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978-0-521-42048-8 - Gideon Mantell and the Discovery of Dinosaurs

Dennis R. Dean

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 1

*Castle Place*

In the topography of southeast England, where Gideon Algernon Mantell (1790–1852) spent his life, strata are generally younger than elsewhere in Britain. Though lying atop older, the earliest exposed rocks date from near the very end of the Jurassic period, some 150 million years ago, when the region was mostly under water. Ammonites, belemnites, and (increasingly) bivalves were common marine species, often serving as food for plesiosaurs and ichthyosaurs, which had already developed to considerable size. Above them, in the air, gliding pterosaurs scanned the ocean for prey. Though far less impressive in wingspread, true birds had also begun to evolve. In freshwater environments, and even some marine ones, long-snouted crocodylians foraged shorelines. On land, dinosaurs were already dominant, including gigantic carnivores like *Megalosaurus*, huge plant-eaters like *Cetiosaurus*, and some early plated genera as well. Careful to stay out from under their immense feet, and usually no bigger than their toes, were our direct ancestors – early, diminutive mammals.

The Cretaceous or Chalk period began about 144 million years ago and lasted more than half that time. During it, the Weald (an extensive freshwater delta or floodplain in what are now Kent and Sussex) gradually submerged; sandstone, greensand, mudstone, and abundant chalk successively resulted. In fawn-colored Wealden sandstone, which Mantell was first to identify as a freshwater deposit, *Iguanodon* and his other dinosaurs were found. Before he discovered them, however, Gideon spent some years collecting marine fossils from the Chalk, a younger but much more prominent formation especially notable for its sponges, corals, ammonites, bivalves, and one kind of brachiopod (*Terebratula*). In decline by this time, the previously dominant ammonites had begun to uncoil their characteristically ribbed shells in a variety of bizarre ways (*Hamites*, *Scaphites*, *Turrilites*). Ichthyosaurs were dying out as well, having been superseded by various mosasaurs. Modern bony fishes, meanwhile, flourished – those of the tarpon group (*Osmeroides*) especially. Thus, plesiosaurs, pterosaurs, turtles, crocodiles, lizards, and in particular a great

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[More information](#)2 *Gideon Mantell and the Discovery of Dinosaurs*

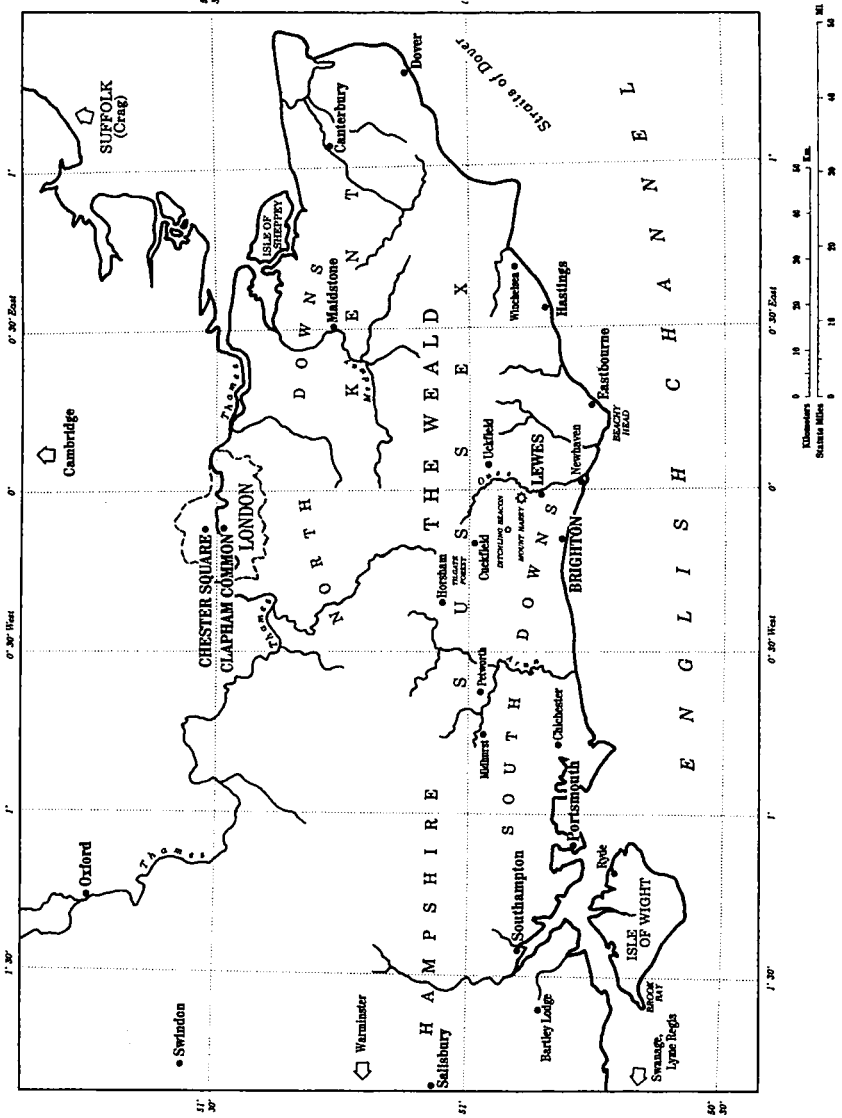
variety of dinosaurs dominated the food chain; fish, birds, mammals, insects, and flowering plants played important but lesser roles.

