If reports are to go by, scientists have uncovered what they believe to be the world's oldest fossilised forest in cliffs on the coast of South West England. Discovered in high sandstone cliffs near Minehead, Somerset, close to a Butlin's holiday camp, researchers from Cambridge and Cardiff Universities assert that these are the oldest fossilised trees ever found in Britain and the oldest known forest on Earth.

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The trees, known as calamophyton, resemble palm trees and were early prototypes that stood between two and four meters tall. Researchers discovered fossils of these plants, along with their debris, fossilized tree logs, and root traces. These fossils reveal how early trees played a crucial role in shaping landscapes and stabilizing riverbanks and coastlines hundreds of millions of years ago.

"When I first saw pictures of the tree trunks, I immediately knew what they were, based on 30 years of studying this type of tree worldwide," said Dr. Christopher Berry from Cardiff's School of Earth and Environmental Sciences. "It was amazing to see them so close to home. But the most revealing insight comes from seeing, for the first time, these trees in the positions where they grew."

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Dr. Paul Kenrick, an expert on plant fossils at the Natural History Museum who was not involved in the study, emphasised the significance of these clues about how plants grew together at that time.

The fossil forest is estimated to be around four million years older than the previous record holder found in New York State. Located in the Hangman Sandstone Formation along the Devon and Somerset coasts, the fossil forest dates back to the Devonian Period, between 419 and 358 million years ago. This period is named after Devon because of the marine rocks emblematic of the era found off its coast.

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At the time of its existence, the area of the fossil forest was a semi-arid plain, attached not to England but to parts of Germany and Belgium, where similar fossils have been found. "This was a pretty weird forest - not like any forest you would see today," said Prof. Neil Davies from Cambridge's Department of Earth Sciences, the study's first author. "There wasn't any undergrowth to speak of and grass hadn't yet appeared, but there were lots of twigs dropped by these densely-packed trees, which had a big effect on the landscape."

Dr. Kenrick noted that these trees were very different from any known today. The most similar modern counterpart might be Dicksonia antarctica, a type of tree fern native to Australasia but popular in Britain as an ornamental plant.