

Report 79

NATURE CONSERVANCY COUNCIL

PRESS RELEASE

Commercial exploitation of scientifically important fossil sites in Caithness

For many years, but to a much greater extent within the last two years, Caithness has been one of the places most often visited by commercial dealers in fossils, who are able to sell the extremely well-preserved specimens of fossil fish which they collect there, for large sums of money to customers all over the world. Many of these collectors, and certainly the most organised and well-equipped groups, come from Germany and Holland, and the material which they collect is taken back for cleaning and subsequent sale. Because of their large scale and great selectivity, these activities have now become a serious threat to scientific research and study. The Nature Conservancy Council, as the government agency responsible for nature conservation in Great Britain, are convinced of the need to control the problem, to ensure that the very important scientific resource represented by the fossil fish is properly conserved and used.

Much of Caithness is composed of rocks belonging to the "Old Red Sandstone", a series of sandstones and mudstones laid down during the Devonian period, about 370 million years ago. At that time, the area now occupied by Orkney and Caithness was the location of a vast equatorial freshwater lake, in which lived large numbers of early fish. Study of these fish, now preserved as crushed skeletons within the rocks, has shown that during the Devonian period, true fish were rapidly evolving from primitive jawless types, and themselves later gave rise to the first amphibia and reptiles, in the succeeding Carboniferous period. Thus the study of Devonian fossil fish is of crucial importance to understanding the early evolution of vertebrates, and there are still many questions to be answered. The Devonian rocks of Caithness contain some of the most prolific and well-preserved fossil fish of this age known from anywhere in Europe, and their importance as scientific specimens is extremely high.

There are several fish bed horizons in Caithness, exposed in quarries and along the coast, and the location of their outcrops are usually well-known to collectors. The known fish fauna consists of over thirty species of fish, but the collecting activities of the commercial dealers are largely confined to the largest and best-preserved of these which find the readiest market. Consequently, their searches concentrate solely on finding these particular species, and large numbers of smaller, perhaps incomplete specimens are carelessly and thoughtlessly destroyed in the process. For the furtherance of our understanding of the fossil assemblages themselves, these specimens are at least as important as the complete ones, and so much scientific information is being needlessly wasted.

The scale of the problem caused by the activities of these commercial collectors, whose sole interest is financial gain, has now become so large that steps must be taken to eradicate the problem. In most instances, dealers do not ask permission from the landowner, or if they receive permission, frequently ignore the conditions laid down in any permit they may be given. This leads to owners developing a mistrust of all geologists, and the carrying out of serious scientific research may subsequently be harmed. Already, two German collectors have been arrested whilst illegally collecting fossils in Lanarkshire, and were found guilty of theft at Lanark Sheriff Court; although they were merely admonished, it is likely that as the law is increasingly invoked to control such activities, heavier penalties will be imposed. Ironically, the two people convicted had been collecting at localities in Caithness only a few days earlier!

There can be little doubt that those people most actively involved in exploiting the financial potential of these vital scientific specimens have scant regard for the resource or the environment which they are destroying, and the NCC is therefore taking a new initiative to try and bring the problem under control. This has already involved site owners, the police and the courts, local naturalists who wish to help conserve the local environment and heritage, Local Authorities and the NCC, and when fully developed will hopefully lead to a much more effective system of protection for these very valuable, but very vulnerable, sites. If such action is not taken now, it may soon be too late.

North fossil hunt pair plead guilty

THE Nature Conservancy Council brought a successful prosecution at Wick Sheriff Court yesterday against illegal fossil hunters.

Two Edinburgh men pleaded guilty by letter to stealing three fossil fish from the important archaeological site at Achanarras Quarry, near Spittal. The council took advantage of recent legisla-

tion to make the quarry the first in Britain to be operated by them on a strict licensing system in co-operation with the land owners.

Fiscal Mr Barry Heywood told the court that William Taylor (49), and Robert Crawford (66), had arrived at the site and started collecting the fossils without obtaining a permit.

They had camped there for two days and seemed set for a long stay, said the fiscal, despite large notices at the quarry entrance informing potential fossilists to contact the council office at Golspie first.

Mr Heywood said police had interrupted the pair after they had removed three fossils and were preparing to take another.

He asked the sheriff to disregard much of the contents of a letter of mitigation sent to the court by the two. They had claimed they were genuine amateur palaeontologists and had no commercial interest in the fossils.

Mr Heywood pointed out that Mr Taylor's wife runs a shop in Edinburgh which sells fossils.

