Per Erik Ahlberg was born in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1963 but moved to Britain with his parents in 1977. He studied Zoology at the University of Cambridge 1982-85 and stayed on to do a PhD on fossil lobe-finned fishes under the supervision of Dr (now Prof.) Jennifer A. Clack, 1985-89. From 1989 to 1994 he was Departmental Lecturer in vertebrate biology at the Department of Zoology, University of Oxford, then from 1994 to 2003 Researcher in Palaeontology at the Natural History Museum, London. In 2003 he returned to Sweden to take up a newly created position as Professor of Evolutionary Organismal Biology at Uppsala University. He was elected to the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences in 2012.

Per Ahlberg's research focuses on the early evolution of vertebrates, from the origin of jawed vertebrates up to the conquest of the land. He combines the study of fossils from the Silurian and Devonian periods (approximately 430 to 360 million years old) with comparative genomics and developmental biology in order to build up a coherent picture of vertebrate evolution bridging the realms of morphology and molecules.

The Origin and Early Evolution of Vertebrates: From Jawless Wonders to the Conquest of the Land

Vertebrates or backboned animals first appeared more than 500 million years ago, as one of the animal groups emerging out of the so-called Cambrian explosion. The earliest vertebrates were small, fish-like, soft-bodied, jawless, marine filter feeders, but during the next 100 million years they evolved a wide array of new anatomical structures, including jaws, teeth, a bony skeleton and paired fins, as well as new tissues such as bone and dentine. They became diverse and ecologically important, some remaining small while others evolved into giant predators. About 395 million years ago one group of vertebrates began to move onto land and became the ultimate ancestors of all living land vertebrates including ourselves. I will present an overview of this remarkable story, showing how recent discoveries are radically changing our understanding of the early history of vertebrates and the origins of the extant vertebrate groups.

Website:
http://www.iob.uu.se/research/evolution-and-development/ahlberg-group/