

Torquay at the time of Richard Burton's birth 200 years ago (PR7277)



# Two hundred years of 'Ruffian Dick' - Torquay's extraordinary explorer

**Two hundred years ago this month one of the most extraordinary explorers of the Victorian age, Sir Richard Francis Burton, was born in Torquay.**

Although Burton believed he was born at the family home at Barham House, Elstree in Hertfordshire, he was actually born at 9.30pm on March 19 in Torquay.

During his early life his family moved between England, France and Italy and the young Richard developed an ear for learning languages.

He entered Trinity Collage Oxford in 1840 and studied Arabic, but he always felt like an outsider and after just five terms was permanently expelled from the university for attending a steeplechase!

After time spent in the army of the East India Company, he earned the nickname 'Ruffian Dick' due to his ferocity in hand-to-hand combat.

He also learned many Indian languages and studied Hindu culture, actively participating in the religion.

During his seven years in India

**BARRY CHANDLER**  
Torquay Museum

he also studied the customs and traditions of Muslims which prepared him for one of his most dangerous expeditions.

Burton eventually 'worked' for Foreign Office but he kept taking time off in search for adventure. He became a constant traveller to unknown parts of the world, finding out about other people's customs and traditions.

He was incredibly tough and a gifted linguist eventually leaning 26 languages to help him communicate wherever he went.

He was also a brilliant swordsman, fighter, spy and hypnotist but also a writer on varied subjects.

He explored many places in Africa, America, Brazil, Arabia, India and particularly wanted to find where the Nile river started in Africa.

He also wanted to know what the Muslim holy city of Mecca was really like and what foreign and ancient writers wrote about sex.

Burton brought back a huge amount of knowledge about other people's customs many of which he had experienced first-hand.

He is probably best remembered for discovering Lake Tanganyika, gaining a Royal Geographical Society Medal in 1859, translating the Arabian Knights stories and the Kama Sutra!

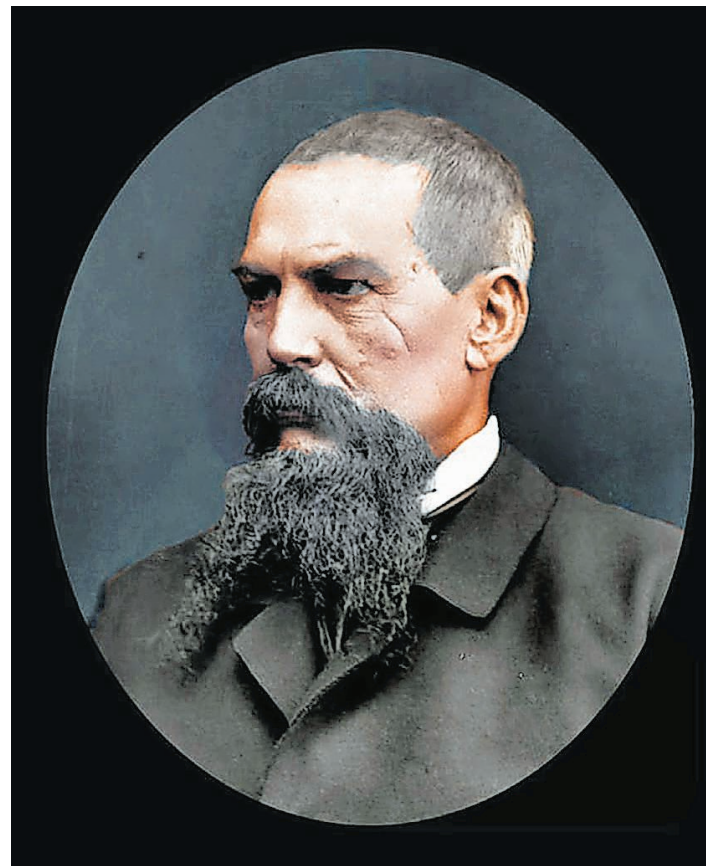
He got into some very dangerous situations, especially going into Mecca disguised as a dervish.

Burton died in Trieste in 1890. He was a controversial character when he was alive and after his death his wife Isabel burnt some of his notebooks believing his spirit demanded it!

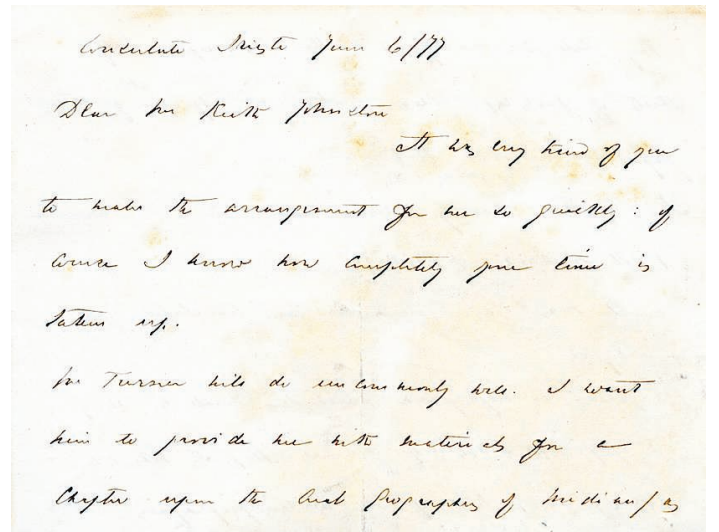
He remains, however, probably one of the most fascinating people of the Victorian era, a true individual unburdened with the conventions of the times.

Luckily, many items relating to him did survive and can be viewed as the Burton Collection at the Orleans House Gallery in Richmond.

Find out more about local explorers when Torquay Museum reopens in May in the 'Explorers Gallery'.



Colourised portrait of Sir Richard Burton, courtesy and copyright of seriykotik1970. In 1855, Burton's party was attacked by Somali warriors. Burton was impaled with a javelin in the point entering and exiting his cheek. The scar is clearly visible in this photograph.



A signed letter written by Sir Richard Burton from the Torquay Museum collection (AR266) Pictures: TORQUAY MUSEUM

archant podcasts

# ARE YOU READY FOR... THE NEW NORMAL

Listen to The New Normal, the news and politics podcast from Archant Podcasts.

Each week hosts Richard Porritt, Cash Boyle and Matt Withers will be bringing you the week's news, politics, gags, gaffes and guests.

Available every Friday from Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you find your podcasts - or just head to [podfollow.com/thenewnormal](http://podfollow.com/thenewnormal)