

## A Charmouth Tail

By Mick Cuddeford.

Chuck and Dodgy had been keen fossil collectors for all of four months, and on hearing of the vast quantities of beautiful fossils being found at Charmouth every Winter, decided to spend a few days there early in January and clean up.

And so late one evening on about the 4th of January they set off in Chuck's run-down Austin estate, armed with hammers and chisels and kitted out with sleeping bags, coffee and a calor gas double ring cooker. After six hours, several stops for coffee and nature, they arrived at Charmouth, cold, tired but very excited at the thought of what the next couple of days would bring.

•It was three in the morning, the place was deserted and on reaching the harbour it was still too dark to see even the sea let alone any fossils. 'You've got to be first' they had been told by an experienced friend, so first they would be.

"Let's get our heads down for a couple of hours" said Chuck, who had done all the driving.

"Is that all" said Dodgy, who had slept through most of the journey.

"We've got to be first" replied Chuck.

With the Austin parked facing out to sea our two chums climbed into the sack and slid into their sleeping bags, Chuck setting the alarm for six.

"Goodnight Dodgy, hope the law don't turn up and think we're a couple of pansies."

"Yawn" yawned Dodgy.

Day one.

Two minutes later the alarm went off, it was six fifteen the waves breaking over the sea wall just ten feet away, it was still pitch dark.

"Come on Dodg, it'll be light in a minute, we've got to be first".

"What's going on man" Dodgy said from the wrong end of his sleeping bag, immediately falling back to sleep.

"Come on Dodg" Chuck a little angry, shaking the Austin, standing in a puddle of something natural, pulling on wellies.

"What" said Dodgy, now in the front seat upside down, asleep, looking for his wellies.

"Come on Dodg, I've got to be first" Chuck, shouting from 200 yds down the beach in the dark.

7.30 am.

Temperature, five below zero, raining, wind keen from the North East. Dodgy arrives yawning, coughing his way through his first Marlborough of the day, Chuck having his eightieth try at lighting his tenth roll-up, sun just starting to rise somewhere over Lyme Regis. On all fours our two explorers make their way along the beach, scouring every inch for an Ichthiosaur or two foot Asteroceras. Fragments start to appear, sections of body chamber, pieces of belemnite, clay moulds; of bivalves, tin cans, plastic bags, cigarette packets, things that have been out to sea and have come back again and all sorts of absolute rubbish~

"Glad we were first" snarls Dodgy as several women appear at the other end of the beach carrying Woolworth plastic bags dressed in raincoats, and scarves tied over their heads looking like Lancashire cotton mill workers. They appear to be picking up everything, within seconds the plastic bags are half full. Dodgy and Chuck get up and make their way over to the locals.

"Good morning" says Chuck confidently, ~were paleontologists from Maidstone, how's the collection?"

morning" scowls the local "not much eer time oyer, airs .Maidstin?"

"Just outside of London," Dodgy in his best Maidstone Grammar School voice. Locals move off topping up their plastic bags.

9.30 am.

Back to the Austin for least the water is chilled. discarded condition leaning coffee and cornflakes, blast no milk, still at Dodgy picks up a half-inch Promicroceras in against the front wheel of the Austin, "Yeah man you've got to be first" Mid-day.

The tide has gone out a bit and a long-haired youth is standing up to his waist in the sea looking intently at the shingle as the waves lap against his jeans.

"Any joy mate?" Chuck from the top of the beach.

"Yes, had one or two this morning" answers long hair in a perfect Oxford accent. Chuck moves into the sea next to long hair.

'Bit nippy today" shivers Chuck.

"The water soon warms you up" replies long hair, reaching down to pick up a perfect two inch pyrite Promicroceras.

"Been here long?" he enquires, tossing the ammonite into a bag containing about twenty or more perfect specimen~.

"We were first" beams Chuck.

"Much luck?"

"Oh, had a few early on"

1.30 pm.

Back to the Austin to regroup and eat lunch,~ickly warmed up beans, dry bread, black coffee.

"They're in the sea, let's get at it"

"Yeah man" yawns Dodgy.

3.00 pm.

Bags bulging with three ammonites each our two intrepid fossilers are feeling much happier and Dodgy is wide awake.

3.15 pm~

It starts to get dark, the rain stops an~ the wind drops, the tide is definitely on the way out.

"Well I think that will do me for today"

"Yeah man" answers Dodgy now covered from head to frozen welly in Lower Liassic clay.

4.30 pm.

After a quick wash and brush up in the back of the Austin, the short ride from the harbour back into town, two hours wait for the local chippy to open, five minutes devouring yesterday's pie and chips, then thank the Lord it's suddenly 7.00 pm. and the pub opens. Our two clean-living Geologists spend the next hour or so getting into half a bottle of Pernod.

