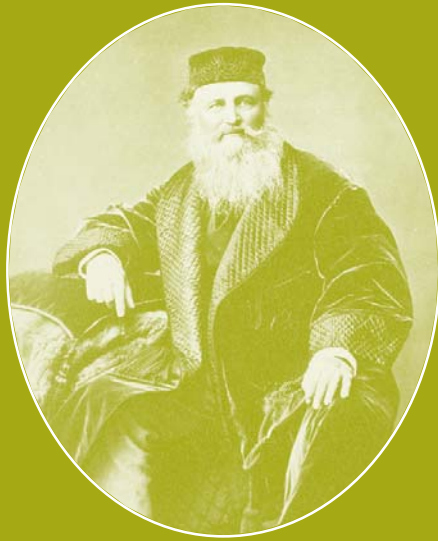


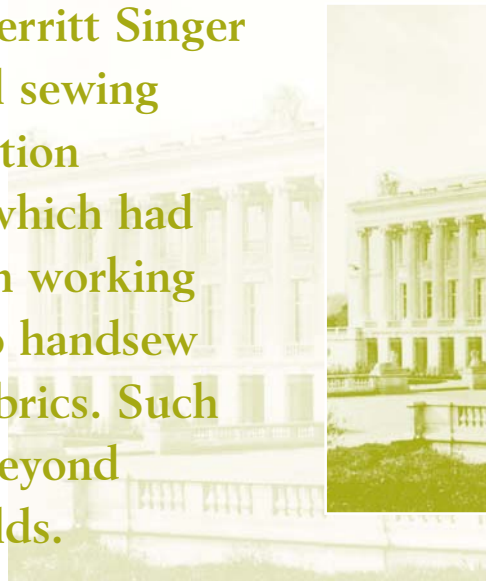
LOCAL STUDIES EDUCATION SERIES

# ISAAC SINGER



THE INVENTOR OF THE SINGER  
SEWING MACHINE  
*(1811-75)*

American engineer Isaac Merritt Singer developed the first practical sewing machine in 1851. His invention revolutionised an industry which had previously employed women working in 'sweatshop' conditions to handsew garments and household fabrics. Such items were expensive and beyond the means of poor households.



# ISAAC SINGER

## THE INVENTOR OF THE SINGER SEWING MACHINE

In an age when there were no domestic devices such as washing machines and vacuum cleaners, it was the housewife who made clothes, curtains, tablecloths and bedding for their families. A Singer sewing machine was affordable for the home and meant that women no longer had to endure laborious hand sewing chores.

Born in the State of New York, Isaac left home at the age of twelve. During the next ten years he had a variety of jobs, got married and had two children. He then pursued his dream to become an actor and toured America with a theatre company. When the work dried up he was forced to take a job as a labourer digging a canal. It was then that he discovered his

real talent when he invented the first mechanical excavator. He sold his idea to fund a return to the stage, but his venture as an actor-manager ended with huge debts and he began a full-time career as an inventor. He made his fortune by greatly improving the performance of existing sewing machines and introducing hire purchase agreements, which allowed people to buy goods from his company by a method of easy instalments.

Singer had a tangled love-life. He left his family and lived with another woman for twenty-five years before divorcing his wife. This relationship produced ten children. During this period he also had a string of affairs with other women resulting in a further six children. He

## OLDWAY MANSION

“Build me a big wig-wam” were the instructions given to Paignton architect George Soudon Bridgeman by Isaac Singer. Singer had bought the Fernham Estate, with two villas and several cottages, but required a grand mansion to house his family.

Mrs Singer laid the foundation stone for the mansion on 10 May 1873. Her eldest son, Mortimer, placed a bottle in a cavity in the stone containing English, French and American coins, copies of local newspapers and photographs of those who took part in the ceremony. His sister, Winnaretta, then covered the stone with a brass plate recording the proceedings. Dinner was provided for the 140 workmen who took two years to construct the building. The Singer family moved in as soon as the mansion was habitable, although Isaac died two months before the completion of his dream home, which was later considerably altered by his son Paris in the style of the French Palace of Versailles.

After World War One, the Singer family used Oldway only as a holiday home and in 1927 the house became the home of the Torbay Country Club. At the end of the Second World War, Paignton Council purchased the Oldway Estate for £46,000 for use as local government offices. Lady Leeds, granddaughter of Isaac Merritt Singer, performed the official opening on 18 December 1946. Oldway Mansion now also provides an elegant setting for civil marriages, though the first wedding to take place there occurred in July 1875 when one of Isaac Singer’s daughters got married just nine days before her father’s death.



# GER INE (1811-75)

assaulted his live-in lover during an argument about one of these other women and he fled the country to avoid arrest. Isaac went to France where he met, married and had six children by Isabella Boyer. This proved to be a lasting relationship and when the Prussians invaded France in 1870, the Singers moved to England and built Oldway Mansion at Paignton. According to Isaac this was the happiest period of his life, which ended on 23 July 1875. In his Will he left a vast fortune estimated at £15 million - accumulated by the famous “Inventor of the Singer Sewing Machine”.

# DID YOU KNOW?

Isaac Singer 's birth sign was Scorpio. He was born in America on 27 October 1811.

Isaac's ambition was to become a Shakespearian actor.

His wife, Isabella, modelled for the sculpture of the Statue of Liberty.

Before settling in Paignton, Singer tried to buy land at Watcombe once owned by railway engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel.

When a circus visited Paignton, the Singers bought tickets for local children.

To celebrate the wedding of his daughter, Singer paid for 800 children to have a party at their schools.

Oldway Mansion was used as an emergency hospital for wounded soldiers during the First World War. In the Second World War it was used by the Royal Air Force.

Following Isaac's death, his son Paris completed the building of Oldway based on the style of the Palace of Versailles in Paris - the city of his birth.

Paris Singer had a long affair with famous American dancer Isadora Duncan who died tragically in 1927. She was a passenger in an open-top car when her long flowing scarf got caught in the rear wheel and tightened around her neck.

Scenes for the 1968 film Isadora starring Vanessa Redgrave were shot at Oldway.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Books about the life of Isaac Singer available from Torbay Library Services include:

Singer and the Sewing Machine - Ruth Brandon (1977)

Stories of Oldway - Joyce Packe (1988)

The Singer Saga - Charles Eastley (1983)

For more about the history of Torbay - visit the Local History Collection at Torquay Central Library or view the Torbay Council website ([www.torbay.gov.uk](http://www.torbay.gov.uk)) for information on 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. Torquay. Tel: 01803 293593

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

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

Brixham Heritage Museum, Bolton Cross, Brixham. 01803 856267



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