

History of  
TORBAY ROYAL REGATTA  
1813 - 2013  
& ROYAL TORBAY YACHT  
CLUB 1863 - 2013



*The Red Arrows during the Regatta display 2012*

*Photo courtesy of Derek Harper*



## History of Torbay Royal Regatta

The Torbay Royal Regatta originated when an advertisement appeared in Trewman's Exeter Flying Post offering 'Two handsome silver cups and other prizes' to be 'sailed for' by 'gentleman's boats' and 'other boats'. Although this maritime event, that took place on 24 August 1813, was not the first time that craft had raced for prizes in Torquay, it was the first time that a class distinction had been made between local tradesmen - 'others' - and the growing number of 'gentlemen' and their families popularising the resort as they were unable to holiday on the Continent during the Napoleonic Wars.

The term 'regatta' was not applied to the races until 1828, when the Duchess of Clarence (later Queen Adelaide, wife of William IV) attended what was by now a fashionable event. Five years later, Princess Victoria visited the regatta and showed great interest in the sailing trophies. In 1839, a year after Victoria's coronation, the new queen consented to a petition from the regatta committee, reminding her 'of the kind sentiments expressed by your Majesty towards us on the occasion of your Majesty's visit to Torquay in the year 1833' and 'humbly' requesting 'to allow your Majesty's Royal Patronage to be extended to the Regatta of this place' that would greatly benefit the 'maritime and general prosperity of Torquay'.

The Torbay Royal Regatta was the first yachting regatta in the country to gain

royal patronage and, as well as organising top class sailing races, the event has variously catered for other sports including: motor boat racing, rowing, running, water-skiing, swimming and diving. In 1847, Trewman's Exeter Flying Post commented that the regatta attracted people who 'enjoy the donkey racing rather than the yacht racing'. In this respect, the organising committee have always provided a range of social and recreational facilities for 'landlubbers' with a grand ball (since 1813) firework displays (since 1836), funfairs (since 1841) and aerobatic displays by the Red Arrows (since 1988). The tradition of the regatta is as old as the town itself and, apart from enforced breaks in wartime, the event has continued to flourish and grow in stature for 200 years.

## History of Royal Torbay Yacht Club

Since the Napoleonic Wars, leisure sailors have been competing in yacht races held in Torbay. However, the annual regatta had been running for 50 years, before a formal body was organised that would eventually take over the running of local maritime affairs. On 19th August 1863, twenty-three gentlemen, under the chairmanship of Sir Lawrence Palk, (Lord of the Manor) founded the Torbay and South Devon Club, initially for social rather than sailing purposes, then purchased premises on Beacon Hill (now the home of RTYC). The Torquay Yacht Club, with Sir Lawrence Palk as Commodore, was formed in 1875



and immediately obtained a warrant from Queen Victoria to become the Royal Torquay Yacht Club. This name was amended to the present-day Royal Torbay Yacht Club following a merger of the yacht club with the Torbay and South Devon Club in 1885. Ten years later, in 1895, the Torquay Corinthian Sailing Club was formed when Captain W.A. Dixon, Bill Prideax and Bill Giles met over a glass of beer. Originally a club for owners of small dinghies, it was affectionately nicknamed 'The Inner Harbour Mud Club'. The new sailing club did not obtain their own premises until one was built on Haldon Pier in 1938. Now known as Torbay Corinthian Yacht Club, membership soared from 85 to 450 by the time it celebrated its Diamond Jubilee in 1955. Six years later, an agreement was reached for Torquay Corinthian Yacht Club to be absorbed into the Royal Torbay Yacht

Club. When the Royal Torbay Yacht Club celebrated its centenary in 1963, indicator trials were held during the regatta, resulting in the selection of club crew Martin Parry, Peter Reade and Colin Harris, who subsequently finished fourth in the International Dragon class at the Tokyo Olympic Games in 1964. At the 1948 Olympic Games, the sailing events were held in Torbay with the yacht club contributing towards the expenses and hosting a cocktail party for officials and competitors. Royal Torbay Yacht Club held its first regatta, distinct from Torbay Royal Regatta, 125 years ago in 1887 and also reaches another proud milestone in 2013 with a welcome message for members old and new in their special anniversary brochure: 'The RTYC, is not just a yacht club, it is a way of life for those who enjoy the sea and great company! And it continues to be so after 150 Years'.



