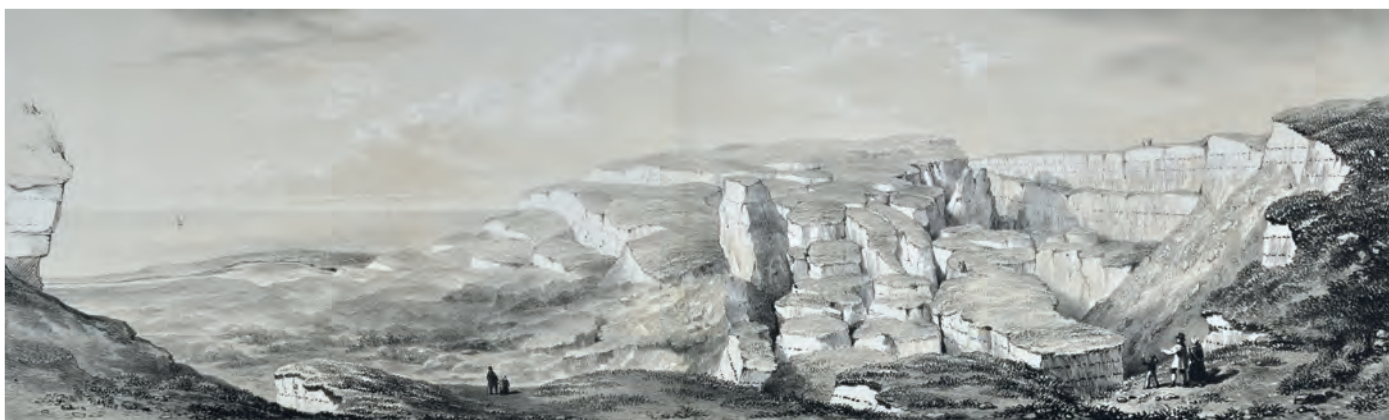


View of the Axmouth Landslip from Dowlands, looking Westward upon the Undercliff and New Beach raised from the bottom of the sea on 25 December 1839. Drawn on the spot by Mary Buckland, 30 December 1839, lithographed by George Scharf. Reproduced with permission from the Geological Society Library collection (image reference 27-25).



Cashing in on Christmas

Nina Morgan reveals how to profit from publicity

AT 1 AM on Christmas morning 1839, a labourer named Critchard found that the path below his cottage on the Dorset coastline cliffs had begun to sink, and at 4 am he heard 'a wonderful crack'. On Christmas night, massive fissures opened up along the cliff tops and huge blocks of land at Bindon, near Axmouth, along the Dorset-East Devonshire border, slid towards the sea. The deafening crashing of falling rocks was accompanied by 'flashes of fire and a strong smell of sulphur'. In all, around 50 acres of the coastline were affected, including a large section of tenant farmer James Chappell's fields.

This truly exciting geological event – examined soon afterwards by the Reverend William Daniel Conybeare [1787 – 1857], geologist and vicar of Axminster, as well as the Reverend Dr William Buckland [1784 – 1856], geologist and Reader in Mineralogy at Oxford University – not only added much to the understanding of how landslides occur, but also greatly enriched farmer Chappell's profits.

Publicity in action

Word of the landslip spread quickly through local inns and taverns, and the press was soon on the scene. In a little more than a week, the landslip had become the 19th century equivalent of nationwide news. In the best entrepreneurial tradition, Chappell quickly took advantage of the press coverage to establish his farm as a tourist destination.

The profits must have been beyond his wildest dreams. As the Lyme Regis antiquarian George Roberts reported in his 1840 publication, *Account of and Guide to the Landslip*, "Thousands on foot and in vehicles hastened to the spot..." This, in spite of the fact that in 1839, travelling from London to the landslip site at Bindon would have cost a labourer two or three weeks' wages and taken a whole day by the fastest coach. Once there, visitors were charged an admission fee of sixpence to enter the general area, and a further sixpence to enter Bindon Farm itself.

Undeterred by the expense, the tourists kept coming. A 'Grand Holyday [sic] at the Land-Slip' harvest event organised by Chappell on 25 August 1840 drew such

enormous crowds that, as Roberts reported, "hundreds could not procure refreshment". Interest in the landslip lasted well into the 20th century. In 1903, the railway between Axminster and Lyme Regis opened a station at Combyne, where the platform sign announced 'Combyne for the Landslip'.

Cashing in


These days farmers have to diversify to survive and some have taken a leaf out of Chappell's entrepreneurial book. To boost their incomes, many set up campsites, farm shops, cafés and wedding venues. Some offer farm tours and outdoor activities. Others host seasonal festivities, such as Christmas fairs. By taking advantage of modern media opportunities, such as television and social media, these offerings can attract huge numbers of tourists from hundreds of miles away. But, try as they might, none can better Chappell's unique selling point – the opportunity to see some great geology!

A happy holiday season to all. 

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