THE FOX TRAIL

In the village of Brighstone, formally known as Brixton, the Revd William Fox divided his life between parish and dinosaurs; the Fox trail follows footpaths that lead from village to cliffs, tracks that Fox may have used every day in his hunt for bones.

1 Myrtle Cottage

Fox lodged at Myrtle Cottage between 1862 and 1881. Located on North Street, which is thought to follow the route of a Roman road, Myrtle Cottage is part of a group of fine thatched cottages still remaining. Sadly much of the interior dates only to the 1940’s, as it was destroyed in a fire. North Street has most of the buildings that Fox would have known preserved on it.

2 Brighstone Village Library and Museum

The museum (and library) houses a display of memorabilia, artefacts and pictures telling the story of life in Brighstone in the 19th century. There is no admission charge, but donations are welcome. Opening hours are limited to Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays. You can find out about rural life, schooling and the impact of the sea and the church within the community.

3 Village map

To find out more about the village and where else to go during your visit to Brighstone, take a look at the village map, it is located next to the main bus stop.

4 St Mary’s Church

William Fox was curate of Brighstone Church between 1862-1875. The origins of the church are unclear; however the oldest parts date to the 12th century, with much of the lower part 14-15th Century, the belfry dates to 1752. Built from local stone, much redesign took place in the 1850’s. Fox is buried in the graveyard; a low headstone marks his grave which is on the east side of the church.

5 Farmland

An often muddy walk down Rectory Lane past beautiful cottages and into the farmland that lies between the village of Brighstone and the sea. Look out for the many hedgerow and larger birds that live there. Birds are now considered to be very closely related to dinosaurs, many modern reconstructions of dinosaurs are feathered. The famous 19th century scientist Thomas Huxley used fossils discovered by Fox to first propose the relationship between birds and dinosaurs (see below).

6 Cliff top viewpoint

The vista encompasses the Lower Cretaceous Wealden rocks where Fox collected the bones of dinosaurs. Deposited between 130-125 million years ago in a landscape of rivers, forests and ponds, the clays and sandstones contain the fossils of plants, clams, mammals, pterosaurs and crocodiles, as well as the dinosaurs. To the south-east is Barnes High where Fox found the skeleton of the armoured dinosaur Polacanthus in 1865 and Hypsilophodon in 1870.

* TAKE CARE ON THE CLIFF EDGE - THE PATH IS CONSTANTLY ERODING!

7 Grange Chine

A visit to the beach will allow you to see the rocks up close; the grey coloured beds are rich in fossil plant remains preserved as lignite, purple-red coloured clays were formed as flood deposits eventually becoming soils. Sandstones formed in the rivers and frequently have footprints preserved in them. Search amongst the pebbles on the beach for fossils.

The Reverend William Fox (1813-1881) has four species of dinosaur named after him, more than any other Englishman, however, unlike Gideon Mantell, William Buckland and Mary Anning, he is almost unknown, forgotten. Amongst Fox’s discoveries, was one of the first almost complete dinosaurs, a partial skeleton of the small ornithopod dinosaur, Hypsilophodon. Described by Thomas Huxley PRS, this dinosaur prompted Huxley to establish the Ornithopoda (bird-footed dinosaurs), for it and other bipedal herbivores. It was Hypsilophodon’s, light-build and bird-like anatomy that started the debate on the relationship between dinosaurs and birds. Hypsilophodon permeates the history of our understanding of how dinosaurs lived, having been interpreted firstly as arboreal, and subsequently as a bipedal runner. It was one of the first dinosaurs studied in detail during the great renaissance in dinosaur science in the 1970’s, contributing to our modern understanding herbivorous dinosaur evolution and biology.

As curate of St Mary’s Church, Fox touched the lives of his contemporary villagers, in what was then a remote and isolated coastal community. Today his barely marked grave and an improvised plaque are all that remain to mark the life of a man whose discoveries made the Isle of Wight synonymous with dinosaurs, and recognised as the richest source of dinosaur remains in Europe, a unique scientific legacy to our Island community.

Dinosaurs Named after the Revd. William Fox:
Polacanthus foxii Owen, 1865. A 5 metre long armoured dinosaur.
Hypsilophodon foxii Huxley, 1869. A 2 metre long small ornithopod.
Eucamerotus foxii Hulke, 1872. A sauropod dinosaur of uncertain size.
Calamospondylus foxii (Lydekker, 1889) a poorly known small carnivorous dinosaur around 3.5 metres in length.

Image of Fox © The Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London.

Map by Al Rowe www.potting-shed-cartoons.co.uk
Text by Dr Martin Munt Curator, Dinosaur Isle Museum www.dinosaurisle.com