

# THE TOR BAY OLYMPIC REGATTA



*The Olympic flame at Torre Abbey, 1948*

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## The 'Austerity' Olympic Games

Tor Bay struck 'gold' when it was chosen as the venue for the yacht races of the 1948 Olympic Games. The Olympiad's main events took place in London, hosting the first games since 1936, when Adolph Hitler's Nazi government had used the Berlin games as a propaganda weapon, trying to convince the regime's opponents of their racial supremacy in sport, as a prelude to the Second World War (1939-45).

The 1948 Olympics were dubbed the 'Austerity Games' and the 'Ration Book Games'. In a post-war age when people

were affected by shortages of basic needs such as food, fuel and clothing, the prestigious yacht racing event brought a much needed boost to the local tourist economy. Even so, special permission had to be obtained from the Ministry of Power and Electricity to switch on the resorts illuminations for the first time since the wartime 'blackout' had been introduced. With rationing restrictions applying, Harbourmaster, Captain Jepp, was delighted when Torquay

Corporation's finance committee authorised him to order a brand new uniform to wear during the Olympiad. New clothing was then a prized luxury and, when news arrived that a parcel

containing the uniform had arrived at Torquay railway station, a junior member of staff was despatched to collect it. Unfortunately, the young man entrusted with this task, lost the treasured garment on the way back to his office. Despite a frantic search, it was never recovered and the culprit received a 'severe reprimand' for his negligence when he admitted that he had left it behind when he stopped off for lunch at a 'restaurant' - or was it a pub?

## The Olympic Flame Burns at Torre Abbey

The Official Report of the Organising Committee of the 1948 Olympic Games



*The runners enter Torre Abbey with the Olympic flame*

concluded: 'It is hard to imagine a more beautiful setting than wide Torbay in shadow and sunshine, whose waters were foam-flecked and sparkling with all the shades of blue and green'. Described by the Herald Express as 'Torquay's Event of the Century', history was made at 11am on 2 August, when an opening



ceremony was held specifically for the yacht races, in addition to the main event in London. The Olympic torch was brought from Wembley Stadium to Torquay by 107 runners and carried on the final leg from the Town Hall to the opening ceremony at Torre Abbey by Sid Francis. Accompanied by two of his Torquay Athletic club mates George Collings and C. Hemmings, he entered the building, strode up the steps to the balcony and, to a roar of approval from the largest crowd ever assembled in the resort, lit the flame that was subsequently watched around the clock by employees of the Torquay and Paignton Gas Company, who as 'keepers of the flame' supplied the fuel and ensured that the torch remained lit throughout the Games. The competitors assembled as the then

Olympic Hymn, *Non Nobis Domine* with words by former Torquay resident Rudyard Kipling, was performed by a 150 voice choir accompanied by massed bands. The hoisting of the national flags of the competing nations was followed by the traditional release of 1000 carrier pigeons, relaying the message to yacht clubs all over Great Britain that the sailing events of the Olympic Games were now officially open. The President of the International Olympic Committee, Mr Sigfrid Edstrom, made a speech, describing the symbolism of the Olympic torch as, 'a lovely token of our efforts to increase the health and physical culture of the nations'.

Tor Bay hosted the largest international event in the previous 175 years of yacht racing history. Twenty-five



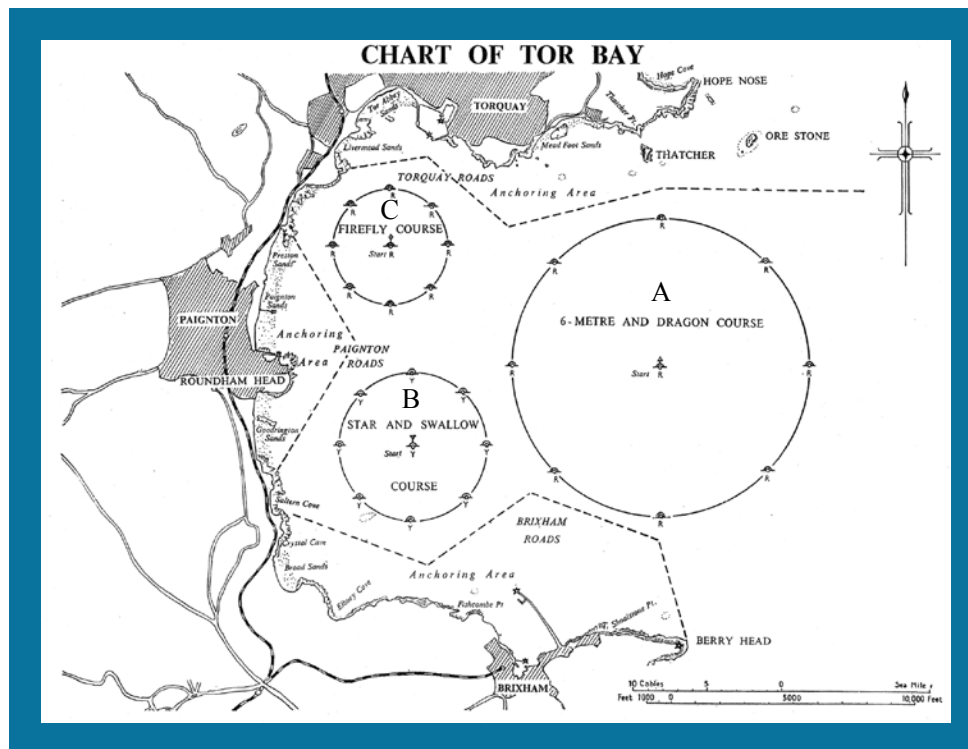
*Great Britain won gold in the Swallow Class*

nations competed: Argentine, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Eire, Finland, France, Great Britain, Greece, Holland, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, USA, Uruguay. A total of seventy-five craft took part in five classes: International Six Metre Class (11 competing nations), Dragon Class (12 competing nations), Star Class (17 competing nations), Swallow Class (14 competing nations), Firefly Dinghy (21 competing nations).