At the close of the Cretaceous period, sixty-five million years ago, dinosaurs of all sizes rapidly died out – just how suddenly or why, no one is sure – as did mosasaurs, plesiosaurs, pterosaurs, ammonites, belemnites, and other less familiar creatures. Correspondingly, the Age of Reptiles, or Mesozoic era, ended and the Age of Mammals, or Cenozoic era, began. Most of the now-vacant ecological niches formerly occupied by gigantic reptiles were eventually filled by mammals evolving toward larger size: mammoth, mastodon, giant sloth, tapir, and rhinoceros, for example. In a few unique environments, like the islands of New Zealand, mammals never appeared; their place was eventually taken by giant flightless birds – most famously the moa, some varieties of which probably survived into the eighteenth century A.D. before being hunted to extermination by man.

During the Age of Mammals also, significant orogenic movements bent European portions of the old sea bottom upward. Thus, Jurassic and Cretaceous strata in what eventually became southeastern England were steadily uplifted, forming a great bulging fold (or anticline), the top of which was subsequently sheered off by erosion to form a symmetrical topography of encased and inverted stratigraphic U's. Bordered at its farther edge by younger, more resistant chalk (the North and South Downs), and now a valley, the truncated Wealden Anticline became progressively older toward its vertical axis, around Winchelsea. Similar but downward warping also created the London, Hampshire, and Paris basins, with subsequent deposits of mammiferous sediments in all three. As part of the Age of Mammals also, Britain experienced glaciations, which contoured its landscape, scattered erratic boulders and thick gravels widely, and depressed subjacent crust, resilient uplift following. Perhaps no more than eighty-six hundred years ago, marine erosion (by a sea deepened with glacial melt) battered out the English Channel, severing Britain from continental Europe and assuring its historical identity as an island. Finally, the spectacular abrupt cliffs of coastal southeast England – at Dover and Brighton, for example, but also cleaving the Isle of Wight from Hampshire – are thought to be less than five thousand years old.<sup>1</sup>

1. See Wes Gibbons, *The Weald* (London, Boston, and Sydney, 1981); S. W. Wooldridge and Frederick Goldring, *The Weald* (London, 1953); David K. C. Jones, *The Geomorphology of the British Isles: Southeast and Southern England* (London and New York, 1981); J. G. C. Anderson and T. R. Owen, *The Structure of the British Isles*, second edition (Oxford, 1980); and, more generally, Rodney Steel and Anthony Harvey, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Prehistoric Life* (New York, 1979). For Lewes generally, see Thomas W. Horsfield, *The History and Antiquities of Lewes and Its Vicinity* (2 vols., Lewes, 1824, 1827), with contributions by GM; *The Town Book of Lewes, 1702–1837* (1972) and idem., *1837–1901* (1976), both