The fiscal said the dipterous species of fish which had been taken could fetch more than £300 on the market but reckoned that the three taken at Achanarras would make about £200.

Sheriff Ewen Stewart deferred sentence on the pair until October 1 for a personal appearance and ordered the fossils to be forfeited.

Dr Terry Keating, the Nature Conservancy Council officer for Caithness, said he hoped the conviction would deter others from illegal fossil hunting.

"We obviously do not want to discourage the enthusiastic amateur, genuinely interested in the fossils and that is why we want to extend our licensing powers to other sites. But we do want to stop the increasing amount of commercial speculators who are raiding important sites."

Nobel chemist dies

THE 1960 Nobel prize-winning chemist Willard Libby (71) has died in California.

and 384 less than in 1978.

The number of alleged offences referred to Reporters

the victim of the offence were also higher in 1979 — 622 compared with 450 in 1978.

Former trawl skipper dies

FORMER trawl skipper Mr Salter Watson has died in Anstruther, Fife, at the age of 84.

Mr Watson came to, Aberdeen in the 1930s and was skipper of the Aberdeen trawler Avondee.

During the war he was skipper of the Eborabbey which was one of the first Aberdeen trawlers to be attacked, and later in February, 1941, his trawler John Duncan was bombed and sunk in the Moray Firth with the loss of two crewmen.

Skipper Watson was taken from the bridge of his sinking trawler unconscious and seriously injured.

He is survived by two sons and a daughter.

Further drop in house building

HOUSE building in Britain declined further in the second quarter of 1980, according to Department of Environment figures yesterday.

During April, May and June 10% fewer council homes were built than in January, February and March. And private house building was 11% lower in the second quarter than in the first period.

The figures show a general decline in Britain's construction industry with a 5% drop in output compared with April, May and June of last year.

Bombs kill five

FOUR women and a child were killed yesterday when bombs, hidden in food sacks, exploded in a village in South-eastern Turkey.

Horoscopes

Virgo (Aug. 23-Sept. 22): Contacts, investments made in past are due to bear fruit. Financial picture brightens as you assume additional responsibility.

Libra (Sept. 23-Oct. 22): A long-standing assignment or project can now be completed. Timing is on target.

Scorpio (Oct. 23-Nov. 21): Areas that had been obscured by mystery of clouds will receive benefit of greater light.

Sagittarius (Nov. 22-Dec. 21): Express feelings, be receptive to one who does care and has your best interests at heart.

Capricorn (Dec. 22-Jan. 19): Accent on advancement, achievement, fulfilment of ambitions. Gemini, Sagittarius people play important roles.

Aquarius (Jan. 20-Feb. 18): Look beyond the immediate — you are about to embark on exciting adventure.

Pisces (Feb. 19-March 20): Emphasis on finances, tax structure and budget related to one who works with you.

Aries (March 21-April 19): Key now is flexibility, versatility and a sense of your own worth. Delay final decisions.

Taurus (April 20-May 20): Avoid direct confrontations. Some revisions are necessary — do not permit false pride to block progress.

Gemini (May 21-June 20): Be ready for change, travel and a variety of experiences. Spark of romance will revive relationship.

Cancer (June 21-July 22): Your natural inclinations, interests, abilities and talents surge to forefront. Family life will become more harmonious.

Leo (July 23-Aug. 22): Messages, reports, visits and a short trip could crowd busy scene. Relative attempts to make amends for recent slight.

Happy Birthday

GREETINGS from Junior Club to:

Carol Beange (14), Lossiemouth; James Buchan (15), Fraserburgh; Alistair Campbell (8), Rothiemay; Gordon Cooke (15), Turriff; Lorne Davidson (6), Hopeman; Wendy Gunn (10), Delny; Colin Ironside (14), Turriff; Nicola McWilliam (4), Bridge of Don; Martin Reid (12), Aberdeen; John Ritchie (13), Fraserburgh; Carolyn Stead (13), Buckie; Keith Stuart (2), Inverurie.



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DARO	Manual Typewriter with 15" carriage	A very robust desk model typewriter	Our Price	£195

A new on the advei The good steel depe rigid mas Pensi Safe

BR set to clinch land

125 acres for sale in Edinburgh

By ALLAN McLEAN

British Rail are ready to clinch the biggest sale of redundant railway land they have ever made at any one time in any city in Britain, by disposing of 13 sites totalling 125 acres in Edinburgh.

More land throughout Scotland is expected to follow as the cash-hungry railways strive to sell or develop as much property as they can in the shortest possible time. A financial crisis after a drop in traffic because of the steel strike and the industrial recession has boosted the need for money at a time of Government spending cuts.

