

# THE PAVILION



*Palace of Pleasure 1912 - 2012*



## History of the Pavilion

On Saturday 17 August 1912, architect Henry Garrett handed Mayor Charles Towell a gold key to officially open the art nouveau-styled Pavilion - designed to provide 'adequate musical and other attractions for visitors to Torquay'. That evening, the success of the new venture seemed assured as patrons filled the venue for the first concert performed by the twenty-five piece Torquay Municipal Orchestra. However, the Pavilion, known to its admirers as the 'White Palace', was soon dubbed a 'White Elephant' by its detractors. Utilised as a concert hall, theatre and cinema, it struggled financially for decades until the final stage performance in October 1976. Despite earning an enviable reputation with regular radio broadcasts and annual music festivals, the orchestra was disbanded in 1953. Concerts by small ensembles, summer shows, rock concerts and even bingo sessions followed but failed to save the theatre from proposed demolition. A campaign by the Friends of the Pavilion (now Torbay Civic Society) ensured that the building was listed as being of special architectural and historical interest in 1973.

The Pavilion was saved and operated as an ice skating rink from 1979-83. It then

underwent award-winning restoration, reopening as an upmarket shopping mall in 1987. Twenty-five years later, Marina Developments Limited, who lease the building from Torbay Council, announced that the mall would cease trading in January 2013 and unveiled a proposal to convert the building into a four star hotel, spa, café and restaurant complex.

In its heyday, the venue featured celebrated artistes including composer Sir Edward Elgar, pianist Rachmaninoff, singer Paul Robeson, ballerina Anna Pavlova, operatic soprano Dame Nellie Melba, actor Sir Donald Wolfit, entertainer George Formby and comedian George Robey in an era when the Pavilion was renowned as 'Torquay's Palace of Pleasure'.

## Ernest Goss

Ernest Goss was music director of the municipal orchestra from 1919-53 and entertainments manager of the Pavilion from 1926-48. His duties in the latter role resulted in the presentation of outstanding films, productions by distinguished theatrical companies and performances by artistes of international renown, while his musical tastes were wide-ranging as he conducted for symphony concerts, grand operas, variety shows and pantomimes.

With the municipal orchestra, Ernest Goss made about 600 BBC radio broadcasts



and organised music festivals which attracted famous conductors including Sir Henry Wood, Sir John Barbirolli and Sir Malcolm Sargeant. Apart from his professional devotion to events at the Pavilion, the music chief's contribution to the wider community was immense. For fifty years he was organist and choirmaster of Union Street Methodist Church and also held posts supporting Torquay Philharmonic Society, Torquay Music Lovers' Association, Torquay Open Air Theatre, Torquay Gramophone Society, Torquay Operatic and Dramatic Society, Torquay and District Organists' Association and the South Western Brass Band Association.

Born in Torquay, Ernest Goss learned to play the piano as a child and went on to study the violin and organ. He was a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists, Associate of the Royal College of Music and a Licentiate of the London College of Music. Involved in music to the end of his life, Ernest Goss collapsed at a meeting of the Torquay Operatic Society and died aged 81 in 1964.

## Did You Know?

- The Pavilion was built on land reclaimed from the sea. Previously, the shoreline was at the front of the Torbay Hotel.
- Pavilion music director Basil Hindenberg diplomatically changed his German-sounding surname to Cameron at the outset of the First World War in 1914.
- In 1915, the reduced size of the wartime orchestra upset author George Bernard Shaw who complained he had been 'swindled' having 'paid two shillings for Beethoven'.
- Amongst the famous speakers who addressed audiences at the Pavilion were Lady Randolph Churchill, politician David Lloyd George, aviator Alan Cobham and polar explorer Roald Amundsen.
- In 1926, Laurence Olivier joined his first repertory company and appeared at the Pavilion in *The Farmer's Wife* written by Torquay author Eden Phillpotts.
- Whilst recuperating at a local war hospital in November 1940, James Nicolson attended a concert at the Pavilion where he was introduced to the audience following the announcement that he was the only Battle of Britain pilot to be awarded the VC.
- Nobel prize-winning playwright Harold Pinter wrote part of *The Caretaker* at the Pavilion whilst appearing in a series of plays using the stage name David Baron in the winter of 1956-7,
- Scenes for *The System* starring Oliver Reed and directed by Michael Winner were filmed at the Pavilion in 1963.
- During the period when the Pavilion had a skating rink there was an annual Miss Ice Queen contest and an ice-hockey team called the Torbay Pirates.
- After attending a concert at the Pavilion in 1913, a young lady accepted a proposal of marriage and agreed to become Mrs Agatha Christie. Following the author's death in 1976, it was suggested that the Pavilion should be renamed the Agatha Christie Memorial Theatre.

## Further information

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)

Material about the Pavilion available at Torbay Libraries includes:

The Pavilion - Elaine Hunt  
The Pavilion 1912-1984 - Enid Stevens

### Website sources:

[www.torquaypavilion.com](http://www.torquaypavilion.com)  
[www.torbaycivicsociety.co.uk](http://www.torbaycivicsociety.co.uk)

Further reference material is available at Torquay Local Studies Library:  
Check out the library web pages at [www.torbay.gov.uk/libraries](http://www.torbay.gov.uk/libraries) or go straight to  
the library catalogue at: <https://libraries.torbay.gov.uk/>

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