

LOCAL STUDIES EDUCATION SERIES

CHAPEL HILL



TORQUAY'S ENIGMATIC RUIN

The enigmatic building atop a rocky promontory overlooking Torbay has fascinated locals and visitors alike for centuries. Although known as St Michael's Chapel, there is no certainty as to who built it or why. It has even been suggested it is not a chapel at all, but merely an early lighthouse or maritime marker. The date it was constructed has also been subject to much debate over the years. Given its mysterious nature, it comes as no surprise that many stories have grown up around it.

Myth & Legend

One of the most enduring folk tales about the landmark inevitably involves a ghost and a beautiful maiden. The story is related in the 1850 book *Legends of Torquay* and is repeated in Arthur Charles Ellis' *Historical Survey of Torquay* in 1930.

The tale tells of one night when a terrible storm raged while the white-robed canons of Torre Abbey were praying. Suddenly, a man rushed in to announce that a ship was drifting on to Abbey Sands. The canons hurried to the beach to find a huge sailing vessel illuminated by lightning flashes. Tragically, though beacons were lit, the ship sank with all the crew being lost, except for one man who was carried to the Abbey and nursed back to full health. In thanks for his life being saved he decided to devote his remaining days to the service of God. He then built a

little chapel on the hill where he could see the spot where his ship went down. There he lived the rest of his life as a hermit and he could be heard praying for the safety of those at sea whenever storms raged in the Bay.

The tale goes on to recount events three hundred years after the shipwrecked mariner supposedly built the chapel as an act of piety. In this story, a young man fell asleep within the building and dreamed that he met a hermit in the now brilliantly illuminated chapel. The hermit prophesied that one day the young man would have cause to be grateful to the builder of the chapel. The young man then awoke.

Time passed and the man, now grown to adulthood, fell in love with a girl by the name of Rosalind. The couple often discussed the strange dream when they visited the chapel. Soon the man needed to travel across the sea and Rosalind promised to visit the chapel on every anniversary of his departure.



A Torre Abbey canon



And although, after a 3 year absence, her lover still had not returned, Rosalind kept her pledge. On one journey, made late at night during a terrible storm, she reached the summit to find a light burning. She was greeted by a hermit who told her that her true love was at that moment aboard an imperilled ship in the Bay battling the elements.

Together they made their way to the beach and found an apparently lifeless body in the shallow waters. They dragged the man to safety and Rosalind promptly fainted when she recognised the man as her long-lost love. However, on waking she was greeted by the sight of him, now miraculously recovered.

The hermit then delivered a lengthy address which included the words: "Not always am I permitted to visit earth, in my earthly form, but for some good end or wise design."

The hermit then disappeared.

Archaeology of Chapel Hill

Setting aside the myths, legends and stories surrounding Chapel Hill, what can modern archaeology and historical analysis tell us about the site?

The chapel building is medieval in character, but has been stripped of almost all embellishment which might help in dating it more accurately. In terms of historical evidence, no documents have been found relating to the chapel building going back beyond the 18th century. Suggestions it was built by the nearby Torre Abbey are therefore not supported.

While there have been theories that the structure on Chapel Hill might actually have been built as a maritime marker or lighthouse, the consensus among historians and archaeologists is that St Michael's was built as a chapel, although it was at some distance from any significant population centre and

unlikely to have been used as a regular place of worship. The uneven surface within the chapel, which appears never to have been covered by a suspended floor, indicates that it is unlikely that the chapel ever served a congregation, and is perhaps the most significant clue regarding the remote location of the chapel. Could it be that a significant religious revelation or ‘vision’ took place at this location and the chapel was built to protect this important point in the landscape? Nicholas Orme, professor of history at Exeter University, has noted that: “many [chapels] occupied picturesque places in the landscape: hills, caves, woods, springs and islands and that in doing this their builders represented a wish to Christianise such [pagan] places.” He has also pointed out that hill chapels were frequently dedicated to St Michael, though the earliest historical references refer to this particular chapel as St Mary’s.

This leaflet was produced in collaboration with Torquay Library Local History Group, with particular thanks to Kevin Dixon. If you are interested in joining the group, please speak to a member of staff.



Further research on local history

Torre Abbey, TQ2 5JE

01803 293593

Since its foundation in 1196, Torre Abbey has witnessed, survived and even played a role in some epic moments of history. It hosts a permanent art collection, Learning Lab and interactive exhibits telling the entire history of the abbey.

www.torre-abbey.org.uk

Brixham Heritage Museum, TQ5 8LZ

01803 856267

The Museum records, preserves and promotes the story of historic Brixham and its people with a host of exhibits, education programmes and archive resources.

www.brixhamheritage.org.uk

Torquay Museum, TQ1 1HG

01803 293975

Find out about local wildlife, famous people and Torquay through the ages. The museum houses a variety of temporary exhibitions throughout the year. The Agatha Christie Memorial Room documents the history behind the famous crime writer.

www.torquaymuseum.org

Torbay Civic Society

The Society promotes public consciousness and appreciation of the beauty, history and character of Torbay and its surroundings and is responsible for installing the blue plaques in our area.

www.torbaycivicsociety.co.uk

