



**PROF. HUGH  
TORRENS WILL UNVEIL A PLAQUE TO THE MEMORY OF JAMES JOHNSON (1764-  
1844), FOSSIL COLLECTOR,**

**AT 12 DOWRY PARADE. HOTWELLS. BRISTOL ON 3 DECEMBER. 2015 4.30 PM**

Clifton and Hotwells Improvement Society (CHIS) has kindly agreed to erect a plaque to the memory of James Johnson (c.1764-1844) at the suggestion of Hotwells, Cliftonwood and Clifton Local History Society.

Hugh Torrens will unveil the plaque at 4.30 pm on Wednesday 3 December outside 12 Dowry Parade, Hotwells, before he gives an evening lecture about William Smith the famous map maker. This is a talk sponsored by the Friends of Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives and will be held at the Tyndall Lecture Theatre, Bristol University at 7.30 pm.

Emeritus Professor of History of Science and Technology at Keele University, Hugh Torrens has made a huge contribution towards understanding the history of geology especially the work of the fossil hunters and their collections. He champions Mary Anning and it was through this connection that a local nineteenth century fossil collector, James Johnson was identified.

### **James Johnson Fossil Collector**

Helped by his surgeon son, Dr. James Rawlins Johnson (1789-1841), James Johnson amassed a huge collection of fossils, many from Dundry and the local area but also others from further afield. Some he collected himself, others he bought. The Eight Day Sale held at 12 Dowry Parade in 1845 after Johnson's death, gives some idea of the scale of the collection. One of the stars of the sale was a huge fossil skull of an ichthyosaur discovered in Lyme Regis in 1813, which Johnson bought and had transported back to Bristol at a cost of just £20. Hugh Torrens in a paper 'A Saw for a Jaw' has recorded what is known of its fascinating story.

Bristol City Museum holds this fossil skull in the collection at Queens Road. Fortunately it escaped the World War II bombing and was last on display in the Sea Dragons Exhibition in 1989. It probably weighs a ton and is famous for its enormous eye sockets!

Johnson was also a Guardian of the Poor and the Governor from 1821-23. In 1826 he wrote an enlightening book 'Transactions of the Corporation of the Poor in the City of Bristol during a period of 126 years'.

### **12 Dowry Parade.**

James Johnson filled his Georgian home to the rafters with fossils during the first half of the nineteenth century. The house is now owned by a local family who are pleased that the house is to be 'honoured' with the plaque.

### **Thomas Austin and the Great Sale of James Johnson's fossils.**

Thomas Austin (1794-1881) was primarily a soldier but also a poet. As a knowledgeable fossil collector he was mainly interested in crinoids. He compiled the catalogue for the sale of Johnson's huge collection of fossils at 12 Dowry Parade, Hotwells. The Sale lasted eight days from 15-23 April 1845 and great museums such as the Natural History Museum were represented as well as private buyers.

Austin was known as 'Old Stick Leg' as he had a wooden one. In a biography compiled by his family, drawing on his war diaries, there is a graphic description of the amputation of what remained of his leg which was blown off by a cannon ball during the war in Holland. The operation was performed without anaesthetic. Austin managed with a wooden leg and a stick for the rest of his life and the sound of him 'tapping' his way around Clifton' was well known. He is buried in Arno's Vale cemetery and his uniform and medals were presented by his family to Bristol City Museum.

For more information please contact Sue Stops 01179397999 [suestops@aol.com](mailto:suestops@aol.com)

## **Anyone is welcome to come to the unveiling ceremony on Down Parade**

Full details of the lecture and booking for free tickets is on the Bristol City Museum web site.

NOTE The drawing of the ichthyosaur fossil on the front page was drawn by George Cumberland. The fossil, found at Watchet in 1818, was collected by William Morgan who moved to Hotwells from Bower Ashton.