

Why is Torquay Museum creating LGBTQ+ Trail?

Museums are actually very dynamic places, people expect them to be static and are often surprised when they haven't visited for years that they are not as they remembered.

Good museums embrace change and when we announced we would be creating a trail through the collections and galleries highlighting LGBTQ+ history we have been met with this question.

In its incredibly long existence, Torquay Museum has never focused any research on LGBTQ+ history and culture and it has not collected specifically in this area either.

This is an oversight but one of many relating to local history.

In 1993, when I joined the museum, it had no collections relating to the local story of World War Two - now it has more than 700 items.

In 2000, it had only a little understanding of the local marble industry - now it has a small, permanent gallery and much greater knowledge of the history of that industry.

Now is the right time to begin this work.

Torquay Museum is far from the first museum to look at LGBTQ+ history.

It is part of a movement gathering pace throughout Britain.

Museums around the country

Barry Chandler on how Torquay Museum will show LGBTQ+ residents' contributions to life in Torbay

are teasing out stories of gender nonconformity in artefacts that have until now been left untold or even actively suppressed.

One of the inspirations for our work has come from a project at Pitt Rivers Museum called Beyond the Binary: Queering and Questioning Collections and Displays.

It was eye opening to see the range of items that were included in their research and the diversity of stories they could tell.

Torquay Museum has a huge collection for a town museum, and we realised we could tell these stories too, and sometimes from the items we already had on display.

One example, staring us in the face daily, is the Torquay Terracotta Company statuette of a young Michelangelo at work.

The renaissance artist was reputedly gay and statuettes of his

greatest work 'David' were used as a discreet come-on by travellers returning from the grand tour.

If you had one on your shelf it was a hint for others to approach you.

To involve the local community research to find more objects like this we have asked for volunteers to join us and help find these hidden histories.

We approached Max Price, co-founder of Devon-based social enterprise Proud2Be to help guide aspects of our work.

They said: "We are thrilled to be able to support Torquay Museum as they create their first LGBTQ+ trail.

"The fact is that LGBTQ+ people have always existed and it is vitally important that our stories and contributions are represented and celebrated in this way."

One of the museum's project volunteers said: "It is also



A terracotta statuette after the renowned sculpture by Emilio Zocchi of young Michelangelo sculpting the head of a faun. Inset, Winnaretta Singer, a benefactor to many artists, supporter of sciences and a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

Pictures: TORQUAY MUSEUM

important to specifically shed light on the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in the past and how they navigated and understood their existence in often difficult circumstances."

The museum has realised that by not addressing this history, we are excluding people from this community who currently do not show up in numbers on our visitor surveys.

LGBTQ+ people have always been part of society and this work will show their important contributions.

As a museum striving to represent all of our local community, we seek to embrace and celebrate diversity.

This project is supported by a grant from the South West Museum Development Recovery Fund.

South Pole explorer Ernest Shackleton's farewell dinner at Torquay hotel

The stories behind Torbay's blue plaques by Ian Handford, chairman of Torbay Civic Society. This week: Ernest Shackleton at Torbay Hotel, Torquay:

It was not until realising an anniversary date was coming up at the Torbay Hotel that we approached Vince Flower, then managing director of Shearings Holiday, who, in partnership with the South West Coastal Path Organisation, then arranged to sponsor a special plaque to honour Sir Ernest Shackleton's visit to Torbay Hotel in August 1907.

We knew Captain Shackleton had a brother living in Torquay during the Edwardian era, although it was not until historian Mike Holgate informed us that a special 'farewell dinner' to him had been held on August 6, 1907, that the visit became significant.

His ship Nimrod had sailed round from Cowes that day, after King Edward had presented a special medallion to Shackleton while Queen

The stories behind Torbay's blue plaques by Ian Handford, chairman of Torbay Civic Society. This week: Ernest Shackleton at Torbay Hotel, Torquay

Alexandria had given him a flag saying 'May this Union Jack which I entrust to your keeping, lead you safely to the South Pole'.

Now he and his 22 naval officers dined at the hotel, the night before the ship sailed for Antarctica 110 years ago.

Once the sponsorship and wording for the plaque were agreed, the unveiling date was to mirror the anniversary dinner date of 1907 with its very special menu - reprinted in our pamphlet.

The unveiling was jointly performed by the chairman of Torbay Council, Anne Brooks, together with mayor Gordon Oliver on August 6, 2017, when a large number of people attended.

Undertaken at the front wall

of the hotel on the busy Torbay Road, right at the traffic lights near The Pavilion, this made it one of our most hazardous fixings and unveilings ever done.

Following the unveiling, everyone moved to a ground floor room to view some extensive memorabilia courtesy of the hotel and mayor, who has a special interest in Shackleton.

With formal presentations given, refreshments were provided and Torbay Civic Society pamphlets handed out to all concerned.

This event turned out to be one of the highest number ever attended.

One hundred years before to the day Nimrod was at anchor in Torquay harbour being clearly visible to its captain -

who was later knighted - from the dining room.

The next morning, his men set sail for New Zealand to set up preparations for their voyage to Antarctica and, hopefully, the South Pole.

Their captain, meanwhile, stayed with his family in Torquay for two months before in October travelling to London and finally re-joining his ship at Lyttleton in New Zealand.

Later we would learn, he and three of his crew were to be the first humans to ever reach the South Polar plateau although his flag was not the first to be planted at the South Pole - Roald Amundsen had beat him by days.

Shackleton was certified a master quite early and as Shacky, as he was known, he took command of his first ship at 24. During what turned out to be an unsuccessful expedition, Shacky and the team reached as far as Mount Erebus, creating the record of being closer to the South Pole than anyone previous.

Later, with numerous scientific discoveries to his

credit, he achieved a knighthood.

On his third trip to the Antarctic on the ship Endurance in 1914, he witnessed it sink after months of being trapped in the ice.

By April 1915 he, with five crew, finally left the safety of their floating home in the ice and rowed to find Elephant Island. Having spent 16 days rowing across 1,300 kilometres of open sea, the six made South Georgia before trekking to its whaling station.

Months later, Shackleton returned to the ice-home and saved all his men.

Our blue plaque to Sir Ernest Shackleton finally commemorated the 150th anniversary of the opening of Torbay Hotel, making it in effect a unique double for the society.

The Torbay Civic Society pamphlet for Ernest Shackleton may 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.