

Art detectives at work in Torquay Museum

As staff working at Torquay Museum, we get very familiar with the exhibits and sometimes we think we have learnt all there is to know about an object, but often that is far from the case.

This is why projects from outside that focus on our incredible collections are so important as they bring fresh eyes and new expertise.

One project, that happened a few years ago, put all of the museum's sculpture collection online on the ART UK database.

Here, high-quality images of our works can be viewed by everyone around the world.

This gives the opportunity for anyone to turn into an art detective and try to identify otherwise un-provenanced works.

Just inside the museum's front doors is a beautiful Carrara marble half-length bust – mezzo busto – format in which arms and hands are prominent elements.

It is of Elizabeth Williams Johnson, who married James John Rowe in Marylebone, London, on September 9, 1823.

Her husband became the rector of St Mary Arches in Exeter in the 1840s.

This sculpture is unsigned and we knew nothing about the maker.

Unknown to the museum, art detective contributor Jacinto Regalado had been researching

How an online posting of a Torquay Museum sculpture exhibit led to the piece being identified.
Barry Chandler reports

our sculpture and provided the ART UK website with a link to a plaster version of the bust, kept in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Florence.

This discovery immediately changed its status from by 'unknown artist' to 'Lorenzo Bartolini'.

Jacinto explained: "Based on the format and on stylistic grounds, I suspected this could be by Bartolini (1777-1850), which was confirmed by going through the Italian online database of his complete works.

"It contains a plaster version of this and the mezzo busto was often used by the Florentine sculptor who had British clients drawn from visitors to Florence, hence many works by him are in the UK."

Bartolini was born near Prato, Tuscany. After studying at the Florentine Academy of Fine Arts he gained a reputation as a modeller in alabaster.

He went to Paris in 1797, where he studied painting and

afterwards sculpture. The bas-relief Cleobis and Biton, with which he won the second prize of the academy in 1803, established his fame as a sculptor and gained for him a number of influential patrons. The greatest of these was Napoleon for whom he executed a colossal bust.

On the recommendation of his sister Elisa Baciocchi, he was sent to the Accademia Carrara in Bergamo in 1807 to teach sculpture.

He remained as the quasi-official portrait sculptor to the Buonapartes until the fall of Napoleon and eventually moved back to Florence, where he resided until his death.

The discovery of a Bartolini in the entrance hall of Torquay Museum is quite a find.

He is regarded as one of the most important early 19th century sculptors and this is quite fine example of his work.

You can see the sculpture for free in the entrance hall when the museum reopens next month.



Portrait of Elizabeth Rowe in Carrara marble by Lorenzo Bartolini. Inset, a portrait of Lorenzo Bartolini, 1805 by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres

Pictures: TORQUAY MUSEUM/ CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION DIDIER DESCOUENS

Blue plaque honoured St John Ambulance's 100 years of service in Torquay

The stories behind Torbay's blue plaques by Ian Handford, chairman of Torbay Civic Society. This week: Torquay St John Ambulance

The initial request for consideration of a blue plaque came from Kathy Matthews, local superintendent of Torquay St John Ambulance, who explained the brigade wished in some way to celebrate their 100th anniversary of the founding of the headquarters at Locksley Hall in St Marychurch Road, Torquay.

Having met Kathy and been in touch with the main St John centre at Exeter, it was clear the brigade headquarters at Torquay were able to sponsor both the plaque and literature that I would write in conjunction with two of their local long-standing members – Mr D Penny and Mr G Furneaux, who would supply St John historic photographs to be used in the collectors' pamphlet.

It was certainly a most interesting learning curve for me, as I knew little about the

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history of St John Ambulance Service other than it was restored during the Victorian era.

In fact, the first organisation, The Order of St John, had been established to help remove injured men from any battlefield by using anything that came to hand, which on some occasions included using farm gates as informal stretchers 'on the field'.

For a background to the history of the St John Ambulance Service, why not send for our collectors' pamphlet as outlined at the end of this article.

The brigade in Torquay was conceived as early as 1902 but did not become operational until 1906, after 26 men signed up to 'an intent' before the official launch of a Torquay

Division. This became why 2006 was chosen as the anniversary year.

With all sponsorship agreed, the next stage was the wording for the plaque which had to be agreed by all concerned before making contact with the local authority to ensure the chairman of the council would attend and officiate at the unveiling.

In truth this was to be a week later than the actual founding day as the local brigade had decided to hold a special open day for past and current members on November 18 - the actual anniversary date.

The public open day, including our unveiling of the plaque, came a week later.

So it was that at 10.30am on Saturday, November 25, 2006, the unveiling was undertaken

by Councillor John Dunn, chairman of Torbay Council, together with Superintendent Kathy Matthews and myself assisting.

The ceremony was attended by a huge number of people comprising young and old members of the Torquay brigade plus members of the society and the public.

The official ceremony was followed by a number of presentations including a short video on the history of St John in Torquay before finally a quantity of the Torquay photographs of the service were put out for everyone to see.

No-one in 2006 could have foreseen that within two decades this important headquarters in Torquay, housing many ambulances serving the local district would permanently closed before being sold to developers.

Later, the blue plaque became only the second one to ever go missing, once Locksley Hall St John's Centre had closed.

Some years later we were made aware that the local postman had retained the

plaque for a time, although today we have no idea of its whereabouts.

Should it ever resurface we could in fact get it restored to one of the other St John premises so that the history of Locksley Hall in Torquay is retained.

Today, St John Ambulance services teach first aid to more than 800,000 people nationally every year, to try and make a difference when a life is at risk.

These volunteers also work at the heart of their local communities at public events throughout the UK, and are often first responders or provide additional services to the NHS ambulance services.

Today, the nearest St John Ambulance headquarters in Torbay is based at Mountbatten House on Totnes Road, Paignton.

The pamphlet 'Torquay Division St John Ambulance' can still be obtained by sending two second class stamps and a stamped addressed envelope to Torbay Civic Society, Office 1, 4 Palace Avenue, Paignton TQ3 3HA