*Torquay Regatta Fair, 1922*

*Rides and amusements were first set up by the harbour in 1841, when Trewwan's Exeter Flying Post reported that 'The Strand appeared as a Fair, with many booths and a show of wild beasts, swings and roundabouts'. Following complaints from local traders the fair was relocated to Torre Abbey Meadow in 1975. Hancocks Fair were regular visitors to the regatta for many years. Now 'all the fun of the fair' is provided by Anderton & Rowland. Owned by the DeVey family, they celebrated 150 years of their history with a special event held during regatta week in 2004.*

## Kings of the Regatta

When Queen Victoria died in 1901, her son the Prince of Wales succeeded as King Edward VII, and was 'graciously pleased' to comply with a request from the yacht club to continue to be styled the Royal Torbay Yacht Club. The king's association with the Torbay Royal Regatta began in the 1870s when he raced his yacht *Florinda*. In 1893, a new royal yacht, *Britannia*, won first prize and continued to appear regularly at the local regatta, raced by a professional crew on behalf of either Edward VII or his son George V. The death of the latter in 1936, marked the end of a

golden age of racing when eight 'Big Class' yachts including *Britannia* and *Astra* (built for Sir Mortimer Singer, whose family owned Oldway Mansion) competed in handicap races against the newly-designed J-Class yachts (weighing up to 200 tons with masts measuring up to 160 feet high). Racing at a series of regattas around the British Isles, including Babbacombe, Brixham, Dartmouth, Paignton and Torbay, the yachts competed for the honour of being chosen to compete across the Atlantic in the America's Cup. Owned by an exclusive club of yachting millionaires, only ten of these amazing



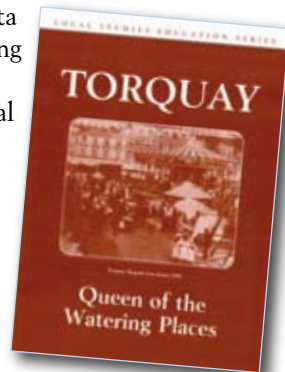
Tommy Sopwith at the helm of Endeavour, Torbay 1934



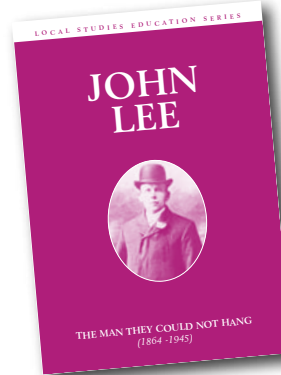
craft were built, six in America and four in Britain. The only US-built J-Class yacht to sail in home waters was Yankee when she was bought by Listerine mouthwash tycoon, Gerald Lambert, joining Shamrock V (owner, grocery chain boss, Sir Thomas Lipton), Valsheda (owner, Woolworth stores chairman WL Stephenson), Endeavor & Endeavor II. (owner, aircraft manufacturer Tommy Sopwith). Known as 'The Sailor King', George V, left instructions for Britannia to be scuttled following his death and, as a mark of respect to the late sovereign, J-class racing was abandoned and an International Coronation Regatta held in Torbay to commemorate the crowning of King George VI in 1937.

## Yachting Yarns

Torbay's first regatta was organised during Britain's war with France when a naval fleet anchored in Torbay. Following his defeat at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte was held prisoner on a battleship in Torbay before sailing to exile in St Helena. Hordes of people hired small boats to take a closer look at the resort's first major tourist attraction and one local entrepreneur jokingly offered to take the fallen emperor off the navy's



hands and exhibit him in a cage. Read more in free leaflet available from Torbay Libraries: *Torquay Queen of the Watering Places*.

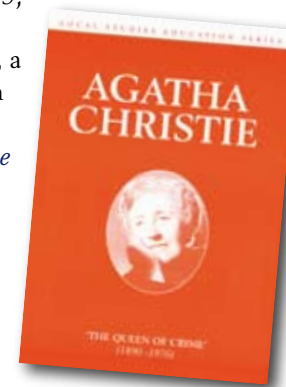


When Princess Victoria attended the regatta with her mother the Duchess of Kent in 1833, they visited the home of Elizabeth Whitehead and her daughter Emma Keyse.

