





The big sleep

At their height, the De La Beche clan were feared warriors and trusted power-brokers, yet their last resting place is a small church in Berkshire. Seven centuries on, even in stone they remain too large for their world. Conservation mason [Andrew Ziminski](#) met them in the course of his work. He reflects on their imperfect magnificence – and their bond with older extinct colossi, also now stone: dinosaurs. Photographs [John Lawrence](#)

Aldworth church's "Sleeping Giants" are a pampered bunch, probably more so now than at any time in the past 650-odd years of their "supine stationary voyage". The addition of radiators fixed to their plinths and tomb chests certainly adds to their short-term comfort, but not to their long-term survival.

We passed by this comfortable part of chalky Berkshire to cost some work there (the usual problem of leaky roofs leading to corroding metal fixings in stonework) but, for once, had not read the Pevsner entry before arriving. Pausing momentarily for eyes to adjust to the gloom of the porch, then giving the door a shove, we stumbled in over the raised wooden threshold, and the slowly developing two-coloured January light lit a post-Black Death medieval mausoleum that caused us to stop short.

These 14th-century memorials to the De La Beche clan are unique in England. In the north and south aisles six recumbent effigies relax under two architecturally cohesive canopy triplets, with unusual bird's-mouth cusping. In the central arcade lie the two centrally heated tomb chests. It is worth stopping here to admire the swaying drapery of the lady and the armour, such as bascinet sporting Sir Nicholas De La Beche, his arms enclosed in hinged plates faithfully executed in Oolitic limestone.

They have been rather beaten about, most probably during the Civil War, when the Giants' nicknames are recorded as John Long,

John Strong, John Ever-Afraid and John Never-Afraid. Legend has it that John Ever-Afraid was buried within the blocked-in flint walls of the church to escape the devil, who would claim him if buried either without or within. Cromwell's Act of Parliament decreeing "the demolition of monuments of idolatry and superstition" caused the curate here, Thomas Longland, to resign in despair from St Mary's when he witnessed the resultant damage.

The big problem is the corroding 19th-century tie bar that spans all three canopies on the north aisle; the iron has expanded and had a bad effect on the capitals and springing points of the cusped arch tracery. They need to be propped with a fixed scaffolding, the fractured stone removed and to receive some careful dentistry to remove and replace the corroding bar with stainless steel.

The clock is ticking for these damp, cracked, overheated and mutilated stones – but funds are being raised locally, with barn dances and hog roasts for the repair and conservation work that is needed.

It has been useful to have developed a working relationship with another ancestor of the De La Beche family, which seems to pop up at all sorts of surprising and odd corners of old England. One such is on the other side of the chalk uplands of Salisbury Plain – at Vallis Vale, in Somerset.

In Vallis Vale, an alpine feel prevails; paradise is sullied with the usual old shopping trolleys, and the ferrous remains of a once thriving quarrying industry. In the brook, there is



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De La Beche tombs: Top, Sir John and his wife, Lady Isabella. He died in 1328. Above, Sir Nicholas, a custodian of the Black Prince. Died 1345. Facing page, Sir Philip De La Beche, died 1327. Far right, Sir Nicholas, detail

the creepy motion of golf balls, which do not float, and make a slow, seaward journey, bumping along at the bottom and surprising crayfish (once native, now the Signal species introduced from North America in the 1960s).

The brook flows quickly through deeply incised rocky valleys, hung with ancient woodlands clinging to the thin, calcareous soils that hereabouts cover the valuable Carboniferous limestone and a surprising geological unconformity. Not really suitable for building, the rock (as opposed to stone) has long been extracted for road building and, in the dim past, crushed by hand and used for lime production for building, or as a flux for the production of iron at the nearby Fussells Ironworks, as well as for sweetening the many fields up on Mendip that have acid soil.

A more English place or place name would be hard to imagine, but “Vallis” in Norman French means *falaise*, cliff.

The limekilns here are peppered down the valley, but working on a couple of them for a few sodden winter weeks led to a chance introduction with a later member of the De La Beche clan. These limekilns are Victorian and are roughly constructed cylinders, (built into the

side of a hillock) with large chunks of rock, well mortared with a coke/ash-based mix. Coal from the Somerset coalfields fired the flue. At the base of the pit there is a stokehole, through which the fire was lit, fed, and the ashes and lime extracted. I don’t think that the kilns have been fired for quite a few decades – but, most interestingly, there is the large, moss-covered spoil heap of lime left over from the last firing. You won’t have to think too hard about where we acquired the lime for the repairs from. Cavities were maintained in the core of the kilns for the resident greater horseshoe bat population.

Just behind the kilns, where our Portaloos were situated, a quarry face exposes one of the oldest principles of geology, the De La Beche Unconformity, discovered by Sir Henry Thomas De La Beche in 1846 and chanced upon by us at the turn of the millennium.