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Map of southeast England

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Dennis R. Dean

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Gideon Mantell and the Discovery of Dinosaurs*

At this point we likewise come to a great divide, because the geological history related thus far, regarding both life and landforms in southeast England, was entirely unsuspected when Gideon Mantell was born in 1790 and known only imperfectly when he died in 1852; a surprising amount of the intervening progress, we shall see, is attributable to him.

As the attractive subject of dinosaurs and their discovery has already been granted a number of popular reprises, however, I wish to stress that this book consists throughout of original biographical research. The need is real, for while Gideon Mantell's role as a discoverer of saurian remains has been widely acknowledged, it has also been almost universally misinterpreted. Because so much of our earlier understanding derived from slipshod scholarship, I have insisted that my own account be resolutely factual throughout. In pursuing these researches, moreover, I soon came to see that the early history of dinosaur discoveries was rather different than had been previously supposed.

In that history, Gideon Mantell emerges now as one of several independent discoverers of *Megalosaurus* – a carnivore, and the first dinosaur of any kind to be described. He also discovered *Iguanodon*, the first herbivorous dinosaur; and *Hylaeosaurus*, the first armored dinosaur. Though not quite realizing that *Cetiosaurus* was a dinosaur, he was among the first to discover its huge remains and correctly identified them as reptilian. He then discovered *Pelorosaurus*, a gigantic brontosaurian; *Regnosaurus*, an enigmatic dinosaur whose more specific affinities are still being debated; and *Hypsilophodon*, which he thought plausibly enough to be a very young iguanodon. In addition, Mantell collected a great deal of important evidence pertaining to other archosaurs, including crocodiles, gavials, turtles, plesiosaurs, ichthyosaurs, and the first mosasaurian and pterosaurian remains discovered in England. No other individual contributed so much to our early knowledge of prehistoric saurians. And far more than anyone else, he impressed the Age of Reptiles upon contemporary minds.

Yet Gideon Mantell has been remembered thus far (in almost every popular book written about dinosaurs) only for his – or his wife's – accidental discovery of *Iguanodon*, a significantly distorted legend which I will examine later on. It is not commonly appreciated that he devoted some thirty years to his increasingly accurate reconstructions of *Iguanodon*, while discovering seven other dinosaurs as well. Gideon was the first person to collect dinosaur bones systematically and over a period of time with the specific intention of restoring the animals' original appearance. His work

ed. Verena Smith (Lewes: Sussex Record Society); together with two detailed local histories by Colin Brent: *Georgian Lewes* (1993) and, with William Rector, *Victorian Lewes* (1980). I am grateful to Dr. Brent for his contributions to this chapter.

in less popular areas of paleontology, moreover, is sometimes distorted even by specialists. In addition to saurians, Mantell discovered several dozen other prehistoric creatures. Among his further important finds were numerous mollusks, fishes, insects, sponges, plants, and foraminifera. Utilizing this previously overlooked supplemental information, he was the first researcher to place living dinosaurs within their real environment and, in so doing, raised seminal questions about prehistoric climates. As a pioneer geologist, furthermore, Gideon made fundamental contributions to stratigraphy, establishing the Weald of Sussex in particular as a classic locality of worldwide significance. Rather unexpectedly, he was likewise fundamental to study of the geology and flightless birds of New Zealand. These nonsaurian accomplishments of his deserve more scholarly recognition than they have received but are too numerous and diverse to be explored fully in this book. Though omitted with regret, they are at least alluded to in passing. Further information can then be found in my footnotes and in Gideon's own writings.<sup>2</sup>

