

Col Fawcett - Torbay's answer to Indiana Jones

In the mid-1990s Torquay Museum was researching personalities that could be included in a new gallery about exploration. It was then that we encountered an extraordinary book, Exploration Fawcett.

Published in 1953, it was compiled from the notes of an extraordinary explorer of South America - Colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett, who was born in Torquay.

The account is pure adventure, lost cities, mysterious objects, map making and giant snakes and spiders. It ends with the mysterious disappearance of Fawcett, his son and his son's best friend in the Matto-Grosso jungle.

It's pure Indiana Jones, but the Museum did not have a single object to illustrate this incredible story.

It took a few years but

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eventually the museum made contact with Fawcett's granddaughter, who was the guardian of the family archive.

It turned out she wanted to find a new home for what was known as the Fawcett secret archive, this contained all the original expedition diaries, letters and some expedition photograph albums.

This extraordinary archive came to the museum in 2006 and took several years to document, scan and research.

Before it made its way to us, the archive was seen by a staff writer at The New Yorker, David Gran, who was equally impressed by the Fawcett story.

In 2009, he completed a best-

selling book The Lost City of Z, in which he went in search of the lost explorer.

Such an amazing tale was not lost on Hollywood either and Brad Pitt's production company Plan B bought the rights to the book which was released as a film in 2017.

The museum was involved in the production design of the film, allowing access to the archive and as a reward, it acquired the hero prop letters and diaries created for the production.

These were displayed in our temporary exhibition on the life of Fawcett in the same year.

They are now housed alongside the real archive, documenting Fawcett's achievements in exploration and film.

We started with nothing but now hold more than 500 items relating to Torbay's 'real Indiana Jones'.

Left, Percy Harrison Fawcett, self-portrait, Bolivia, 1911 - courtesy and copyright of the Fawcett Estate
Right, Exploration Fawcett
Below, Props from The Lost City of Z film on display at the museum in 2017