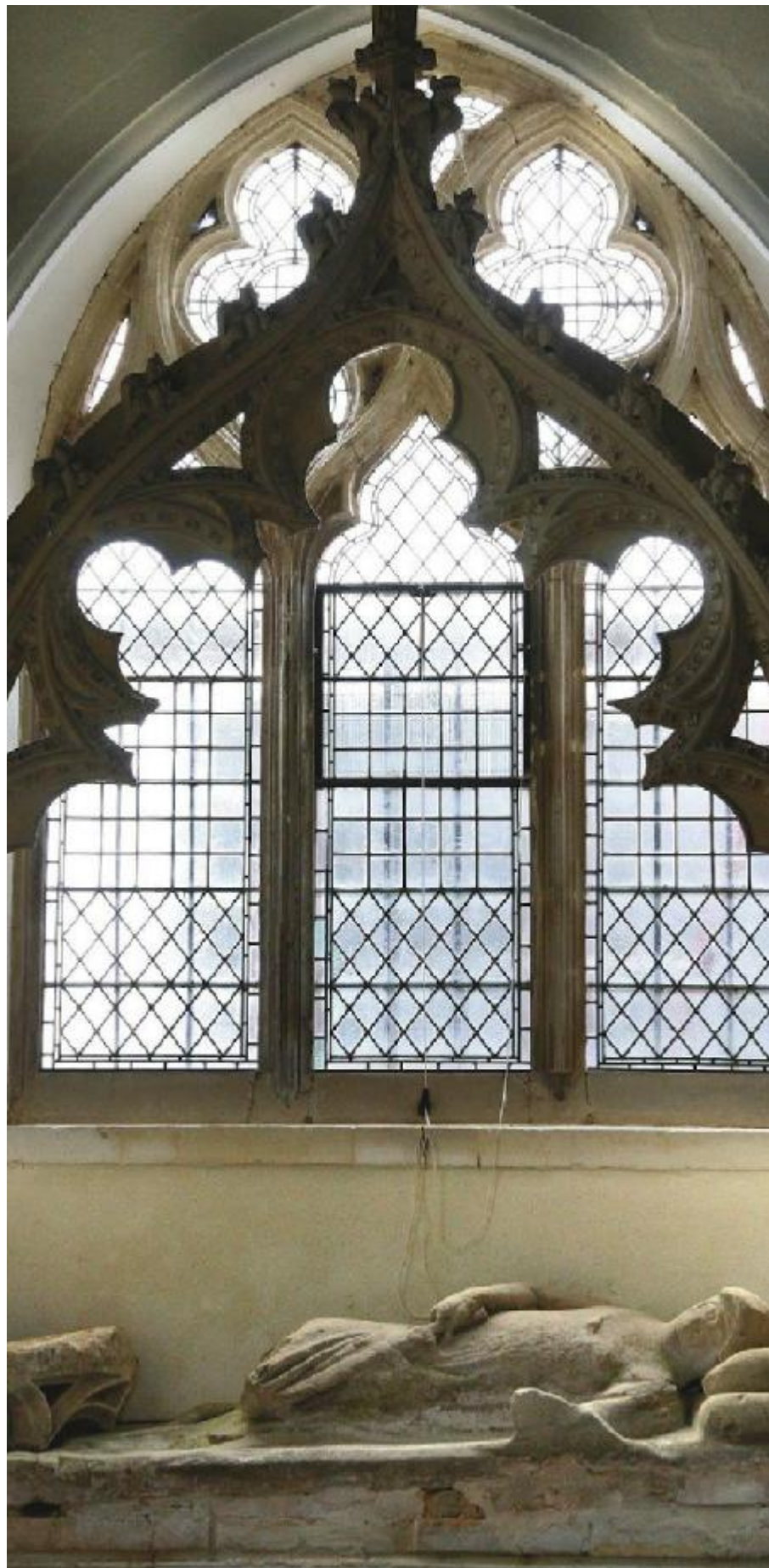
In the usual geological sequence, layers of sedimentary rock are laid down in chronological order on the surface of the earth, like the pages of a book – but here in Vallis pages have been ripped out of this chronology and are missing through faulting and erosion, leaving a gap of 170 million years in the geological record

between the lower Carboniferous limestone and the inferior Oolitic Bath stone.

Sir Henry was the first director of the British Geological Survey, appointed in 1835. He was a close friend and benefactor of Mary Anning, probably the best known and most successful of fossil collectors, whom he had known from his childhood upbringing in Lyme Regis. Henry became a keen fossil collector and illustrator, writing groundbreaking papers on ichthyosaur and plesiosaur anatomy.

MUCHELNEY Abbey, on the moors of Somerset, possesses an exposed Saxon crypt that has an unsurprising tendency to fill with water in the winter. Splitting Blue Lias limestone slabs newly arrived from the quarry over in Somerton for a drainage culvert, renewed my interest in the observations of Sir Henry. A particularly large and expensive slab seemed to fit well with the other sections, but was on the thick side. It was not a totally pleasant surprise to find a fresh, fossilised

site seen aldworth's sleeping giants



reptilian shoulder blade which was “Disencumbered from its earthly shroud”, as the £80 stone would have to be cut and much reduced in size to extract the prize specimen for the hallowed shelves of the Zimsonian and a replacement slab obtained at short notice.

The earlier interest in Sir Henry introduced a kernel of recognition and a push in the right direction to the great Philpot Museum in Lyme to identify the shoulder blade to be that of a young plesiosaur.

In the 1830s, to support his now impoverished friend Mary Anning, Sir Henry sold copies of his lithograph *Duria Antiquior – A More Ancient Dorset*. This was the first artist's impression of deep time, and it illustrated Mary's finds, including ichthyosaurs, a plesiosaur and dimorphodon. The child in us should like this as it shows coprolites (I will spare the reader a photo of coprolites in my collection) emanating from a rather startled-looking plesiosaur, realising it's the end.

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