



1821

### The Hyenas' Den in Kirkdale

One of the most exciting geological finds of the 19<sup>th</sup> century happened in Kirkdale, close to Kirkbymoorside. A discovery in 1821 put it right on the scientific map.

While quarrying stone from a small cliff above Hodge Beck, near the ancient church of St. Gregory's Minster, local people began to find animal bones and teeth amongst the rock, and they brought them into Kirkbymoorside. They attracted the attention of a young visitor from London, who went to the quarry. About 40m above the river-bed, he climbed into a narrow cave entrance and was greeted with an amazing number of fragmented bones and teeth stuck in the cave floor. Realising this was something special, the young man headed back to London with some of his finds. Soon, a well-known geologist, William Buckland, heard about them.

Buckland was born in 1784 and had developed a passion for fossils at an early age. The news of the Kirkdale cave was too good an opportunity to miss, and he travelled to Yorkshire to see for himself. The caves were carefully cleared and William Buckland began to identify the treasure trove of fossils. He found that the bones belonged to 23 species of animal, including unexpected ones such as hippopotamus, elephant and rhinoceros. Many of the bones were from hyenas, so the cave was named 'The Hyenas' Den'.



At that time people believed the world was created in six days, as told in the Bible: they thought that all animals were created by God exactly as we see them today. Some argued that the animals found in Kirkdale had been washed up there from Africa by Noah's Flood. William Buckland challenged these beliefs by stating that the bones pre-dated the Flood. His work was regarded as a model for careful scientific research, and brought him fame and recognition.



Meanwhile, the cave became an attraction, with Victorian gentlemen coming to explore, aided by candles as they squeezed through the tight passages, soaking in water and sticky mud. Keen to make money, the local lads went in search of other bones and teeth and sold them to the visitors. One lucky lad sold a tusk from a bear for one and a half guineas - over £100 in today's money!

## QUESTIONS

1. What year was a discovery made that put Kirkdale 'right on the scientific map'?
  
2. What had been happening that enabled local people to find animal bones and teeth and where was this?
  - a.
  - b.
  
3. When the young man climbed into the cave, what did he find?
  
4. Who heard about the findings and what was his job?
  
5. What did this person do and what did he find?
  - a.
  - b.
  
6. Why was the cave named 'The Hyenas' Den'?
  
7. Why did people at that time think the world was created in six days?
  
8. How did some people think the animal bones had arrived in the cave?
  
9. How did William Buckland challenge these beliefs?

10. What brought William Buckland fame and recognition?

11. How did the local lads make money from the cave?

12. Why do you think the cave with the fossils in was 40m above the river bed?  
How did the animal bones get in there, and why were there bones of animals found nowadays in Africa?

**Find out more:**

- Ryedale Family History Group Research Room, Hovingham, <http://www.ryedalefamilyhistory.org/>
- Yorkshire Museum, Museum Gardens, York, <https://www.yorkshitemuseum.org.uk/>
- Kirkbymoorside History Group Archives, <http://kmshistory.btck.co.uk/>