Among the prominent researchers of his time, Mantell was unusually concerned to disseminate accurate scientific information throughout the public at large. He did so primarily in three related capacities: as the proprietor of an outstanding fossil collection, as the most popular geological lecturer in England, and as a foremost geological writer. In each case, he attracted both scientific and lay audiences of unprecedented size. Since Gideon was professionally a surgeon, however, doctoring routinely filled his days. Invariably on call, he was often summoned after dark as well. Much of his scientific work, consequently, took place around or beyond midnight, leaving him no more than a few hours' sleep. As if two such demanding careers – medicine and science – were not enough, Gideon was also a local and family historian; a productive archeologist and microscopist; a political activist and social climber; a minor poet and artist; and, in his valuable journal and extensive correspondence, an outspoken critic and chronicler of his times.<sup>3</sup>

2. Gideon Mantell's major books on earth science include *The Fossils of the South Downs* (1822), *Illustrations of the Geology of Sussex* (1827), *The Geology of the South-East of England* (1833), *The Wonders of Geology* (1838), *Medals of Creation* (1844), and *Petrifactions and Their Teachings* (1851), all of which are discussed below. An adequate survey of Mantell's contributions to every area of paleontology would necessarily include the work of his two sons, Walter and Reginald, for whom see later mentions in the present work.
3. See DRD, "A Bicentenary Retrospective on Gideon Algernon Mantell (1790–1852)," *Journal of Geological Education*, 38 (1990), 434–443, which is the text of my Ramsbottom Address, twice given in Sussex. A bibliography of Mantell by me, listing and remarking on his writings and publications in all areas, is available.

Cambridge University Press

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Dennis R. Dean

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Gideon Mantell and the Discovery of Dinosaurs*

## Origins

Norman French in origin, the name Mantell (pronounced “Mantle”) refers to the common medieval cloak. According to Gideon’s own notes (begun in 1814), the family of Mauntell, or de Mantell, came to England from Normandy and was still represented in Abbeville. As Mantell, it could be found in the Roll of Battle Abbey, a listing (by surname only) of the knights and squires who accompanied William the Conqueror in 1066 and won the Battle of Hastings. A William de Mantell then accompanied Richard the Lion-Hearted (d. 1199) to the Holy Land, as part of the dramatic but unsuccessful Third Crusade. Matthew Mantell was sheriff of Northamptonshire under King John in 1213. This line of Mantells remained in place through the Reformation, leaving their tombs and brasses in the chancel of Heyford Church, six miles west of Northampton. In 1541, however, John Mantell and some others ventured upon a “nocturnal frolic,” poaching deer from Sir Nicholas Pelham’s park in Sussex. Caught by three of Pelham’s men, they murdered one and were subsequently executed, the greater portion of their estates being forfeited to the crown. As if to complete the ruin of his house, John’s son Walter then joined Sir Thomas Wyatt’s Kentish rebellion of 1554, which tried but failed to prevent Queen Mary’s union with the powerful Catholic monarch Philip of Spain. Walter, his nephew, and Wyatt himself were executed the same year.

Gideon was highly conscious of this ancestry and the religious differences that had contributed so much to the social and economic degradation of his family. “I fully reciprocate your feelings as to the virtues of our blessed monarchs of the 17th century,” he wrote ironically to his American friend Benjamin Silliman in December 1849.

You forget that my family was despoiled of lands and fortune and station for their attempts in the previous century to maintain the Protestant faith. Sir Walter Mantell and his son [error for nephew] were executed in Kent in the reign of Queen Mary – see Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* – and in Charles II’s time when the persecuted family took refuge in Lewes, their names are among the fined and imprisoned for being *convecticlers*.

