



Thomas Hawkins FGS

This imposing headstone can be seen in Ventnor Cemetery not too far from the entrance gate. Who was Thomas Hawkins and what was his connection with Ventnor?

Thomas Hawkins was a famous English geologist and poet who was born, and grew up in Glastonbury, Somerset, in 1810. He was the son of a farmer who encouraged his interest in geology by giving him money to purchase fossils. He bought fossils exposed by erosion near Lyme Regis on the Dorset Coast (now known as "The Jurassic Coast") and he also paid quarrymen at inland quarries at Street and Edgarley in Somerset to look for any fossils uncovered during excavations. In addition, he collected specimens from the south coast of the Isle of Wight, which may have been the reason for his eventual move to live on the Island.

Hawkins had made himself into a capable fossil preparator, whose skill at preparation was exceeded only by his pugnacity and purple prose! This was exemplified in a number of texts he had published between 1830 and 1850, the most well-known being "Memoirs of Ichthyosaurii and Plesiosaurii" in 1835 and "The Book of the Great Sea Dragons, Ichthyosauri and Plesiosauri" in 1840.

Gideon Mantell, MRCS, FRS who is credited with the discovery of the dinosaur, once described Hawkins as "a very rich young man with more money than wit". Acquaintances tolerated Hawkins's quirks because of his outstanding fossil collection, and he was willing to do anything to promote the idea that his fossils were the best! He is thought to have completed many skeletons by inserting parts from other specimens, and, as a result, Hawkins hoodwinked Gideon Mantell and another famous palaeontologist of the time, William Buckland, into assessing his collection at artificially high values. Buckland then wrote, to Charles Konig, Keeper of Natural History at the British Museum, recommending that the Institution purchase the collection. The trustees took Buckland's advice and bought Hawkins's collection for £3,000. Incidentally, another Ichthyosaur fossil, donated by Thomas Hawkins, can be seen in the Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences in Cambridge.

Just before Hawkins's 25-foot ichthyosaurus was to be put on display in 1835, Konig gave it a careful inspection and discovered that a lot of the skeleton was, in fact, fake. Hawkins had replaced missing parts with plaster casts but had led the Museum to believe that it was 100% genuine bone! The final solution was to paint the plaster parts a different colour so that it was obvious which was real bone and which was not.

Hawkins decided to move to the Isle of Wight and took up residence at "The Hermitage", Niton. As well as being the editor of the Asiatic Quarterly, he was a considerable contributor to Political literature. He died at "The Hermitage" on October 15th 1889. His funeral took place at Holy Trinity Church, Ventnor with the Vicar, the Rev. A. P. Clayton officiating. Mr Willard was on the organ and the funeral arrangements were in the capable hands of Messrs. Ingrams of Albert Street. His fame, as a Fellow of the Geological Society of London, and as a well-known poet, would explain the magnificence of the grave and headstone - over 6 feet tall, flanked by two ionic columns and topped by a pitched lintel. Compared to other graves nearby which have fallen into disrepair, Hawkins's tomb is still in remarkable condition after more than 130 years.

Colin Beavis

