

# A MONSTER OF OUR OWN

AUSTRALIA'S own "Loch Ness Monster," dug out of a NSW opal mine, is now being studied in Sydney.

The monster is a 100-million-year-old giant reptile which has been fossilised into opal.

It is worth more as a

scientific specimen than as a precious stone.

The 2.4-metre fossil skeleton is now in the Australian Museum, Sydney, encased in rock, plaster and hessian.

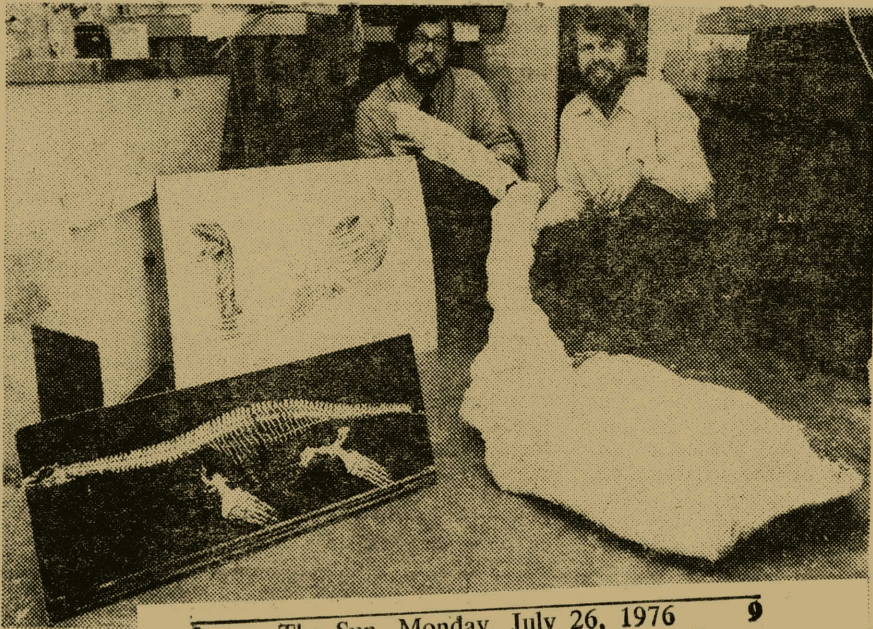
It was once a fish-eating plesiosaur that lived in the huge sea once covering Central Australia.

It was dug out of an opal mine at White Cliffs by Dr Alex Ritchie, curator of fossils at the museum, and his assistant, Mr Robert Jones.

It was originally found by opal miner Ken Harris 26ft underground.

"He did a very good job," Dr Ritchie said today.

Left: Dr Alex Ritchie, curator of Fossils at the Australian Museum and his assistant Robert Jones (right) with the reptile fossil.



The Sun, Monday, July 26, 1976

## Museum seeking opalised skeleton

The Australian Museum hopes to acquire the fossilised skeleton of a plesiosaur if its owner, a White Cliffs opal-miner, is prepared to sell.

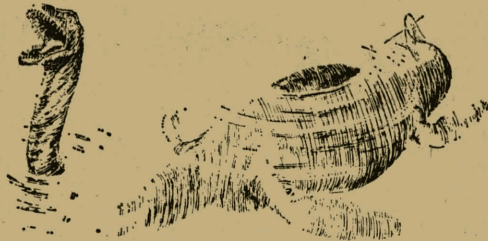
The plesiosaur, a marine reptile which swam the shallow sea which once covered much of inland Australia, is estimated by the museum's curator of fossils, Dr Alec Ritchie, to be 100 million years old.

It was discovered nearly two weeks ago by the miner, Mr Ken Harris, as he was sinking a new shaft.

He phoned Dr Ritchie who, with his assistant, spent 2½ days scraping earth and rocks away from the skeleton and encasing it in hessian and plaster for transportation to Sydney.

They have begun chipping rock from the skeleton and estimate that it will be a couple of months' work to completely uncover the frame.

But when they have finished, what will be visible is not just old bones but a skeleton of opal,



The plesiosaur as it would have looked 100-million years ago.

some of it probably precious, the rest perhaps quite worthless.

Mr Harris, 30, said yesterday that he couldn't put a price on his find.

"I saw some nice-looking colour there where the bone has been completely replaced by opal in some areas," he said.

"I had to have a pretty good look at that before I could let the museum at it."

He would like the fossil to stay in Australia but thinks he could be offered a better price overseas "and I'd have to consider that."

"Mining's only a tucker

money job and I've got four kids to feed," he said.

"They'll pay a lot of money for some bit of modern art from America, like that Blue Poles in Canberra, but they get a bit tight when it's something local."

Dr Ritchie said the plesiosaurs were "fairly common" in Europe but less so in Australia.

One had been found six years ago at Andamooka but had been sold to an American museum.

This was the first opalised one ever to have been found in Australia.



"But he didn't have the expertise to get it out of fairly soft rock without it falling apart.

"We knew what the animal looked like and where to dig to find the bits not showing."

Some of the fossil bones are of precious or semi-precious opal, others of "clear jelly" opal, and the rest non-precious potch.

Dr Ritchie said the plesiosaur looked very much like what most people imagined the Loch Ness monster looked.

The Sydney Morning Herald, Tues, July 27, 1976 3



Mr Harris packs the skeleton in plaster watched by Dr Ritchie.

The Australian Museum cannot afford to buy a rare opalised fossil discovered by a miner in western NSW.

The museum has offered \$10,000 for the fossil, a plesiosaur skeleton. But the miner, Mr Ken Harris, 32, of White Cliffs, said yesterday that it would fetch 10 times as much used as a tourist attraction at his Pepper Tree mine.

The plesiosaur, a marine reptile, lived in the shallow seas covering Australia about 100 million years ago.

Mr Harris has packed the skeleton in clay, plastic and plaster ready for the drive home within the next few days.

The skeleton was discovered on July 14. Museum experts helped to excavate and transport it to Sydney, where three weeks were spent in restoration.

Dr Alex Ritchie, the museum's curator of fos-

## Monster price too high for museum

sils, said hundreds of hours and about \$15,000 would be needed to bring it up to display standard.

The director, Dr D. J. Griffin, was disappointed but said he remained hopeful as Mr Harris had agreed the museum would retain first option to buy.

Mr Harris said: "It's still possible I will sell. I will give it a trial display for a year and reconsider my position.

"Until then it will be a boost for the town and a boost for myself."