Which is to say, they were Protestant dissenters who met clandestinely.<sup>4</sup>

4. That the Mantells pronounced their family name trochaically is evident from Thomas Mantell’s and others’ phonetic spellings of it, the puns of Horace Smith and others on it, and the placement of “Mantell” within metric lines of poetry. GM, “Memoirs of the Mantells” (ATL) is a collection of genealogical materials; see also William Berry, *County Genealogies: Pedigrees of the Families in the County of Sussex* (London, 1830), p. 20; William Berry, *County Genealogies . . . Kent* (London, 1830), pp. 332 and 185; Edward

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Dennis R. Dean

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Castle Place*

7

Gideon traced his *direct* ancestry from the sixteenth-century John Mantell's brother Thomas, said to have been headborough of Lewes in 1562 and constable a decade later. His son and grandson, both named Thomas, were headboroughs of Lewes also. After two more generations, a further Thomas Mantell, born in 1716, married Gideon's grandmother, Susannah Austen (1716–1790). They had two daughters and five sons, including the future Reverend George Mantell (1757–1832) of Swindon and Thomas Mantell (1750–1807) of Lewes, Gideon's uncle and father, respectively. All eight of this latter Thomas Mantell's children (beginning with Sarah, his short-lived firstborn) would be named for biblical personages.

Gideon Algernon Mantell, the third son and fifth child, was prophetically named for an Old Testament patriarch who defeated the Midianites and subsequently became a judge of Israel; his middle name commemorated Algernon Sidney, a republican hero. He was born on 3 February 1790 in Lewes (now pronounced "Louis"), Sussex, a small provincial town of about five thousand persons with a long history of political and religious dissent. Gideon was baptized some time later by the Reverend George Barnard in an eventually Methodist chapel that Thomas Mantell, Gideon's father, had founded in 1788; no longer extant, it was then in St. Mary's Lane. Also on "Simmery-lane," in an unpretentious but comfortable home which paternal shrewdness and hard work (rather than formal education) had provided, Gideon lived with his father, Thomas; his mother, Sarah; his surviving older sister, Mary; his older brothers, Thomas and Samuel; and (in time) his younger siblings Joshua, Jemima, and Kezia.

As of February 1790 the French Revolution was less than a year old; when it became increasingly radical, concomitant British reaction harmed the Mantells a good deal. During his years in Lewes a generation before, from 1768 to 1774, Thomas Paine had fostered a political discussion group at the White Hart Inn (then the town's social center) on High Street, not far from St. Mary's Lane. That outspoken group of headstrong dissidents attracted William Lee the printer and a number of persons unknown. One of the latter was probably Gideon's father, who would have been eighteen to twenty-four. While definite connections between him and Paine's group are lacking, the Mantells and the Lees would thereafter be close friends and political allies for three generations. It is also entirely consistent with what little we know about Thomas Mantell's radical political beliefs to suppose that he came directly under Paine's influence during his formative years. As American revolutionary and author of *The*

Hasted, *The History of Kent* (4 vols., Canterbury, 1778–1799), III (1790), 97, 319–320; and Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. Spokes's fuller genealogy supplements Berry but includes mistakes. GM–BS, 30 May 1842, and 14 Dec 1849 (Yale) discuss Mantell family history.

Cambridge University Press

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Dennis R. Dean

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Gideon Mantell and the Discovery of Dinosaurs**The Mantell Family*

“Memoirs of the Mantells” (ATL) includes GM’s birth and baptism; for Thomas Mantell and his Methodist chapel, see Horsfield, I, 306. The chapel was sold at Thomas Mantell’s death in 1807.

THOMAS MANTELL (b. 1716) married Susannah Austen (1716–1790). Their five sons included Gideon’s uncle and father.

GEORGE MANTELL (1747–1832), the Reverend, of Westbury and Swindon, son of the above and Gideon’s uncle, married Martha Houston (1751–1821). Their son George (b. 1789), a Faringdon doctor and Gideon’s cousin, had six sons and two daughters by his first wife, a former Miss Isles (d. 1832) and three daughters by his second, Rosetta Stacey.

THOMAS MANTELL (13 April 1750–1 July 1807), shoemaker of Lewes and Gideon’s father, married Sarah Austen (25 Nov 1755–23 Dec 1828) of Peckham, Kent, in 1776. They had four sons and four daughters.

