

Torbay's 'Queen of the Poor' was one of most remarkable women in Victorian times

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Torbay's history is full of inspirational and influential women such as Hester Pengelly, Agatha Christie, Amelia Griffiths and many others.

This is the story of Baroness Burdett Coutts, one of the most remarkable women of Victorian times.

Angela Burdett Coutts was born in 1814 to Sir Francis and Lady Sophia Burdett, both of whom she lost when she was very young.

As the favourite child of her grandfather Thomas Coutts, she inherited the entire family fortune and became the richest woman in England.

Instead of keeping the inheritance for herself she purposely gave it away.

Miss Coutts donated money to churches and schools, financed the building of homes for young women in London 'who had lost their innocence' and helped in the provision of public reading rooms and libraries.

She also funded nurses and surgeons to attend the sick in South Africa and built whole districts in Ireland after its famine.

The beautiful scenery and mild climate of the 19th century Torquay attracted many members of the wealthy elite of England including Miss Coutts and her parents, who spent an idyllic

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holiday here in the 1820s.

In 1856, she visited Torquay for the second time and rented Meadfoot House, No 1 Hesketh Crescent while No 2 was occupied by Charles Darwin.

After three years, she moved to Villa Syracuse on Daddyhole Plain and, shortly after, to the newly-built Ehrenburg Hall, now the English Riviera Centre.

Miss Coutts found a pleasant community life in Torquay and welcomed many guests in her house including Louis Napoleon, Queen Sophia of Holland and Bishop Philpotts with whom she enjoyed theological arguments.

During her time in Torquay she became a friend of one of the founders of the museum, William Pengelly.

Their strong friendship began when she heard him lecture on physical geography at the museum and lasted until his death in 1893.

Miss Coutts encouraged Pengelly in his research into the past and shared with him her passion for geology.

In 1860, she bought his fine collection of Devonian fossils and presented it to the new museum of the University of Oxford.

Two years later her interest in botany and natural history led to

her buying a collection of rare seaweeds and shells from Mrs Griffiths and donating it to Kew Royal Botanic Gardens and the British Museum.

Pengelly and Miss Coutts shared an interest not only in science but also in education.

They were both concerned at the state of rural education and set up the Torquay Group of United Schools.

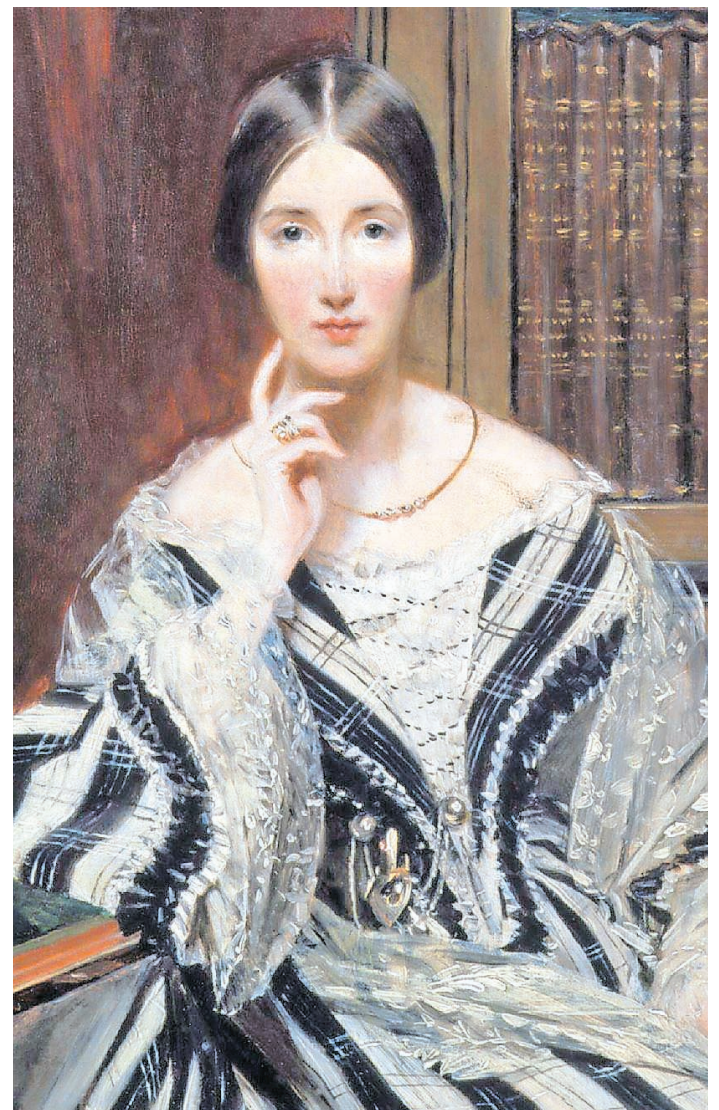
Because of her experience as an orphan, she also enlarged the Brixham British Seamen's Boys' Home.

