000 today) - can take pride in their own purpose-built museum. The architect was George Vialls who also designed the Guild Hall next door and several other important buildings around the town.

## **Gun Cliff and Cockmoil Square**

The museum stands in one of the older parts of town, formerly crowded with houses like those which can still be glimpsed up alleyways in Bridge Street and Coombe Street. Clearance of the old buildings began in the 1880s, first for the rebuilding of the Town Hall (in which Thomas Philpot was also closely involved) and then for the museum.

Even after the museum was built, several houses remained in the square. The houses where the museum now stands fronted on to Cockmoil Square. One of them was the house where Mary Anning was born and where she (and her parents before her) sold fossils before she moved to Broad Street in 1826.



*Mary Anning's House, by W H Prideaux and Edward Liddon 1842*



*The building of the Museum 1901*

In spite of its narrow and crowded streets, the Bridge Street and Cockmoil Square area housed a surprising number of thriving businesses early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There were several boot and shoemakers, including John Bennett, the Anning's furniture making and curiosities (until 1826), a confectioner, a milliner, and dress-maker, straw hat maker, hairdresser, grocer, baker, and butcher.



*The Museum in the 1920s*



*Caroline Philpot*

## **The Museum 1901 to 1945**

From its completion in 1901, the museum stood empty and unused nearly 20 years. *The Bridport News* of 12 June 1912 reported that the Mayor proposed to Lyme's Borough Council "a scheme for the opening of the Philpot museum and free lending library"; one councillor observed that "he did not think that they would average two people a day who would visit the museum during the 9 months of the year", and the scheme was rejected. During the First World War, the building served as a Red Cross depot, but relapsed into disuse.

In 1920, T E D Philpot's niece, Caroline, gave the Museum to the Borough of Lyme, and in March 1921, two rooms were opened thanks to the efforts of Dr Wyatt Wingrave, formally confirmed in 1927 as the museum's first honorary curator. Wyatt Wingrave added local objects to his own collections and virtually created the museum single-handed.

The museum guide and report issued by Wyatt Wingrave in 1923 listed the objects displayed in the two rooms, devoted to geology and archaeology. Several of the exhibits are familiar to visitors today; notably the town fire engine, the wooden tracery from Buddle Bridge, the cannon balls from the Siege of Lyme and the nucleus of the fossil collection. "*So far it is a nucleus*", Wyatt Wingrave wrote of the displays, "*but it is hoped that in time, with the help of loans and gifts, it will become worthy of Lyme's great reputation and of the building itself.*"

The museum also benefited enormously from the work of Cyril Wanklyn (1864-1943), historian of Lyme. Forced to retire from his city career by an illness which left him stone deaf, Wanklyn came to live in Lyme and interested himself in the mass of neglected documents in the Borough's monument room. He spent most of the last twenty years of his life sitting and classifying the town's records, stretching from the 13<sup>th</sup> century until after the 1832 reform act. One of his most notable discoveries was the first extant manuscript of Henry Fielding, written and posted up in Lyme in 1725; its discovery was reported in *The Times* of 4 December 1944, and the document is displayed in the Writers' gallery.

A further crucial contribution to the Museum's development was made by Dr W D Lang FRS, Keeper of Geology at the British Museum (Natural History), and trustee of this Museum from 1937-1948, who greatly enhanced and classified the collection of fossils.

Notwithstanding the contribution of W D Lang, from 1939 the museum suffered a severe decline. The Borough took over the building during the Second World War, storing the collections upstairs, using the ground floor as an ARP report post and the cellar as an air raid shelter. In a letter to her mother in 1948, Muriel Arber noted: "*the museum is a very saddening sight, all going damp and mouldy, and many of the exhibits just jumbled in their cases or the cases empty*".

## **Post-War**



The Queen's Proclamation 1952



The crumbling East Wing in the 1960s

There was apparently no curator from 1945 to the early 1960s. For a time the museum was opened daily in the morning by someone from the Town Hall and locked again when it got dark: several townspeople today recall the pleasure they had as youngsters, wandering at will in the Museum and sliding down the banisters, but losses were severe. In the 1960s, a group of people, the glass engraver, Laurence Whistler, pre-eminent among them, took a new interest in the museum, which gradually revived. Several curators were succeeded by John Fowles whose careful work brought the museum back to its original path of sound scholarship.

The building was also deteriorating badly. Signs of this were most obvious in the exposed east wing, which finally reached such a state of dilapidation that the Borough Council had to demolish it on grounds of safety. Its utilitarian replacement was completed in 1969.

## **Regeneration**

John Fowle's time as Honorary Curator from 1978-1988 left the museum in fine spiritual fettle. He set up and generously funded a body of Friends of the Museum who provided the volunteers to man the desk and welcome visitors. The museum is indeed proud of its long tradition of voluntary service, still continuing today.

But times were changing. The long and searching process of Registration with the Museums and Galleries Commission lay ahead. Competition with other "attractions" was also becoming acute as tourism emerged as a major national industry and visitors were looking for more diversions on their holidays. Above all, dilapidation of the Museum's structure had gone so far as to make it very nearly unsafe. The trustees decided to redevelop the museum and divided the scheme into two parts. Phase 1 would be the reconstruction of the building, including the trustees' own proposed improvements and extension, and phase 2 would be the internal refurbishment, with provision of new displays and storage space etc.

John Fowles and Sir David Wilson, then Director of the British Museum, kindly agreed to become patrons of the museum. They were soon joined as Patrons by Sir Crispin Tickell, then Warden of Green College, Oxford; formerly British Permanent Representative at the United Nations and President of the Royal Geographical Society; an eminent spokesman on the environment, and a great-great-great nephew of Mary Anning.



John Fowles and Sir David Wilson in the museum

The entire collections were packed up and put into store and the museum cleared for work to start in November 1993. The interior was stripped out, including the floors, the main staircase and the central landing, both of which had been broken, were replaced. All the roofs were replaced and the cupola re-leaded; new oak floors were laid throughout with under-floor central heating for the better conservation of the collection. The loggia was glassed in to form a new entrance and shop, and a new gallery built on the seaward side. Floors were levelled throughout at ground level to allow better access. Building and construction work began in earnest in 1997 and the first completed gallery, the writers' gallery, was officially opened by John Fowles on 12 December that year.

The redevelopment culminated in the museum winning the top national museum prize, the Gulbenkian, in 1999.