But much of the land is expected to go to local authorities at a nominal cost because BR are anxious to rid themselves of legal liabilities to spend money on drainage and

maintenance of property for which they have no use.

The advantage to the councils involved is that they can protect land for public needs, such as cycle tracks, walkways or—in the case of Edinburgh—possible "super trams" in the future.

The sites in Edinburgh have been released after decisions on transport by Lothian Regional Council.

REVIEW

Much of the land was earmarked for possible road developments which the region have now abandoned. Though some of the ground is of limited commercial value because it is

in long, thin strips, several sites are likely to raise significant sums because of their development potential.

In addition to their plans for Edinburgh, the British Rail Property Board have carried out a review of land in Tayside Region which has identified 45 sites totalling 97 acres with potential. Another review is to take place in Highland Region, and will probably be followed by a survey of saleable property in Grampian Region.

The BRPB cleared £50 million profit last year which went straight into British Rail's coffers, which constantly need replenishing to provide for the limited investment in new

trains which the Government are prepared to allow. Since the Beeching era began in the early 1960s BR have raised £230 million by selling 79,000 acres of redundant railway land.

The 13 sites in Edinburgh have been waste land for more than ten years. It is hoped by BR that Lothian Region will buy four parcels of land with Edinburgh District Council accepting nine sites. The region are also interested in other BR land outside Edinburgh.

Spokesmen for both councils confirmed that negotiations had taken place with BRPB. But no decision has been taken, pending consideration by council-

Fossil hunters fall foul of permit system

Two amateur fossil hunters were admonished at Wick Sheriff Court yesterday after admitting charges of extracting three fossil fish from Achanarras Quarry, Caithness, during the summer.

In court were William Taylor (49), an engineer, of Prestonfield, and Robert Crawford (76), of Hutcheson Terrace, both Edinburgh.

Both had denied knowledge of a new permit system operated by the Nature Conservancy Council. Achanarras was the first site in the country to operate the

system, and the NCC are now empowered to press charges if anyone is found taking fossils without their consent.

There are multi-language warning signs at the site and a round-the-clock warden system is in operation.

Both the accused said they were genuine amateur palaeontologists and were not as had earlier been suggested by the Procurator-Fiscal, Mr Barry Heywood interested in selling the fossils which they had obtained.

They also said they had intended to visit the NCC office

at Golspie on their way back after their weekend stay in Caithness.

The court had earlier heard that Taylor's wife ran a shop in Portobello which had on display several fossil fish which had come from the Caithness site. But he denied that the specimens were for sale and both men said they had never made money from their interest in fossils.

The prosecutions stemmed from firmer measures being taken by the NCC to control the activities of commercial fossil collectors in the North. Over the past five

years the focus has largely been on the fossil fish, found in the Devonian rocks of Caithness and Orkney, which can fetch several hundred pounds.

The NCC have said that irresponsible fossil hunting could destroy other important remains as well as detracting from the potential scientific value of the specimens taken.

They are entering into agreements with owners of particular sites to establish a strictly enforced permit system reserved for genuine research workers.

**We challenge
to find a better
Building Scheme**

Security met for our rare fossil fish

The Nature Conservancy Council has brought in a system of operating permits for those seeking fossil fish specimens from Achanarras quarry that is aimed at stopping theft from the site.

Caithness has seven or eight localities that are good for fossils, but Achanarras is exceptional, and is one of the most important sites in the country.

Collecting fossil fish was at one time the interest of a few schoolboys and the odd one or two natural historians. But of recent years — particularly the last two or three — the problem of commercial interests exploiting the quarry with power tools and causing damage to this irreplaceable heritage has become acute.

According to Dr. Terry Keatinge of the N.C.C.'s Golspie office, collectors have just about cleared out the major sites in Europe and have turned to Scotland as the last remaining source of the fossils, which can fetch up to several hundred pounds.

Achanarras is owned by the Murray-Threavand family and A. and D. Sulholland's of Thurso are

the tenants. The quarry has not been worked for some time and until now there have been few restrictions on those seeking specimens.

It has been known for continental exploiters to spend two or three days at the quarry digging out and removing considerable quantities of fossil-bearing rock, with perhaps 100 specimens, using compressed air tools, crowbars and specially equipped vans.

Those involved have been mainly German and Dutch, and a few English. These collectors have caused considerable damage to the trackways within the quarry leaving huge holes some 10 yards by 10 and four feet deep.

Negotiations between the N.C.C. the owner and the tenants have now been completed, and the N.C.C. have been given control over access to the site as from last month.