Three racing courses were marked by buoys as seen opposite on the map of Tor Bay: Course A positioned offshore between Hope's Nose and Berry Head was a two mile diameter circle used by the Six Metres (five-man crews) and Dragons (three-man crews) with both classes racing a distance of 14 miles. Course B positioned inshore

between Paignton and Brixham was a 1.25 mile diameter circle used by the two-man Swallows and Stars who raced a distance of 10 miles. Course C positioned inshore between Paignton and Torquay was a 0.8 mile diameter circle used by the single-handed Fireflies who raced a distance of 5.6 miles. The start and finish was marked with a buoy at the centre of each course.

All five classes raced on seven dates: August 3, 4, 5, (three-day break) 9, 10, 11, 12. Points were awarded according to the finishing order in each race and the six highest marks of the competitors totalled to determine the overall winners. The fifteen medals awarded for the five events were shared by nine countries. The USA (who competed in borrowed boats they had never seen before) was the most successful nation winning two golds, one silver and one



bronze, while Great Britain came away with just one medal - a gold in the Swallow Class.

## Olympic Fun and Games

On the eve of the opening ceremony, members of Babbacombe Corinthian Sailing Club hosted a reception for officials and competitors at the Marine Spa. The guests were entertained by actor and comedian Jack Warner who later starred in the long running television crime series Dixon of Dock Green.

During a break in the competition, representatives of the Italian team were guests of the South Devon Film Society at the Empire Cinema, Torquay. The main feature screened was Open City, Roberto Rossellini's post war production

of every day life in Italy during the German occupation.

Sailors on shore leave in Paignton were recalled to their vessels by messages flashed on cinema screens when a heavy squall caused havoc in Tor Bay. The Torbay lifeboat was called out after distress signals were fired by a number of naval training ships and private yachts. Heavy seas pounded Torquay seafront and stranded sailors, unable to return to their ships, were accommodated overnight at Torquay Town Hall.

The Olympic yachts in Torquay harbour were severely buffeted, but not damaged by the weekend gales. However, a crisis was averted when a hastily assembled wind guard was fitted to prevent the Olympic flame from blowing out at Torre Abbey.

## The Closing Ceremony

On the evening of Friday 13 August, the closing ceremony of the Olympic Regatta was held at Torre Abbey. The national anthems of first-placed Great Britain, Norway, Denmark and the USA were played by the band of

The spirit of the occasion was summed up by USA competitor Julian Kean Roosevelt, a relative of the late President Theodore Roosevelt, who paid a generous tribute in a press release to the 'greatest single factor leading to the success' of the yachting event:



*Helmsman Stuart Morris and crewman David Bond receive the gold medal for their success in the Swallow Class from Sir Ralph Gore*

*From the day we arrived in Torquay until the day we left, nothing was too good for the visitors. The yachting teams were given honorary memberships in the local yacht clubs. The round of receptions and parties given in Torquay aboard ships of the Royal Navy, and in surrounding towns, never ended, while the attitude of the general public was: 'If you don't have a good time, we'll take it as a personal insult'.*

the Royal Marines after the winners proudly received their gold, silver and bronze medals from the President of the International Yacht Racing Union, Sir Ralph Gore, who then called on the youth of all lands to assemble in Finland at Helsinki for the 1952 Olympic Games. The flags of the competing nations were lowered, a fanfare of trumpets sounded, a salute of guns was fired and the Olympic flame, which had burned brightly since 2 August, flared momentarily then slowly died away. Then, quite spontaneously, hundreds of officials and competitors joined by the Mayor of Torquay, Denys Gilley and his wife, linked arms to sing Auld Lang Syne.



*The world's media gathered at the Marine Spa where typewriters and telephone boxes were provided for the press.*

*The British battleship HMS Anson hosting a social reception during the Games*





## Did you know?

- An Olympiad is a period of four years. Resurrecting the games of Ancient Greece, the modern era began in 1896 and the 14th Summer Olympiad was held in 1948.
- The 1948 Olympic hymn was 'Non Nobis Domine' which means 'Not Unto Us O Lord'.
- Herald Express reporter R.A. Colwill wrote the scripts for the opening and closing ceremonies at Torre Abbey and compiled the official record of the event.
- Ernest Goss conducted the massed bands and choirs at the opening and closing ceremonies in Torquay. From 1920-52, he was musical director of the Torquay Municipal Orchestra that performed concerts at the Pavilion.
- A rule was introduced in 1948 to prevent women from taking part in the sailing events. Therefore, Dartmouth sailor Mrs Pritchard (in a boat crewed by her husband) was forced to withdraw from the national trials. Her Dragon class yacht Rhythm was borrowed by the USA team who won the Olympic gold medal in Tor Bay.
- During the sailing events, local pleasure boats Kiloran and Torbay Prince ferried officials of the YRA and BBC radio commentators around the racing courses.
- In 1996, Torbay Council bought a 1948 flame holder at auction and relays of youngsters from Torbay Athletic Club and the Royal Torbay Yacht Club carried the flame along the seafront before ceremonially handing the torch over to Mayor Carol Millward at Torre Abbey.

## Further information

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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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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