

Gideon Algernon Mantell's unpublished journal, June–November 1852

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The Mantell Family papers are a primary source for the study of early British geology and as such attract almost constant international interest. Gideon Algernon Mantell (1790–1852) was never free from the necessity of providing his own living; out of his considerable experience as a general practitioner in Lewes, Brighton, and London he contributed to the medical literature and gained a reputation in this field. It is, however, as a geologist and man of science that the discoverer of the Iguanodon is principally known. Through his publications, lectures, and the display of his collections, Gideon Mantell played a significant part in fostering the widespread popular enthusiasm for the study of Britain's fossil remains, and in laying the foundations for the systematic scientific study of them.

Although a brilliant lecturer 'filling the listening ears of his audience with seductive imagery, and leaving them in amazement with his exhaustless catalogue of wonders'¹ his 'peculiarly sensitive, not to say querulous, susceptibility to interference with his own ideas made his life none too happy'.² Colleagues and family alike suffered from his dominating personality, and his domestic relationships suffered severely. He lived apart from his wife, his elder son Walter emigrated to New Zealand, one daughter died in adolescence, the other made an unwelcome marriage, and it was with one child only, Reginald, that he maintained consistently close relations.

When Gideon Mantell died in London in November 1852 it was this son, Reginald, who resigned his job as a railway engineer in Kentucky and returned to England to supervise the dispersal of his father's estate. After the collections of natural history specimens, books, and household effects had been sold, and specific bequests to his other children and friends had been taken care of, Reginald took up employment in India, and, as residual legatee, took the balance of his father's papers with him. They in turn were sent on to Walter Mantell when Reginald died in Allahabad in 1857. In New Zealand, Walter played a prominent part in government and politics, and pursued the family interest in natural history, collecting the remains