



PRESS RELEASE

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197-million-year-old Stolford Ichthyosaur Saved

‘Operation Poppy’ last week saw a 197-million-year-old Ichthyosaur from Stolford delivered to the Somerset Heritage Centre ahead of conservation work. The specimen was successfully extracted on 27 December by experts working against the clock in the intertidal zone of Bridgwater Bay National Nature Reserve.

The prehistoric fossil was discovered by amateur fossil hunter Jon Gopsill when he was out walking his dogs on 14 December. The five-and-a-half foot long marine reptile had been exposed by recent storms. It has now been dubbed ‘Poppy’ after one of Jon’s dogs who helped make the discovery.

The rescue mission took place at the first opportunity allowed by the tides after the unexpected discovery was made. The fossil was at risk of being washed away by the strong seasonal tides. A team of geological specialists from Geckoella had a four-hour window within which they could extract the specimen from the Blue Lias rock. They used rock saws, hammers, chisels and crow bars to cut out a single block of stone containing the fossil. The block weighs about 160 kg and is 175 cm long, 85 cm wide and 9 cm deep.

Bridgwater Bay National Nature Reserve is owned by the Environment Agency and managed by Natural England, who assisted with the excavation along with archaeologists from the South West Heritage Trust. They were joined by the finder Jon, together with his dogs Poppy and Sam.

The South West Heritage Trust is a charity supported by Somerset and Devon County Councils and other generous funders

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Dr Andy King, Co-Director and Palaeontologist with Geckoella, led the extraction. He said:

“It was very exciting to have the chance to rescue such an impressive fossil ichthyosaur as ‘Poppy’. Given the tidal conditions at Stolford and very shaley nature of the rock, this particular extraction was certainly more challenging than others we’ve been involved with. Though the skull is not preserved, ‘Poppy’ is otherwise remarkably complete.

“It’s not uncommon to find pieces of fossil ichthyosaur ribs or vertebrae, but such complete specimens are relatively rare. Slightly older ichthyosaurs have been collected from West Somerset, but it’s still quite a feeling to realise that this marine reptile was swimming in the Jurassic seas covering Somerset nearly 200 million years ago at the same time that dinosaurs were walking around on the land and pterosaurs were flying in the skies. We’re really delighted that this fossil was collected safely and responsibly, and that it will be preserved by the South West Heritage Trust.”

The Environment Agency transferred ownership of ‘Poppy’ to the Somerset Heritage Centre, near Taunton, on 17 January ahead of conservation work to be undertaken by the Heritage Trust.

Sam Astill, Head of Museums from the Trust, said: “We’re grateful to Jon and our partners at Geckoella, Natural England and the Environment Agency for their collaboration in successfully rescuing this remarkable specimen. We will now undertake the conservation work required to preserve the fossil. This involves three basic steps – cleaning, including de-salination and drying, consolidation and stabilisation, to avoid splitting, and preparation for display. We look forward to displaying ‘Poppy’ at the Museum of Somerset where visitors can discover more about the county’s Jurassic past.”

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David Evans, a geologist from Natural England, who assisted with the extraction said:
“Natural England and the National Nature Reserve team were really pleased to be able to ensure that this valuable fossil and important piece of Somerset’s heritage was safely and responsibly extracted, and will be going to the county museum to be conserved and then to be seen by the public.”

Jon Gopsill said: “I’ve been interested in fossils all my life. I started fossil hunting on Watchet beach when I was just six-years-old. The scale of this find, at 197-million-years-old, is incredible. When I saw it I thought, ‘I’ve been looking for this my whole life!’

“The whole experience has been amazing. You see ichthyosaurs in museums and think they’re amazing, but to actually find a ‘wild’ one in it’s natural environment is totally mind blowing! Somerset is my home so I’m delighted that this specimen will be staying in the county for other people to enjoy.”

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For further information please contact Beth Jerrett, PR & Communications Lead Officer,
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Image/s: *Photographs are granted for one time use in conjunction with this press release only, and photographer Jesse Roth must be credited.*

Photo Captions:

1. The fossil was rescued by experts working against the clock within the intertidal zone at Bridgwater Bay National Nature Reserve
2. The extraction team, with the fossil on a pallet, following its successful extraction
3. Despite the skull not being preserved the five-and-a-half foot long Ichthyosaur is otherwise remarkably complete
4. Finder Jon Gopsill with his dogs Poppy and Sam

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Notes to editors

1. The South West Heritage Trust

The South West Heritage Trust is an independent charity committed to protecting and celebrating Somerset and Devon's rich heritage. As well as the widely-praised Museum of Somerset and the redeveloped Somerset Rural Life Museum, in Glastonbury, the Trust manages state-of-the-art facilities in Taunton and Exeter to care for the extraordinary archive collections of the two counties. The Trust also provides essential advice about the historic environment and manages historic sites. Visit swheritage.org.uk #SWHTdiscovery

2. Geckoella

Geckoella consultants provides specialist advice on geology, wildlife and heritage. Our expert team, based in Somerset, have worked on some of the biggest projects across the country, whilst supporting a range of conservation initiatives. These include the promotion and responsible enjoyment of the fantastic geological and wildlife heritage of the Somerset coast. Our new geological workshop, comprising part of the Watchet East Quay development (opening in spring 2021), will provide a focus and base for a range of exciting initiatives. Visit geckoella.co.uk #geckoella

3. The Environment Agency

The Environment Agency regulates England's major industry and waste, treatment of contaminated land, water quality and resources, fisheries, inland river, estuary and harbour navigations, conservation and ecology. We are also responsible for managing the risk of flooding from main rivers, reservoirs, estuaries and the sea.

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