THOMAS AUSTEN MANTELL (1781, 1784, or 1786–30 Nov 1872), sheriff’s officer, local politician, and auctioneer of Lewes, son of the above and Gideon’s eldest brother, married Hannah (Ann) Groves (d. 1848) on 21 Dec 1809. Their six children, Gideon’s nieces and nephews, included Sarah (b. 7 Oct 1810; bapt. 23 Mar 1812), Thomas (b. 26 Feb 1812; bapt. 23 Mar 1812), Charles, Ellen (d. 1849), George (all three baptized 20 June 1817), and Fanny (1821; bapt. 12 Jan 1822). TAM’s age is given as ninety-one on his death certificate, as sixty-five in the census of 1851, and as eighty-seven in the census of 1871.

SAMUEL AUGUSTUS MANTELL (1789–23 Mar 1873), innkeeper and butcher of Lewes and Gideon’s elder brother, married Henrietta (Harriet Mather) Kennard, ca. 1811. Their six children, also Gideon’s nieces and nephews, included Arabella (b. 31 July 1817), Laura (b. 21 Oct 1818), Caroline (b. 9 June 1820), George (bapt. 7 July 1822), Thomas (b. 21 Sept 1824), and Samuel (b. 25 Jan 1828). An earlier Samuel was baptized on 26 Feb 1812. SAM’s age is given as eighty-three on his death certificate, as fifty-five in the census of 1851, and as eighty-one in the census of 1871. In regarding him as older than Gideon, I am also following a genealogical memorandum in which GM identified himself as “3rd Son” (ATL).

JOSHUA MANTELL (3 Nov 1795–28 Mar 1865; DNB), surgeon of Newick and Gideon’s younger brother, never married and was permanently institutionalized from 1836 onward. A hunchback deformed from birth, he was thought unlikely to survive and remained unbaptized until 8 Sept 1811. Joshua outlived Gideon by more than twelve years. Of Gideon’s four sisters, SARAH (1779) died in infancy. MARY (Sept 1780–13 Apr 1854) wed her cousin Charles West, a London stationer, who was dead by 1833. JEMIMA (1798–unknown) married Edward Bevis, a widowed Brighton carpenter, on 4 Oct 1831. Surviving him, she then married a Mr. Fielder of London around May 1850. KEZIAH or Kezia Mantell (1800–30 May 1874), domestic servant of Bromley, never married and may have been defective. In 1800 her mother, Sarah Mantell, was ap-



*Castle Place*

9

proaching forty-five years of age. Keziah's birth year, like that of her older sister Jemima, is recorded only in the sometimes erroneous *International Genealogist's Index* (which lists Gideon's birthday as 8 Sept 1790, possibly his baptismal date). If all three are in fact baptismal dates, then Jemima may have been born in 1797 and Keziah in 1799. Keziah's death certificate gives her age as eighty-five.

GIDEON ALGERNON MANTELL (3 Feb 1790–10 Nov 1852; *DNB*), surgeon and fossil collector of Lewes, Brighton, Clapham Common, and London, married Mary Ann Woodhouse (9 July 1795–20 Oct 1869) of Maida Vale, London, on 4 May 1816. They had five children, the first of which died unnamed in 1817.

ELLEN MARIA MANTELL (30 May 1818–?1892), his oldest surviving child, was baptized on 3 Feb 1819, married the widowed publisher John William Parker (1792–1870) on 12 Feb 1848, and by him had three children, Walter, Edith, and Maud.

WALTER BALDOCK DURRANT MANTELL (11 Mar 1820–7 Sept 1895; new *DNB*), apprentice surgeon, New Zealand emigrant, naturalist, and preserver of his father's papers, married first Mary Sarah Prince (d. 1873) in 1869 and then, in 1876, Jane Hardwick (d. 1906). The widow of his son, Walter Godfrey Mantell, donated Gideon's and other family papers to the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington.

HANNAH MATILDA MANTELL (24 Nov 1822–12 Mar 1840), Gideon's younger daughter, his angelic invalid, was baptized on 1 July 1823 and died unmarried (of tuberculosis), as did

REGINALD NEVILLE MANTELL (11 Aug 1827–30 June 1857; new *DNB*), civil engineer (of cholera, in India).