Angela's continuing support for the poor saw Queen Victoria make her the first Baroness in her own right with an access to the Royal Court.

Sadly, this privilege ended when at the age of 67 she married a 27-year-old American, William Ashmead Bartlett who had been educated in Torquay.

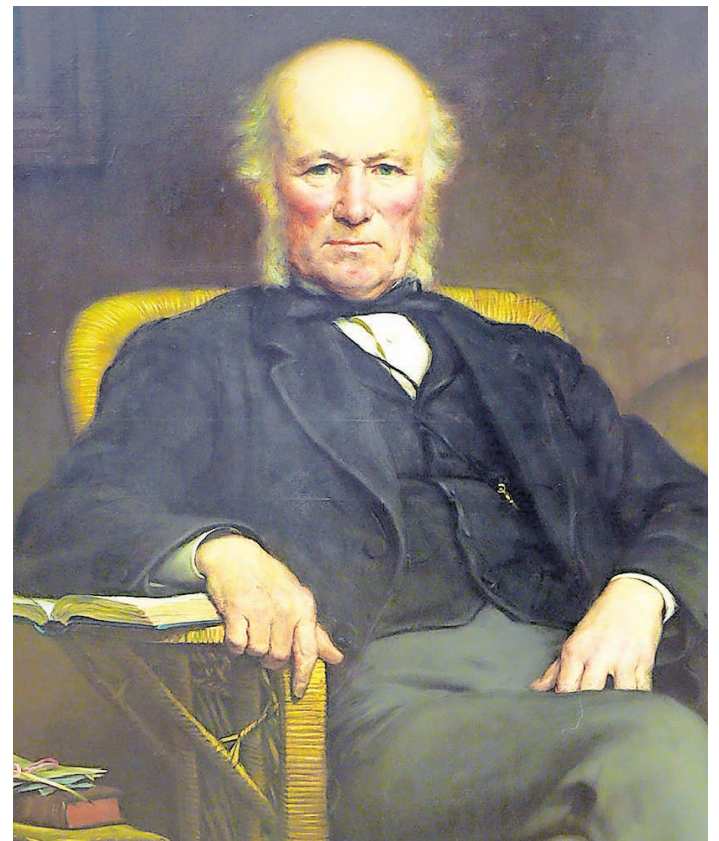
Because of this marriage she had to give up all rights to her inheritance. This act proves even more that Angela Burdett Coutts was an independent, strong-minded woman who chose to challenge society and did what made her happy.

The Baroness died in 1906 at the age of 92 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.



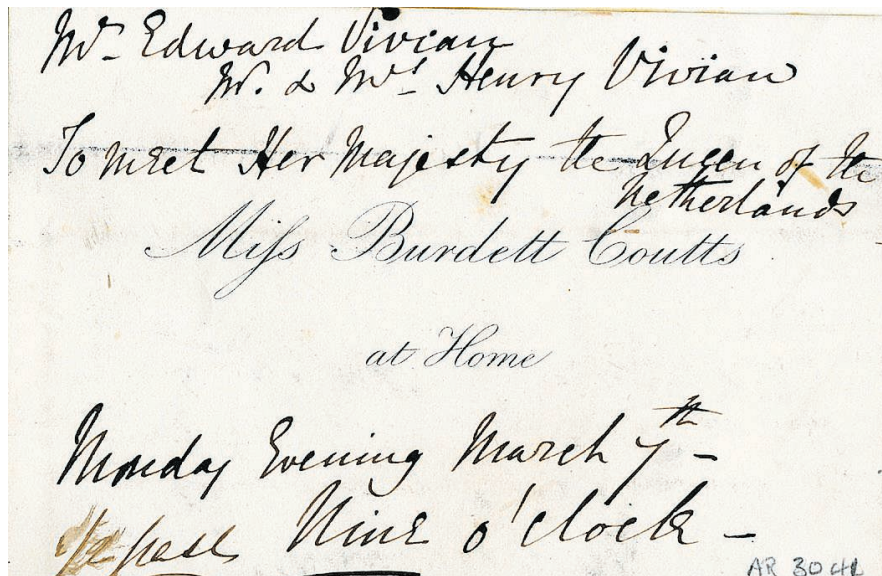
Baroness Angela Burdett Coutts

Picture: TORQUAY MUSEUM



Painting of William Pengelly

Picture: TORQUAY MUSEUM



An invitation for the Vivians to meet the Queen of the Netherlands at Miss Burdett Coutts' home. (AR3041)

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