

# Changes are happening at Torquay Museum

**Basil Greenwood,**  
Torquay  
Museum  
manager



**This has been a difficult year for Torquay Museum and you may well have heard that there are changes afoot.**

Some of you may have heard that we could be struggling financially.

Hopefully, I can put people's minds at ease by outlining what has been happening.

In common with many businesses, the last 18 months have been a difficult time for the museum, with the pandemic seriously limiting our ability to generate visitor income.

But with outstanding support from Arts Council England and advice from industry experts, we are re-evaluating our offer, re-focusing our efforts and looking forward to carving out a more sustainable future from the New Year.

There are going to be some



Torquay Museum in the snow

changes you need to know about: In order to keep our costs down we will only be opening our doors to the public four days per week – Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday.

This is not a decision taken lightly but with low numbers of visitors, it is simply not viable to keep the doors open on more days each week.

We will keep this under review, but need the support of the public in terms of increased footfall if we are to reverse this decision. Your support is vital to our future.

We are going to be closed to the

public for the whole of January to give our now-reduced staff the time to build a new way of working and plan for future projects to help us survive financially.

The good news is that we will still be continuing our education sessions for primary schools.

We have already seen our school's engagement growing back after the necessary lull during the peak of Covid lockdowns.

We are also working on a new programme of temporary exhibitions, events and activities particularly focussing on engaging



The mayor and mayoress with local school children at the Christmas tree at Torquay harbour (PR25279)  
Pictures: TORQUAY MUSEUM

the public in new and exciting ways so they can enjoy the museum and its collections.

We will also continue to ensure our extensive collections and galleries are maintained in good condition – this is a big job and we rely on volunteers to help us achieve these aims.

Regrettably, the Torbay Museums Trust Board have had to take some difficult decisions about staffing, as this is the major cost of running the museum.

We are very sorry to lose some valuable members of the team, but believe that the new structure and business plan will help us to secure the longer-term future.

While organisational change is difficult we now have great confidence in a solid foundation so that we can continue looking after

our amazing collections and deliver a diverse programme for everyone to enjoy.

Over the Christmas period we are open to the public today, December 23, and December 28 to 30.

We will then re-open to the public on Tuesday, February 1.

We will be relying on your support over the months and years ahead so please come into the museum when we re-open our doors in February.

Bring your friends and family in to enjoy what we have on offer.

If you have not been in to see us before you may well be surprised at the wonderful objects we have on display and the incredible stories they tell.

I wish you all a happy Christmas and a safe and healthy New Year.

## Charles Darwin moved to crescent overlooking Meadfoot Beach

**The stories behind Torbay's blue plaques with Ian Handford, chairman of Torbay Civic Society. This week: Charles Darwin**

The story behind this plaque is quite extraordinary. It started after Torbay Civic Society were contacted by Ian Davies, managing director of the Osborne Hotel, who at the time was in dispute with South West Water about the hotel's failing sewage disposal systems.

As a former chairman of the Federation of Small Businesses, added to which this was a Listed Building in a conservation area, I fortunate to be able to give advice and this eventually brought a compromise with South West Water, who at the time were involved with the South West Clean Sweep scheme.

Mr Davies was, I discovered, also the head of the major Caparo Hotel Group at the time the largest hospitality company anywhere in Britain.

In wanting to do something for the civic society, Mr Davies now put forward the idea of arranging a blue plaque in

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honour of the famous Charles Darwin (*pictured*), who had not only been to Devon many times but more importantly had stayed at No 2 Meadfoot House, Hesketh Crescent, while convalescing in 1861.

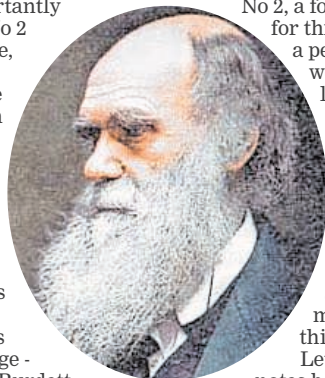
He had remained a resident with his wife and ten children at No 2 for six weeks while his neighbour was another famous person of the age - Miss Angelina Burdett-Coutts of Coutts Bank, the richest woman in England, who later became Baroness Coutts. The houses on Hesketh Road

at that time were ideally suited to house large families and the Darwin's remained resident in

No 2, a four-storey home for three months, being a period properties were normally leased at the time.

Although the blue plaque states the family 'lived here' for six weeks, a recently unearthed letter confirms they actually stayed much longer than this.

Letter writing and notes became a passion for Mr Darwin who, although in poor health, fully documents that he generally worked every morning for a few hours before



then going out walking with the family or perhaps taking a carriage ride.

We also know he met William Pengelly of Torquay regularly because many years after his death a letter to Pengelly's daughter Hester surfaced dated March 19, 1873 - in which he remarked - "You must forgive me for differing from you on one point when you call yourself an almost total stranger for I, have a lively and very pleasant remembrance of seeing you some dozen years ago when in Torquay."

Darwin's workday books also confirm he started to write a paper on orchids while residing in Torquay and that this was not completed until April the following year.

He also worked on a further book concerning primulas - more proof that his idea of convalescence never included rest.

He was, of course, a unique and extraordinary man who loved naturalism, botany, biology, geology and was a scientist who loved writing.

As late as March 1873, he was still corresponding with

Pengelly even to the extent of penning a note on the odd subject of the sagacity (wiseness) of dogs penned only days before the now-bedridden Darwin whispered to Emma: "I am not in the least afraid of death." On April 19, 1882, he died at age 73.

With the blue plaque fully sponsored by the Osborn Hotel and the usual pamphlet completed by Michael Thompson and myself, our plaque unveiling ceremony was carried out with the help of the Worshipful Mayor of Torbay Council Mrs Jenny Faulkner and her escort, Cllr Alan Faulkner on Thursday, September 30, 2004 at No 2 Hesketh Crescent.

Being an afternoon event and with the sun shining at 3pm, we all moved to the hotel patio bistro where refreshments were provided.

Today, the Darwin plaque plus the original Lord Haldon's plaque at the entrance to the Osborne still remain the only two to the many famous people that over the years have lived at this beautiful crescent overlooking Meadfoot Beach.