

# BRIXHAM



Brixham Trawlers 1868

## The Mother of Trawling

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**Brixham about 1850**

Although Brixham folk have harvested the sea for centuries, the town really came to the fore as a major fishing port after Europe was plunged into war by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1793. Whilst their continental competitors went into decline during the conflict, Brixham fishermen, nicknamed 'Brickies', prospered in British waters protected by Royal Navy ships based in Torbay. By 1850, Brixham was established as the largest fishery in England with 270 vessels employing 1600 seamen and utilising the crafts of local shipbuilders, sailmakers and ropemakers. Lower Brixham was now firmly geared to the fishing industry in contrast to Higher Brixham which remained largely agricultural. The rival districts were known as 'Fish Town' and 'Cow Town'!

Putting to sea in fishing vessels called 'smacks', Brickies perfected the 'trawl' - a method of dragging the sea-bed with their nets which enabled them to catch deep-lying fish. By 1845, local skippers were venturing along the East Coast of England, trawling an area known as the 'Great Silver Pits' where they dis-

covered fantastic quantities of sole and plaice. Their catches were landed at nearby Hull and Grimsby providing a great boost to the economy of the Humberside towns. Before the brave men of Brixham plundered their habitat, it was said that the fish of the North Sea lived to a ripe old age! (Brixham Heritage Museum have models of trawlers on display)

Brixham continued to thrive following the arrival of the railroad in 1868 and although the industry now faces an uncertain future, caused by many factors including increased foreign competition and government restrictions to protect dwindling fish stocks, the town will always be acknowledged as 'The Mother of Trawling'.

