

D-Day bonds that lasted a lifetime

Back in 2015, Torquay Museum was contacted by Christine Ogden who was interested in finding a home for some of the property of her great uncle.

Christine was living in Virginia, USA, and her great uncle had taken part in the Normandy landings.

For more than 25 years now, the museum has been actively collecting items relating to D-Day in South Devon but we are rarely offered items with such a rich wartime story.

Barry Chandler,
engagement and
collections manager
at Torquay Museum

William (Bill) E. Neilson JR was an American soldier who was shipped to England in 1942 to train for battle in a

rifle unit. In May 1943, his division (the 29th) moved to the South West and, in Bill's case, Torquay.

During his training, Bill lived at 38 Princes Road, Torquay, with Dick and Jessie Hayward, with whom he developed a close bond that lasted a lifetime.

Bill most likely left for France from Trebah beach in Cornwall and landed as a part of the second wave on Omaha Beach.

The collection that came to the museum included a Purple Heart medal (awarded to US troops wounded or killed whilst serving) - this is the only one in our museum's collection and we wanted to discover the story behind it.

On June 18, the 29th Division was advancing toward the town of St Lô in France moving down a narrow road with hedgerows.

Bill, acting as the sergeant in charge, was advancing in front of his platoon when German soldiers opened fire and hit him in the right leg.

He was sent back to England for recovery and rewarded with Purple Heart.

The battle in the hedgerows of St Lô was notorious for the large number of Purple Hearts awarded.

A gully at the base of one hill was ominously known as 'Purple Heart Draw'.

Bill's memorabilia came with quite a collection of US World War Two medals - The American Defence Service Medal, The European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal, The Good Conduct Medal, The World War Two Victory Medal and The Bronze Star Medal were all awarded to him for his service in World War Two.

However, the most touching items in the collection are the mementoes of battle and his time in Torquay.

These include a red and white



The only Purple Heart in the museum's collection. Credit: TORQUAY MUSEUM



Bill Neilson, an American World War Two veteran stationed in Torquay whose archive was donated to the museum by his relatives in Virginia, USA (PR35558).
Credit: TORQUAY MUSEUM

flecked stone from Omaha beach, which was removed on June 6, 1982, by E. Gene Bujac so that he could present it to a comrade in arms who participated with him in this extraordinary military operation, a red patterned mat made by Bill Neilson while he was recovering from a gunshot wound in a hospital in England and a Longpark pottery, blue kingfisher design plate which was sent

back to America as a gift for his sister before D-Day. The collection also includes many letters that passed between Bill and his 'family' in Torquay. The extreme emotions and experiences caused by war have profound and life-altering effects.

Similar stories and relationships are unfortunately being forged again throughout Europe with the families of Ukrainian refugees.

Paris Singer's monetary support to hospitals was legendary

Having previously featured **Oldway Mansion in this series, at the time I chose to concentrate of Isaac Singer whose plaque can still be read on the entrance of the mansion and confirms 'Oldway Mansion built by Isaac Merritt Singer in 1874 and adapted by his son Paris Singer in 1904'.**

Bearing in mind Paris, son of Isaac, was arguably the greatest philanthropist to our area, it is amazing no-one has provided him with any personal memorial to-date.

Yet he not only converted Oldway into the mansion we know today but also left us the Mowbray Organ in St John's Church, Paignton, developed Redcliffe Towers into Redcliffe Hotel and helped found Paignton's first hospital.

His philanthropy saw no bounds

The stories behind Torbay's blue plaques by **Ian Handford,** charman of Torbay Civic Society. This week: Paris Singer at Oldway

as monetary support to especially hospitals was legendary. Having supported numerous hospitals in London, he assisted with the provision of our first cottage hospital in Paignton and allowed his mansion to be converted into a military convalescent hospital during World War One.

Later, he created the Paignton and District Land Development Company which provided us with the district areas of Preston, Barcombe and Marldon.

Isaac Singer's plaque at Oldway is still applicable yet confirms his son's name as being significant and

it remains the only memorial to Paris other than his name on the family tomb at Torquay cemetery.

Today, of course, his mansion and the estate are owned by Torbay Council.

Paris Singer was an enthusiastic supporter of all motor vehicles and was a founder member of the RAC in 1897.

He also became a founder member and chairman of the City and Suburban Electric Carriage Company in the late 90s.

It is recorded that, in 1901, one of his cars - an English Napier brought him to Paignton from

London although prior to this he had the 'honour of driving Queen Alexandria in one of his horseless carriages'.

It is my belief he would have adored the 21st centuries enthusiasm for electric vehicles because as a visionary he had supported this type of motor many decades before.

Thanks to that foresight Paris left the study room at Oldway, which was later used as a mayor's parlour adjacent to and on a level with the massive ballroom, both awaiting a new function.

Paris Singer died in 1932 and it was 50 years before Torbay Civic Society created a heritage room/museum on the ground floor level of the mansion to display artefacts of history including various Singer sewing machines.

If Oldway is ever restored our hope is we will shall be invited to resurrect this public facility.

It was in 1988 that Torbay Civic

Society's blue plaque was formally unveiled by the chairman of the Society Ena Hocking, yet because no documents survive we can only assume the mayor or a representative of council at the time would also have attended such an important event.

Sadly, because the plaque was shared between father and son, there were no specific biographies done at the time, although I did one to Paris in April 2002 when I wrote 'Oldway and Palm Beach remain as lasting proof of a Singer's vision'. For anyone that wants a copy, follow the instructions below.

Torbay Civic Society today continue to support Torbay Council in its wish to restore Oldway to its former glory and the sooner this is achieved the better for us all.

My feature can be obtained by sending three second class stamps and a stamped addressed envelope to Torbay Civic Society, 4 Palace Avenue, Paignton TQ3 3HA.