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274. A lost ichthyosaur from the Lower Lias of Somerset in the collection of the Rev. David Williams F.G.S. (1792-1850), and figured in William Buckland's Bridgewater Treatise of 1836

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I am seeking a lost ichthyosaur, and any plaster casts of it, from the collection of Reverend David Williams F.G.S. (1792-1850) of Bleadon, Somerset (general details of collection in Taylor 2016).
In a report to the 1852 annual meeting of the Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, printed in a number of local newspapers, Baker (1853, p. 6) highlighted one of the reptiles in their recent purchase of the Williams Collection and then in the Society’s museum at Taunton as ‘especially interesting, being the identical tenuirostris represented on plate 9, fig. 1, of Dr Buckland’s “Bridgewater Treatise”.’ William Buckland (1784-1856) had indeed figured one of Williams’s specimens in his famous Bridgewater Treatise, Geology and mineralogy. This was an ‘Ichthyosaurus Tenuirostris, from the lias of Street, near Glastonbury’: in modern terms, probably a Leptonectes tenuirostris (Conybeare, 1822) from the Lower Lias, lowermost Jurassic (Buckland 1836, vol. 1, p. 170fn., vol. 2, p. 21, plate 9, reproduced as Figure 1 here).

Baker evidently considered the specimen one of the highlights of the Williams Collection. He was not clear as to whether it was mounted on the wall in the usual cement and wooden frame common in those days and used for other specimens in the collection (Baker 1853, p. 5; Taylor and Evans 2016). The specimen was obviously in loose blocks when Buckland’s artist had drawn it some years before (Figure 1), and might have remained in this state.

I have not come across any further reports of the specimen in the Taunton collection (now held by the South West Heritage Trust (Museums Service) for the Society). Dennis Parsons (pers. comm. 2016) kindly advises me that he has not located the specimen there. Possibly it was discarded due to deterioration or disposed of during the collection’s 20th century travails (Taylor 2016). Another possibility is transfer to another museum, perhaps later in the 19th or 20th centuries, as it is unlikely that the Society would have contemplated disposal of such a prize in their 1850s deliberations. If perhaps for want of any better guess, the Royal Literary and Scientific Institution at Bath is the most obvious recipient on grounds of (then) common Somerset geography, and the known transfers of parts of the Moore collection to Taunton - though it would seem odd to send an ichthyosaur there in return, in view of Bath’s already large collection of ichthyosaurs (Copp et al. 2000). But Tom Sharpe (pers. comm. 2012) and Matt Williams (pers.comm. 2016) kindly advise me that the specimen does not appear to be with the Moore ichthyosaurs now stored in Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales, Cardiff, or at Bath.

I would welcome information on the specimen’s current location, and any plaster casts of it. It should be borne in mind that the specimen may still be in loose blocks, perhaps scattered throughout a collection and making it harder to spot.

Figure 1. Plate 9 from William Buckland’s Bridgewater Treatise showing ‘Ichthyosaurus Tenuirostris’ (Buckland 1836, vol. 2). The specimen is partly shown from both sides and must therefore have been in loose blocks, at least at the time. The scale bar on the drawing is one imperial foot, indicating a skull length of approximately 66 cm.
References