9.00 pm.

Austin and party arrive back at harbour and two drunk troopers fall into sleeping bags to dream of ammonites and ichthiosaurs and hot food and warm beds.

9.05 pm.

Chuck standing in his socks by front wheel of Austin, asleep, answering the call of nature.

Day two.

6.00 am.

Alarm goes off and somehow ends up outside of the Austin.

10.00am.

Chuck and Dodgy waken to the sound of voices and hammering. It' 5 a beautiful day the sun beaming in through the front window and the harbour full of tourists wondering what two mucky-looking blokes~are doing sleeping in a tatty locking Austin by Charmouth Harbour.

10.15 am.

After a hurried breakfast and not quite first, our fossilers find themselves heading along the beach towards Church Cliff. Several sma<sup>11</sup>

boys are breaking up pieces of rock and removing rather nice ammonites preserved in calcite.

"They're in the rock" says Chuck. Dodgy is already breaking open a piece and removing fossils. By mid-day quite a good quantity of material is in the bag and lads have covered most of the beach from Church Cliff to Golden Cap discovering the belemnite marks, how to glean ammonites from the shingle as the waves break without getting more than their wellies wet and finding material in situ in the softer clays. The only thing that is missing is some evidence of the huge calcite ammonites that Charmouth is famous for.

'Lock for dinner plate size nodules' they had been told, and then quite suddenly Dodgy spots a nodule, at least a foot across, protruding out of the cliff face only thirty feet up.

"Wish we could get at that, there could be an 'ichy' in that<sup>1</sup>"

"I '11 have a bash" says Dodgy and makes off down the beach where the cliff slopes down to beach level.

Within half an hour Dodgy is hanging precariously thirty feet up the cliff eyeing the nodule.

"3mash it out" yells Chuck standing in some mud at the foot of the cliff. Dodgy starts hammering, an hour later he's half way round the brute and things are getting exciting.

come on Dodg, there's going to be something amazing in that".

Dodgy wipes the sweat from his brow and battles on, hammering and chiseling like a man possessed, he's even awake.

"Look out Chuck I think it's moving"

Chuck moves back as the nodule starts to shift from the cliff, quite suddenly it's out and plummeting earthwards. It must be all of two feet across and half a ton in weight. SPLOSH, straight into the mud, SQUELCH, GLURP, SQUIDGE. Nodule containing something amazing disappears out of site into the mud.

3.00 pm.

Darkness comes to Charmouth - our two successful Palaeontologists are happy, tired and ready to murder pie and chips and a bottle of Pernod.

Day three.

7.00 am.

Chuck as usual standing in a frozen puddle of something next to the Austin is contemplating their last morning, "Must get cracking this morning Dodg, we'll have to get going back by mid-day"

Dodgy is still asleep, in fact he's still drunk and when he wakes up he's going to feel quite poorly and in no condition to receive bacon and eggs with fried bread, but then there is only dry cornflakes and black coffee so everything is o.k.

10.00 am.

Not much time left now, a few nice small ammonites have been found, hundreds of belemnites and one quite nice piece of vertebra. Dodgy has been looking more closely at some large pieces of fallen rock and Chuck is doing the shingle and soft clay on the beach.

At about 11.30 am. Dodgy seems very intent on a single large piece of rock about 6 x 4 x 4 ft. He hails to Chuck who recognises the sign of excitement, rushing over to find Dodgy examining a black piece of fossil that rather resembles a piece of vertebra. It's still in situ and there seems to be more-of it.

"What do you think?" says Dodgy.

"Looks good" says Chuck.

Dodgy continues to chip away carefully and gradually half a dozen vertebra are exposed and hands are getting sweaty and pulses are beginning to hasten.

"Which way do you think it's going to" Dodgy, his lips dry and hands trembling.

"Don't know Dodg, keep going, we could be here all day getting this one out."

12. 30 pm.

It's out, nearly two feet of vertebrae all in a line, just as it was shed 180 million years before, indeed part of the tail of an Ichthiosaur, possibly a whole one.

There are cries of delight, shouts of joy, two scruffy, mud covered fossilers jumping up and down and dancing around the beach. Photographs are taken and finally the specimen is wrapped in a length of towelling.

1.30 pm.

In that faithful old Austin heading East for Maidstone, Ichthiosaur riding safely on the back seat and two tired but happy fossilers heading for home." Wait till Jim sees this" smiles Dodgy. "Good job we were first" agrees Chuck., Dodgy falls asleep.

End of a Tail.