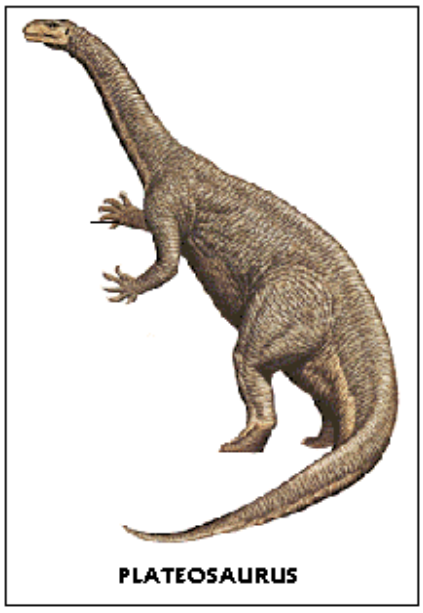
DINOSAURS FROM THE BRITISH TRIASSIC

The fifth article in the series deals with dinosaurs not from a particular area but with dinosaurs from a specific age. It was during the Triassic period that dinosaurs first evolved from earlier reptilian ancestors. There is much controversy over the exact origins of the dinosaurs and many early fossils called dinosaur may infact be reptiles.

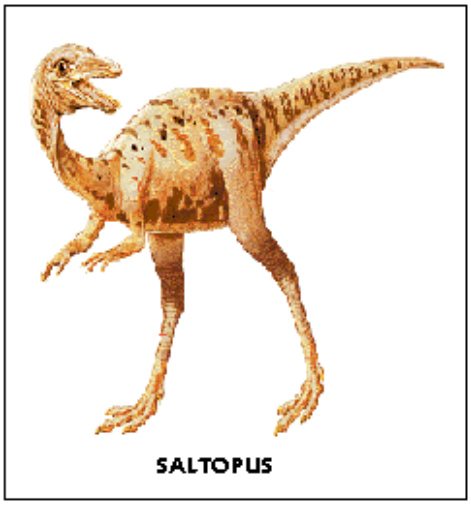
During the Triassic period Britain was in a position roughly where the Sahara desert is today, also the landmasses of the world were formed into one gigantic continent called Pangea. This gave rise to desert conditions that laid down very thick sandstone deposits. Towards the later Triassic this landmass started to break up and shallow seas started to cover Britain. In these seas, never far from land, various terrestrial vertebrate fossils, mostly of reptiles but also of true dinosaurs were deposited.

One of the best areas for finding Triassic vertebrate fossils is in the Bristol region, in the famous Rhaetic fissure deposits. Dinosaurs were just evolving at this time and the variety of types was quite limited. Meat eaters were represented by early Theropods. *Palaeosauriscus* meaning *"Old lizard ancestor"* identified from a tooth found near Bristol. was a 20ft Theropod *Picrodon* meaning *"Sharp tooth"* was a small Teratosaurid, (early Theropod) is also known only from a single tooth found in Somerset.



Plant eaters were represented by the Prosauropods which were very similar in appearance to the Theropods but with a bulkier body and longer neck. These forms were ancestral to the later Brontosaurs. *Thecodontosaurus* meaning *"socket-toothed lizard"* was a Prosauropod about 7ft long whose remains have been found in the Bristol area. *Plateosaurus* meaning *"Flat lizard"* was a Prosauropod up to 26ft long has been found in the Bristol region but is much more common from Germany. In the early 1980's a small number of bones from the back, tail, hips and a hindlimb of a dinosaur were found in Somerset. Named *Camelotia "Of Camelot"* it the only known Melanosaurid type Prosauropod) found in the northern hemisphere.

Quite nearby Bristol at Barry Island south west of Cardiff, in South Wales, are a series of sandstones that were deposited in shallow water. Within these beds footprints of reptiles and dinosaurs are quite common. No actual bones have been found in the area but from the prints a few dinosaur species have been identified. *Brontozoum* and *Coelurosaurichnus* are the names given to the makers of two distinct types of footprint. There are good displays of these footprints in the National Museum of Wales at Cardif, and at my home in Rochester!



Another area in Britain, perhaps surprisingly, provides a source of Triassic vertebrates, this is Elgin in Scotland. Most of the fossils are reptilian pre-dinosaurs, *Scleromochus* meaning *"Hard jumper"* was not a true dinosaur but a Thecodont reptile very close to their ancestry. But *Saltopus elginensis "Leaping foot"* was a 2ft long Coelurosaur. Specimens from the Middle Trassic, Lossiemouth Sandstones make it the oldest British Dinosaur. Though as always the identification as a dinosaur is disputed!

While other countries have yielded far better and more abundant fossils of the earliest dinosaurs it is nice to know that in Britain we do have this very important period of dinosaur development represented.

By Gary Woodall