

'Far Side of World' tells story of Torquay's Fijian connection

Barry Chandler on how Torquay Museum shares a connection with islands of Fiji

On Saturday, October 2, Torquay Museum will open 'Far Side of the World' - an exhibition which tells the story of how Torquay and the museum share a connection with islands of Fiji.

How Penijamini Veli, Roko Tui Macueta or Native Lieutenant-Governor of the Province of Macueta in northern Fiji came to be here almost 100 years ago - and whose photograph and words inspired the exhibition.

"Torquay is a beautiful place. The palms and the tropical trees, the broken formation of the coast and the undulating land remind me of home. Torquay is more like Fiji than anything else I have seen since I left for England," wrote Ratu Penijamini Veli in Torquay on June 16, 1924.

Within Veli's words lie a clue as



Victoria Parade, Suva, 1940s. Both Torquay and Suva grew rapidly in the late 19th century and consequently share major street names.

to why Torquay Museum holds a small but internationally important collection of items from 19th century Fiji.

The collections of three men - Adolph Brewster, Arthur Ogilvie and the Hon Charles Swayne - reside in Torquay Museum.

These collectors retired to the palm-filled, rather 'colonial' surroundings of this seaside town, leaving their artefacts to the museum.

An ideal place to retire, after lives spent in the Pacific.

As a young man in the 1890s, Veli worked with Brewster, who was deputy commandant of the Armed Native Constabulary,

stationed with the highland people of Viti Levu, the largest island of the now Republic of Fiji.

Brewster was an amateur anthropologist and showed a keen interest in the local histories and genealogies of the people under his jurisdiction.

By 1895, he claimed to have recorded the genealogies of most of the leading hill clans of Viti Levu, clans of which Penijamini Veli was a high-status member.

In 1898, following 12 years of road building in the district, Veli took over this work, constructing more than 250 miles of bridle tracks in terrible mountainous conditions.



Above, Arthur Ogilvie (right) standing next to Adolph Brewster and Alice Brewster and Ratu Veli (seated) in the garden of the Brewster's home at Lynwood, Torquay, June 1924. Pictures: TORQUAY MUSEUM

He became sub-inspector of Native Constabulary in 1906, and continued working with Brewster until Brewster retired and left Fiji for Torquay around 1917.

During his retirement in Torquay, Brewster published much of his research in a book entitled 'The Hill Tribes of Fiji' (1922).

He maintained an active interest in the affairs of Fiji and, in 1924, hosted the visit to Torquay of Ratu Veli, now a Native Lieutenant Governor who was touring England with two other chiefs to mark the 50th anniversary of Fiji's cession to the United Kingdom.

This was Veli's second visit to England, having accompanied Brewster in 1902 to attend the coronation of Edward VII.

This second trip, a voyage of over 40 days to England, reunited a circle of friends that included the curator of Torquay Museum, A.H. Ogilvie.

Ratu Veli would eventually reach a place in the government of Fiji, being chosen as one of five Fijian representatives nominated by members of the Council of Chiefs for the legislative council in 1937. Veli died in 1938 aged 64.

In the 1990s, Torquay Museum discovered a newspaper article about Veli's visit to Torquay. At that time, we knew none of this history.

Veli's words, those of a Fijian, gave us a unique view of Torquay and provided the key to understanding why the museum had such an outstanding collection of Fijian objects.

In 2013, working with the Fijian Art Research Project, the museum created an exhibition inspired by his words: 'Far Side of the World: Torquay's Fijian Connection'.

There will be a second chance to see the exhibition from Saturday, October 2, until February 2022.

Tower built to protect Paignton's so-called Palace of Osbern

The stories behind Torbay's blue plaques by Ian Handford, chairman of Torbay Civic Society. This week: The Bishops Tower, Paignton:

The manor house, its castle walls and tower at Bishops Place, Paignton, is locally referred to as 'Coverdale Tower' although in practice it was built as part of the fortifications to protect the so-called Palace of Osbern - Bishop of Exeter in the time of William the Conqueror in 1072 and named simply the Bishops Tower.

Our early blue plaque erected on the tower was sponsored by Torbay Council in 1987 although due to it being west facing, it faded quickly to such an extent that many locals would regularly write to us to get it renewed.

As mentioned previously, the responsibility and maintenance of any plaque becomes the responsibility of the sponsor once formally unveiled.

This particular blue plaque was originally put up by my predecessor, Mrs Ena Hocking - who with the help of Torquay Council and Torbay Museum

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had also produced the first pamphlet the Bishops Tower Paignton written by civic society members Frank Cawson and Denis Walton and printed by the borough council, although today long out of print.

In 2006/7 and in partnership with the late Tony Moss as chairman of the Paignton Preservation and Local History Society - now Paignton Heritage Society - he and our society decided to restore the plaque and issue a new pamphlet which was written and produced by local historian Mrs Peggy Parnell, giving far more detailed history of how the 'Rev Miles Coverdale' connection came into being and why it still takes precedence in people's memories when referring to the Bishops Tower.

The new pamphlet more fully reflects the complete history of the Palace and its tower - we titled it 'The Bishops Tower (Coverdale Tower) - circa 1050' - and it is still available.

The restored plaque was formally launched by Tony Moss and myself on April 20, 2007, when large numbers of both societies and the public attended.

After the unveiling everyone was invited to tour the tower, still looked after by volunteers of the Paignton Heritage Society.

A goodly number of us having firstly picked up their copy of the new publication, then made a short walk to a local cafe where light refreshments were purchased and further presentations made.

The ongoing problems between Protestants and Catholics during the 15th century saw the Rev Miles Coverdale choose to spend much of his time abroad, although remaining a supporter and friend of Thomas Cromwell no less.

Eventually it was Cromwell who convinced King Henry VIII of the need for an English translation of the Tyndale's official Bible which he entrusted to Coverdale and which was finally published on October 4, 1535.

The Rev Miles Coverdale, as Bishop of Exeter during 1551-1553, was of course in charge of the huge diocese from Somerset right down through Devon and Cornwall to the Isles of Scilly.

Some locals appreciated it was Coverdale who translated much of the Tyndale Bible which led to them honouring him on the formal town crest and even naming roads and properties after him including - Coverdale Road and Coverdale Hotel.

By 1553, Queen Mary had stripped him of the Bishopric and even for a time considered

he should be executed.

Our wording on the blue plaque still says: "Fortifications of the Palace of the Bishops of Exeter - Lords of the Manor of Paignton from 1066 to 1549" - yet makes no mention of Coverdale.

Throughout the reign of Queen Mary, he continued to preach the gospel in English and as legend still goes, it was Queen Mary that imprisoned him in the Tower of Paignton and only after his wife intervened, using her Royal connection to Denmark did the family manage to be given safe passage out of England to Denmark.

By the 1700s the tower was derelict, used only to store cattle until in 1909 the Exeter Diocese finally took over its deeds and built the vicarage within the existing castle walls.

The Bishops Tower (Coverdale Tower) circa 1050 pamphlet is still available and may be obtained on sending two second class stamps and a stamped addressed envelope to Torbay Civic Society, 4 Palace Avenue, Paignton TQ3 3HA