

Memories of African delegates' visit to Torquay in 1950

October is Black History Month and the theme for 2021 is Proud to Be.

It aims 'to focus on celebrating being black or brown, and to inspire and share the pride people have in their heritage and culture'.

While looking through Torquay Museum's archives, we discovered these wonderful if slightly mysterious and unidentified images from 1950.

The main image shows a delegation from, we believe, West Africa in their magnificent national dress, proud to represent their nation at an event in Torquay.

Also present are Robert Rook, the mayor's secretary, and the mayor, Alderman F.T. Adams and his wife.

The images were part of a

Barry Chandler on how Torquay Museum is celebrating Black History Month

collection made by the Torquay mace bearer Bill Baxter and are dated to 1950-51 the year of the GATT International Conference.

GATT was the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, a multinational trade treaty and was succeeded by the World Trade Organisation.

The conference in Torquay was round three of the trade negotiations established by the allies after World War Two.

The conference handbook, also in the museum's collections, lists around 38 participating countries who were in Torquay in September and October 1950.

Of these, there is only one West African nation represented, Liberia.

Although we can't be completely sure, this appears to be the Liberian delegation at the GATT Conference and they were based at the Edenhurst Hotel.

Liberia has an extraordinary history.

It was founded as a sovereign nation in 1847 by free people of colour from the United States of America.

The emigration of free and recently emancipated slaves from America was paid for by the American Colonization Society.

Some American abolitionists believed that blacks should return to 'the African homeland', as if it were one ethnicity and country, despite many having been in the United States for generations.

The mortality rate of these settlers was the highest in recorded human history.

Of the 4,571 emigrants who arrived in Liberia between 1820 and 1843, only 1,819 survived.

Free people of colour in the United States, with a few notable exceptions, overwhelmingly rejected the idea of moving to



Symbols of power, beaded crowns and a flywhisk are displayed alongside the mayor's mace
Pictures: TORQUAY MUSEUM

Liberia, or anywhere else in Africa, from the very beginning of the movement.

They wanted better treatment, they did not want to leave.

Between 1847 and 1980, the government of Liberia was dominated by the African-American colonists known as Americo-Liberians who held power over the indigenous population of Liberia.

During the Cold War, when the Torquay conference took place, Liberia was under pressure from the United States to resist Soviet influence and was in receipt of large amounts of foreign investment.

It had rich natural resources

including the world's largest rubber plantation which accounted for 40 per cent of the Liberian national budget.

The importance of the rubber industry to the war effort, its strategic position on the west coast of Africa and Liberia's support to the allies during World War Two explain their presence as the only West African nation at the Torquay GATT Conference.

The museum would like to know more. Do you have any information about this image? Can anyone identify the delegates in this picture and confirm they are from Liberia? Please let Torquay Museum know



Officials prepare GATT Conference road signage in 1950



West African delegates pose with the mayor, Alderman F.T. Adams, and his wife