

Lewis Hunton, a scientist who changed the world

Lewis Hunton was born over two hundred years ago at Hummersea House, perched high on cliffs overlooking the North Sea near Loftus, East Cleveland. His father was the manager of the local alum works and quarry. Alum was an important mineral used to 'fix' colours in the cloth dyeing industry.

When Lewis was a boy he had access to the exposed cliffs and Jurassic rocks near his home. He discovered the many fossils they contained. He began to study them closely, developing a special interest in ammonites, small sea creatures that lived millions of years ago in the age of the dinosaurs.



Fossil of an ammonite

Lewis realised that certain ammonite fossils were located within specific strata (layers of rock) of the cliffs. From this he cleverly deduced that the fossils could be used to work out the periods in time when the rocks were formed. Furthermore, he realised that this could also be used as a reliable indicator of the age of rock strata that contained similar fossil deposits, no matter where they appeared. His pioneering work led to the important science of bio-stratigraphy, a fundamental technique that geologists still use today.

Lewis was not a healthy man so he moved to France in the hope of improving his health. However, he died there in 1838 at the age of just 23. To commemorate the life and achievements of this remarkable young man, there are now two green plaques. One is on the wall outside his birthplace at Hummersea House. The other is displayed in the market square at Loftus. He is also honoured by having an ammonite fossil named after him. Lewis's baptismal entry of 1814 can be seen in the record ledger of St Leonard's Church, Loftus. Unfortunately, there is no known image of Lewis.



QUESTIONS

1. What year was Louis Hunton born?

2. Where did he live and where did he discover fossils?
 - a.

 - b.

3. What did he have a special interest in?

4. Write a sentence to describe these.

5. How did he cleverly deduce (work out) that fossils could be used to determine the age periods from when the rocks were laid down?

6. What else could he work out from this?

7. What is a geologist?

8. What is a fundamental technique that geologists still use today?

9. What commemorates Lewis Hunton and where will you find them?
 - a.

 - b.

Find Out More:

- Whitby Museum, Pannett Park, Whitby YO21 1RE, <https://whitbymuseum.org.uk/>
- Lewis Hunton Trail (Loftus) - self-guided walk leaflet available at <https://www.walkingloftusandthenorthyorkshirecoast.com/self-guided-walks>
- North East Yorkshire Geology Trust, <http://www.northyorkshiregeologytrust.com/pages/archive/lewishutton.html>