

Parked Firefly class dinghies awaiting their Olympic moment

Pictures: TORQUAY MUSEUM



Remembering when the Olympics' 'Austerity Games' came to Torbay

This month sees the unfolding of the fascinating saga of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

It will be an unusual one, delayed by the pandemic and with few or no spectators in the stadiums. It is being staged for the cameras, but we are watching a new group of Olympic stars being born.

Back on August 2, 1948, the opening ceremony of the Olympic yachting events was held at Torre Abbey in front of perhaps the largest crowd ever assembled in the Bay.

These were also unusual games, known as the 'Austerity Games'.

The world was rebuilding after years of war and the athletes had to compete while still on rations.

They were given the same increased rations as dockers and miners, 5,467 calories a day instead of the normal 2,600.

Germany and Japan were not

Barry Chandler, of Torquay Museum, tells of how the Olympic Games attracted the biggest-ever crowds to Torbay

invited to these games and the Soviet Union decided not to send any athletes.

Members of the competing teams of 25 countries marched past the platform to salute the mayor led by Greece, the home of the games, and was followed last by Great Britain as the host. A tradition continued at Tokyo.

Out in Torbay, there were three sailing courses with a number of committee boats and various naval

vessels acting as guard ships, HMS Victorious, HMS King George V and HMS Anson.

Racing took place in weather varying from almost dead calm to squally and very windy.

On the last day all but nine or ten of the Fireflies came to grief either by capsizing or by being dismantled.

The medal ceremony was a grand affair:

Each of the teams that took part received a laurel wreath to 'honour all those that tried.

The medals were presented by Sir Ralph Gore of the Yacht Racing Association accompanied by Commander Peter Scott of the Olympic Committee.

One of Great Britain's three gold medals at the Games came in the Swallow class from Stewart Morris and David Bond.

The meeting ended with a call to all to come together once more for the Olympics in Helsinki in 1952.

The Summer Olympics of 1948 brought home a haul of 23 medals for Great Britain: three gold, 14 silver and six bronze.

They were held in a spirit of great optimism shortly after the war and here in Torbay the games are firmly impressed on the memories of local people.

The yachting competition was run with great economy and austerity at a cost to Torquay of just over £9,500! A figure that's seems hardly possible compared to today's multi-billion dollar games.

You can see two incredible images of the ceremony as part of Torquay Museum's Windows in Time trail at the shelter next to Abbey Refreshments.



The opening ceremony crowd on Torre Abbey Meadows - the largest crowd ever seen in Torbay



Sir Ralph Gore presents helmsman Stewart Morris and crewman David Bond the gold medal for their success in the Swallow Class



The laurel wreath presenters



Olympic torch bearer Sid Francis is about to ignite the flame on the balcony of Torre Abbey