



*Women* in science- Mary Leakey

## Who was Mary Leakey?



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*Mary Leakey was a British expert in ancient human fossils. She was one of the most important researchers in human evolution, and found the first examples of several extinct species that were human ancestors (Proconsul, an ape, Australopithecus boisei, an small early human who walked on two legs, and Homo habilis, one of the first tool-making human ancestors).*

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## Early Years

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*Mary Nicol was born on the 6th of February 1913 in London. Her father was a painter and painted landscapes so this meant that Mary went to a lot of different places when she was young. Throughout Mary's early years, the family spent much of their time in the south of France.*

*As a child she had a very adventurous spirit which was like her father. Her interest in prehistory started at the age of 12 when she was allowed to explore the finds from a cave in France at Les Eyzies. This was where she started her collection of stone tools. At the age of thirteen she moved back to London after the death of her father and had no real interest in anything other than drawing and archaeology.*

*At the age of seventeen Mary worked on her first archaeological excavation as an illustrator, and then did the drawings for a book on stone tools from Egypt. After this she worked on illustrations from the human fossil site Olduvai Gorge.*

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## Her Journey into Science



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*Mary spent 24 years in northern Tanzania, she was accompanied by her Husband (Louis Leakey) and their family and this is where she made some of her best known discoveries. During this time she discovered many different stone tools, aged between 100,000 and two million years old.*

*On various digs during 1970s and early 1980s she found fossil bones from extinct species including human ancestors. Maybe her most amazing find was the footprints of a group of australopithecines, a type of early human ancestor, preserved in soft ash from a volcanic eruption.*

*Although her most famous discovery was the first fossilised Proconsul skull, an extinct ape which is now believed to be ancestral to humans. She also discovered the robust Zinjanthropus skull at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania, eastern Africa.*

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## Mary Leakey - Changing the World



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*Mary Leakey revolutionised our understanding of how humans and primates evolved. She spent decades uncovered ancestral hominids in East Africa. Among any others achievements, she was essential in creating the field of modern paleoanthropology. Sadly Mary passed away in 1996 but her legacy still lives on because of the Leakey foundation which increases scientific knowledge, education, and public understanding of human origins, evolution, behaviour, and survival.*

*In the words of Mary Leakey "Basically, I have been compelled by curiosity".*

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*1 - Animated Life*