*Rights of Man* (1791) Paine certainly had his British admirers, but his religiously unacceptable *Age of Reason* (1794, 1796) managed to alienate most of them. The concurrent Reign of Terror in France, moreover, turned English opinion sharply away from even the most enlightened revolutionary views. "My poor father," Gideon remembered as an adult, "suffered greatly in fortune during the war with revolutionary France for his Whig principles."<sup>5</sup>

Because of his father's strongly held unorthodox beliefs in both religion and politics – Methodist and radical Whig, respectively – it was not possible for Gideon to enter the usual public schools. After learning to read,

5. GM–BS, 14 Dec 1849 (Yale). In 1796 Thomas Mantell voted for Justice William Green, an extreme Whig candidate, for Lewes Borough (poll book). For Paine, Lee, and Lewes, see John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (Boston, 1995); Audrey Williamson, *Thomas Paine: His Life, Work, and Times* (London, 1973); David Freeman Hawke, *Paine* (New York, 1974); and the earlier recollections of Thomas "Clio" Rickman on which all accounts are based.

Cambridge University Press

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Dennis R. Dean

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Gideon Mantell and the Discovery of Dinosaurs*

memorize, and recite biblical passages at home, he began his institutional education in 1796 at a dame school in nearby Fish Street, not far from his father's shop. A year later he moved across the river Ouse to John Button's Academy, or English Grammar School, opposite Cliffe Church, attending as a day scholar through 1802. The Cliffe section of Lewes, a crowded, insalubrious mercantile suburb, immediately adjoined Cliffe Hill, an Upper Chalk exposure of the South Downs. Button himself, a prominent Baptist Dissenter and openly radical Whig, was remembered years later as "a gentleman whose political sentiments were so accordant with those of Mr. Mantell the father that he was known to be on the Government black list."

As part of the sound, contemporary education he offered (based on English language and literature rather than classical), Button emphasized grammar, rhetoric, composition, penmanship, and daily oral recitations, which his better students were then required to perform in public. Here, Gideon's earlier training at home served him particularly well. Thus, on 22 June 1797, in the Assembly Room of the Star Inn, seven-year-old Master Mantell presented "The Parting of Hector and Andromache" from some version of Homer's *Iliad*. Similarly, on 20 December 1802, the young gentlemen of Mr. Button's Academy once again entertained "a full and respectable audience" of their friends with an evening of elocution at the Star Assembly Room. Master Mantell spoke that evening of his vile treatment on an imaginary "Trip to Paris" that included a particularly repulsive dinner, probably of snails. These schoolboy exercises, Gideon's earliest successes as a public speaker, were reported and commended in the Lee family's local newspaper.<sup>6</sup>

By 1801 Gideon had likewise become an author. His first book, "Sketches by G. A. Mantell, aged eleven, for his sister Jemima," in a limited edition of two copies, featured eight colored drawings by himself of Lewes Castle, Lewes Priory, and various other local sites, with accompanying calligraphy on facing pages. Again in 1801 he wrote in rhyme to his paternal uncle, the Reverend George Mantell, a Congregationalist minister in Westbury, Wiltshire, describing a characteristically tumultuous general election at Lewes and its results. "To His Uncle," a verse epistle of fifty-six lines, then went on to describe Henry Shelley's victory fete, which included football, racing, bobbing for apples, and dancing.<sup>7</sup>

6. Benjamin Silliman remembered being told of Gideon's early Bible training (GM obituary, [AJS], ns 15 (May 1853), 150). The rest of this paragraph combines GM on himself in "Memoirs of the Mantells" and *Ramble* with *Gentleman's Magazine's* comment on Button (GM obituary, 1852 [vol. 38, p. 645]) and information from Dr. Brent. *The Sussex Weekly Advertiser; or Lewes Journal*, 19 June 1797, p. 3 (adv.); 20 Dec 1802, p. 3.

7. Gideon's copies of "Sketches," "To His Uncle," and other childhood productions are preserved at ATL. A second copy of "Sketches" is in private hands.