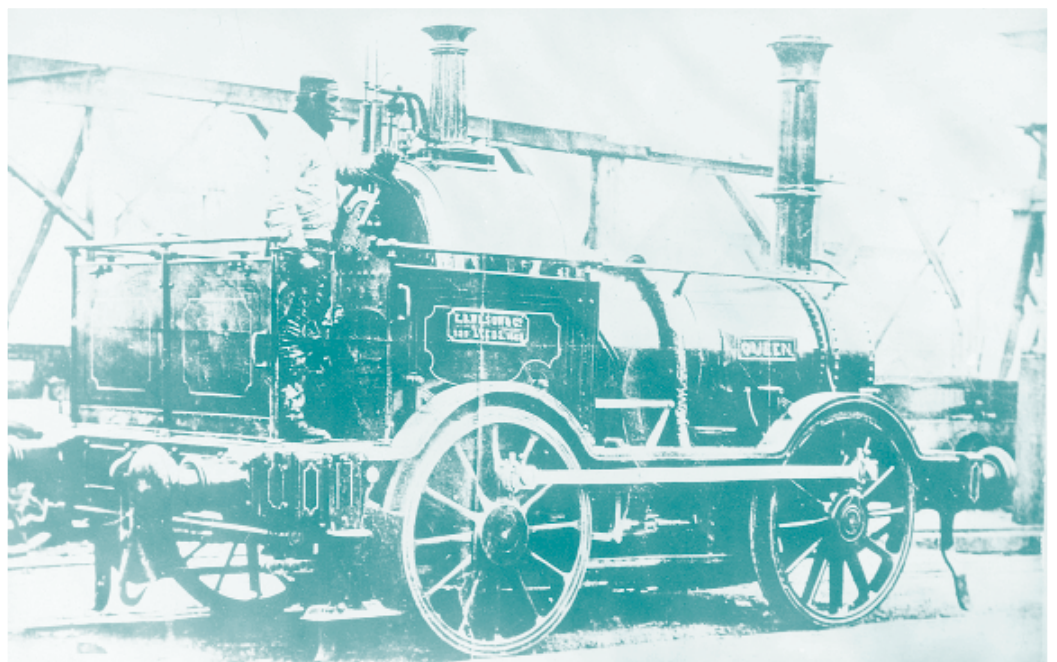


## RICHARD WALTER WOLSTON (1799 - 1883)

'It is seldom we record an act of public munificence of the scale it will be commemorated in Brixham tomorrow - a branch railway carried out entirely by the the enterprise of a private citizen for the benefit of the town, without we fear, the least expectation of pecuniary profit'. This tribute to Brixham solicitor Richard Wolston was published in the *Torquay Directory* before the official opening of the Torbay and Brixham Railway on New Years Day 1868. With an average catch of 150 tons landed at Brixham each week, transportation to markets was a major problem. To reach London, it took three days to carry the fish overland on horse-drawn vehicles. In 1864, the railroad bypassed Brixham, stopping at Churston on the line between Paignton and Kingswear. Although the nearest station was now only two miles away, Wolston was determined that his town should have its own railway, but attracted little support when he called for 7,000 people to subscribe £2 each to raise the capital required to complete the rail-link. Undeterred, he funded the enterprise himself, including the purchase of a steam engine called 'Queen'. By 1877, the new line was moving over 2,000 tons of fish a year, but Wolston was driven into bank-

ruptcy by the South Devon Railway Company who overcharged for the provision of staff and rolling stock whilst managing the line as his agents. In the year Wolston died in poverty, the famous Great Western Railway took over the railway he had founded. (The line was closed in 1963, but a working model of the station can be seen at Brixham Heritage Museum).

During his lifetime, Wolston had pursued many other business interests in the area. As well as serving as clerk to Brixham market and the harbour commissioners, he was also Portuguese Vice-Consul, overseeing the wine trade between Dartmouth and Oporto. When iron ore was discovered on his land on Furzesham Common in 1841, Wolston founded the Torbay Paint Company, which used the iron to produce a rust free paint. In 1867, it was chosen by engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel to coat the Royal Albert Bridge, built to carry the railroad across the River Tamar between Plymouth and Saltash.



The Steam Engine Queen

# BRIXHAM - NINETEENTH CENTURY MILESTONES

- 1801 The Census reveals that Brixham is the largest town in Torbay with a population of 3,500, whilst Paignton has only 1,575 and Torquay a mere 838.
- 1809 Berry Head House (now the Berry Head Hotel) is built as a military hospital to care for casualties from the Napoleonic Wars.
- 1847 Reverend Henry Francis Lyte dies abroad shortly after writing the words of "Abide With Me" at Berry Head House. The hymn became soccer's first anthem and since 1927 has been sung before every FA Cup final.
- 1850 The Coastguard is established on Queens Bay responsible for Customs work. A year later they discover a haul of tobacco hidden in a smugglers cave.
- 1858 A prehistoric cavern discovered at Windmill Hill is excavated by William Pengelly, founder of Torquay Natural History Society.
- 1863 Brixham Seaman's Home is opened by William Gibb. The orphanage continued as a boys' home until it closed in 1989.
- 1866 A cyclone known as "The Great Gale" destroys 60 out of 94 ships anchored in Torbay, resulting in the loss of almost 100 lives.
- 1867 The Royal National Lifeboat Institution launch Brixham's first lifeboat. It is named 'The City of Exeter' in honour of the people of that city who made a huge donation towards the cost.
- 1889 A statue of William of Orange is unveiled to commemorate his arrival at Brixham in 1688. The Dutch nobleman was crowned William III of England.
- 1897 Victoria Embankment (The Strand) is opened to coincide with Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee (a celebration of her 60 year reign).

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

For more about the history of Torbay - visit the Local History Collection at Torquay Central Library. The following selection of material is available at all branches of Torbay Library Services:

Francis Frith's Torbay - John Bainbridge (1999)

Book of Brixham - Frank Pearce (2000)

Brixham - John R. Pike (Torbay's Heritage series 1993)

A Short History of Brixham - John Horsley (1988)

Visit the Torbay Council website ([www.torbay.gov.uk](http://www.torbay.gov.uk)) for the following subjects:

History of Torbay/Torbay's Heritage/People and Places/Famous People. The site also

contains opening times, news of forthcoming events and general information about the following historic buildings and museums which are all well worth a visit:

Torre Abbey Historic House & Gallery, King's Drive, Torquay. Tel: 01803 293593

Torbay Museum, 529 Babbacombe Road, Torquay. Tel: 01803 293975

Oldway Mansion, Torquay Road, Paignton. Tel: 01803 201201

Brixham Heritage Museum, Bolton Cross, Brixham. Tel: 01803 856267



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