

TORQUAY



Torquay Regatta Fair about 1898

Queen of the Watering Places

TORQUAY

The Queen of the Watering Places



Torquay from the Pier 1850

During the 19th Century, Torquay mushroomed from a small fishing village of 800 people into a fashionable 'watering-place' (a Victorian term for a seaside resort). This remarkable transformation owed much to the Napoleonic Wars when the Channel Fleet was anchored in Torbay and the area became popular with naval officers and their wives. The developing tourist industry received a further boost as visitors, unable to travel abroad during the conflict, found that Torquay compared favourably with continental holiday resorts. Following his defeat at the Battle of Waterloo, Napoleon Bonaparte became an instant tourist attraction when he was taken prisoner and brought to Torbay in July 1815. Anchoring near the Orestone, during his voyage to exile on the island of St Helena, the fallen French Emperor was seen pacing the deck of his prison-ship HMS Bellerophon. (A famous painting of this scene can be viewed on a print at Torre Abbey). His army had been

defeated by the British whom he had dismissed as 'a nation of shopkeepers', although his military campaigns were largely responsible for the increase and prosperity of such traders in Torquay!

At his first sight of Torbay, Napoleon commented 'Quel bon pays' (What a lovely country). Many other celebrities were similarly impressed. Amongst the famous people who stayed in Torquay were authors of classic children's stories Charles Kingsley (*The Water Babies*), Rudyard Kipling (*The Jungle Book*) and Oscar Wilde (*The Happy Prince*). Visitors often took advantage of the mild climate to spend the wintertime in Torquay, particularly invalids, among them the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who also benefited from sea water medical treatments available at the Bath House (now the Regina Hotel, Victoria Parade) .

Before the invention of the car, visitors had the option of travelling to Torquay by stagecoach or ship. The arrival of the railroad in 1848 made travel easier and more affordable. The seaside town became even more popular and added to its growing reputation as the 'Queen of the Watering Places'.

WILLIAM KITSON (1800 - 1883)

The *Western Morning News* described Torquay in 1864 as 'the most opulent, the handsomest and the most fashionable watering place in the British Isles'. The resort attracted royalty, leading families of Europe and many Victorian celebrities, thanks to the vision of local banker and solicitor William Kitson who was the driving force behind the town's popularity. Elected as a commissioner to an early form of local government in 1835, he supervised the introduction of many basic amenities now taken for granted including; main drainage, water supply and street lighting. Acting on behalf of the Palk family, who then owned the land in central Torquay (Cockington was owned by the Mallocks and Babbacombe & St Marychurch by the Carys), Kitson devised a plan to create an exclusive residential area. New roads made the hills of the Warberries and Lincombes accessible and two acre parcels of land were then sold to wealthy clients who had elegant villas built overlooking the bay. Amongst the many outstanding examples of architecture was Hesketh Crescent, Meadfoot Sea Lane, where landowner Sir Lawrence Palk resided. Completed in 1848, it was described as the 'finest crescent of houses in the West of England'.

Despite his own affluence, William Kitson had a reputation as the local 'Scrooge'. He may have promoted the town as an healthy option for rich visitors, but had little sympathy for the plight of poor residents living in overcrowded slums - opposing the provision of a public wash house as an unnecessary expense. A gaunt physical appearance and frugal eating habits also earned him the nicknames "Darning Needle Kitson" and "Penny Bun Kitson". Upon his retirement from the management of the Palk Estate in 1874, a portrait of Kitson was commissioned by public subscription and in 1923, his achievements were recognised by Torquay Council who unveiled a memorial tablet (both are on view at the Town Hall) as 'a permanent record of the great and valuable services rendered to the inhabitants of Torquay'. His memory was honoured further in 1988 by Torbay Civic Society, when a blue plaque was placed above his former home and offices on Vaughan Parade dedicated to "William Kitson - The Maker of Torquay".



Hesketh Crescent

TORQUAY - NINETEENTH CENTURY MILESTONES

- 1828 There is competition for Torquay's only hotel since 1774 (later the site of the Royal in Torwood Street) when another opens close by (now the site of the Queens). Objections are raised by the Vicar of Torre who believes, "two hotels in the town would be detrimental to its moral health".
- 1833 Princess Victoria visits Torquay. Victoria Parade is named in honour of the place where the future Queen stepped ashore.
- 1835 Fleete Mill is demolished. Standing near the junction of what is now Union Street and Fleet Walk, it had been used to grind corn since Saxon times using water from a stream which flowed through the middle of the town.
- 1848 Torre Station opens. Railroad engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel admires the town and buys land in Watcombe where Brunel Manor now stands. (see Local Studies Education Series 'Isambard Kingdom Brunel - The Little Giant').
- 1857 The Bath Saloons open at Beacon Cove as a medical baths where invalids recuperate. It later became a swimming baths and ballroom known as Marine Spa. In 1971, it made way for entertainment complex Coral Island, which was demolished in 1997.
- 1865 William Pengelly commences an excavation of Kents Cavern. The work continues for 15 years and evidence of prehistoric dwellings is discovered.
- 1870 Landowner Sir Lawrence Palk creates a new harbour which makes Torquay a favourite spot for yacht owners.
- 1872 The first regular horse-drawn bus service operates between Torquay and Paignton.
- 1888 Torquay Recreation Ground opens and the first event is a rugby match between Torquay Athletic and Newton Abbot. A year later, a cycle track is added where 'penny farthings' race.
- 1892 Torquay celebrates the granting of a Royal Charter which gives the town new powers of self government. The Latin motto 'Salus et Felicitas' is adopted meaning 'Health and Happiness'.
- 1900 The districts of Cockington, Babbacombe and St Marychurch unite with Torquay under one local council. Former Torquay MP Richard Mallock dies and two years later, a clock tower is erected on the Strand in honour of his memory.

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:

Book of Torbay - Frank Pearce (1999)

Francis Frith's Torbay - John Bainbridge (1999)

Torquay - John R. Pike (Torbay's Heritage series 1994)

Torquay - Mike Holgate (1998)

Visit the Torbay Council website (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

houses and museums which are all well worth a visit:

Torre Abbey Historic House & Gallery, King's Drive, 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. Tel: 01803 856267



LIBRARY SERVICES