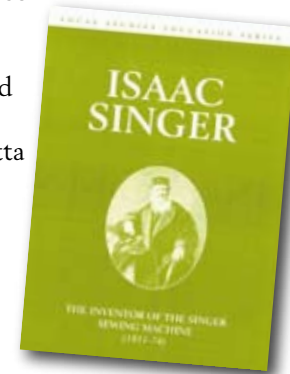
In the same house on Babbacombe Beach, Miss Keyse was murdered by John Lee in 1884. 'Babbacombe' Lee claimed God had saved an innocent man when he survived three attempts to execute him and he became infamous as 'The Man They Could Not Hang'. Read more in free leaflet available from Torbay Libraries: *John Lee, The Man They Could Not Hang*.

Agatha Christie's father was a member of the RTYC. In Edwardian times, the clubhouse overlooked, what was then a ladies-only beach at Beacon Cove. Once, when Agatha was swimming in the cove, she was saved from drowning by a boatman. In 1939, she wrote *The Regatta Mystery*, a short story set in Dartmouth.

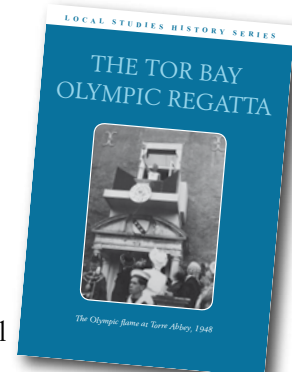
Read more in free leaflet available from Torbay Libraries: *Agatha Christie, The Queen of Crime*.



Sir Mortimer Singer, son of sewing machine millionaire Isaac Singer, lived in Warren Road, Torquay at Astra House, and also named a new racing yacht Astra in 1928. The yachting world was stunned a year later, when Sir Mortimer took a drug overdose and committed suicide. His yacht Astra was later sold and continued to appear at the regatta. Read more in free leaflet available from Torbay Libraries: *Isaac Singer, Inventor of the Singer Sewing Machine*.



On the organising committee of the 1948 Olympic Games sailing events was Peter Scott (son of Antarctic explorer Robert Falcon Scott). An Olympic sailing bronze medallist in 1936, Peter Scott later presented nature programmes on television, founded the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust and was awarded a knighthood for his conservation work. His love of sailing continued and in 1964, he skippered the yacht Sovereign in an unsuccessful bid to win the America's Cup. Read more in Torbay Libraries free leaflet: *The Tor Bay Olympic Regatta*.



*Torbay Royal Regatta Bicentenary Committee*

**Back row, left to right:** Captain Mowatt ( Torquay Harbourmaster); Debbie Selley (Regatta Secretary); Paul Green (Water Ski-ing) **Front row, left to right:** Richard Cudmore ( Torquay Rowing Club); David Selley (Chairman of Torbay Royal Regatta); Greg Fine (Torbay Athletic Club)

## Further information

Torbay Royal Regatta website:  
[www.torbayroyalregatta.co.uk](http://www.torbayroyalregatta.co.uk)

Royal Torbay Yacht Club website:  
[www.rtyc.org](http://www.rtyc.org)

Torbay Civic Society website:  
[www.torbaycivicsociety.co.uk](http://www.torbaycivicsociety.co.uk)

J-Class Yachts website: [www.jclassyachts.com](http://www.jclassyachts.com)

Caught in the Web - Bytes of Torbay's Past: [www.torbytes.co.uk](http://www.torbytes.co.uk)

Find out more about Torbay's history at: <http://www.torbay.gov.uk/libraries/reference>



**Torre Abbey, TQ2 5JE** Contact 01803 293593  
[www.torre-abbey.org.uk](http://www.torre-abbey.org.uk)

**Torquay Museum, TQ1 1HG** Contact: 01803 293975  
[www.torquaymuseum.org](http://www.torquaymuseum.org)

**Brixham Heritage Museum, TQ5 8LZ** Contact: 01803 856267  
[www.brixhamheritage.org.uk](http://www.brixhamheritage.org.uk)

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or go straight to the library catalogue at: <https://libraries.torbay.gov.uk/>  
Text written and compiled by Mike Holgate.



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