Permits have to be obtained from the Golspie office in Old Bank Road before anyone can enter the site. The permits take around six weeks to process and require detailed information including the

colour, make and registration of vehicle being used. This is to allow for easy checking by a local warden, or by the police. The parking place is within sight of the Causeway traffic road.

Even with a permit there are considerable restrictions placed on the collector: no power tools or explosives are to be used, specimens to be taken from loose rock; the number of specimens restricted to two per visitor.

A local farmer is acting as honorary warden, and he will have copies of

permits before the collector arrives on the site. Mr Jack Saxon of Caithness Field Club is also a warden, but Dr Keatinge would be glad to hear from anyone else willing to help. He stressed that there would be no question of people being able to get instantaneous permits by calling at his office — the system was all to be operated by post.

Last year a number of Germans were successfully prosecuted for stealing fossils from a site in the south of Scotland.

Cancer relief group formed

A Thurso group of the National Society for Cancer Relief has now been formed, and a committee appointed.

This is the charity devoted to giving practical help to cancer victims, through financial assistance for some particular problem. Anyone directly concerned may apply to the fund for help, through their local doctor.

The committee are

Chairman: Mr Archie Campbell, secretary, Mrs Dorothy Sanderson; members, Mrs Isabel Buchan, Mrs Anne Cunningham, Mrs Jenny Simpson and Mr John Taylor.

At a recent mini auction held at Janet Street Club £110 was made for the fund. But more contributions are needed, and will be gratefully received by any member of the committee.

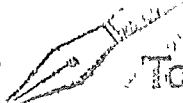
be wrong. But when the car driven by Katherine Robertson still had no moved by the time the source of lights had returned to red they became suspicious. The went over to the vehicle and after checks discovered she had been drinking. Tests later revealed she had 209 ml of alcohol in her blood. Robertson (36) shop assistant, 7 Strathmore Place, Thurso, admitted the offence and was fined £50 and disqualified from driving for two years.

21), 4 Moray Street, and George Farquhar (25), 41 Ginnage Street, both Wick; William Taylor (62), Beaconsfield, Thurso; Donald Manson (35), 31 Laurel, Falkirk.

A further three folk had fines of £5 imposed on them for similar offences. They were: Ian McMillan (64), Harbour House, Scrabster; Dennis Howell (35), 41 Mackay Rd., Inverness; and Mary Ronaldson (35), Lower Gillock, by Wick. All nine had their licences endorsed.

Two face charges

LETTERS



To the EDITOR

Night of the Heinkel...

Sir, — I was interested to read the account of the Heinkel III reported in the John O'Groat Journal of 11th April.

At the time I was serving as a pilot at the Naval Air Station, Hatston, Kirkwall. On 10th April, 1940, at about 10.30 a.m., I landed at Wick and imagine my surprise when I found an

intercepting a German air-raid on Scapa Flow.

It transpired that the Heinkel had been damaged in combat and its fuel tanks were leaking. The aircraft was based in Norway and the pilot, realising that he would not have enough fuel to get back, decided to land at Wick. The crew ditched in the

Sir, — In connection with the article in the 'Groat' of 11th April headed "Night of the Heinkel" I was intrigued by the suggestion therein that the crew of the Heinkel bomber thought that they were ditching their crippled aircraft in the sea instead of putting it down on a runway at Wick Aerodrome.

I would, however, prefer

I was lucky in getting a "ringside" view of that night's action as I was a gunner of an anti aircraft battery in operation on Flotta and the "Groat" of the following Friday rightly described it as a "Never to be forgotten spectacle".

I sometimes feel that high altitude German bomber squadrons thought that Flotta, a small island

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[REDACTED]
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London, September 11th, 1979

Mr. Robert Maclellan, MP
House of Commons,
London, SW1A 0AA

Dear Mr. Maclellan,

Thank you very much indeed for your letter of August 14th, 1979, and the enclosed copy of Mr. Jack Saxon's letter.

Although it may seem as if the matter concerned only a small group of people, I do think that actually it is of general interest that archeological sites should remain intact and I therefore fully share the concern which makes you raise the matter in the House of Commons. Actually I think if tourists were fully aware of the damage they do this might already considerably improve the situation.

As far as the possibilities of tackling the matter in the Federal Republic are concerned, I do agree that publicity might be the best help. I therefore talked about the matter to our Press Attaché who will get in contact with the Federal Press Office to find out what ways would be best to get the information to the people who cause those problems.

I hope we will find a satisfactory solution.

Yours sincerely,
[REDACTED]