

On the hunt for love in Torquay Museum stores

The origins of Valentine's Day are shrouded in mystery.

Some believe they can be traced back to the feast of Lupercalia, an ancient fertility festival during which men sacrificed goats before using their skins to whip women in the belief that this would make them fertile.

We know there were at least two martyrs called Saint Valentine but it's not clear which one this day was initially dedicated to.

The fact is it has become a significant cultural, religious and commercial celebration of romance and love in many regions of the world.

Like it says in the famous song 'Love is All Around', symbols or tokens of love can be found in almost all the museum's collections.

Hidden deep in the archive lies the most romantic object which isn't displayed very often due to its significance.

It is a love letter by one of the most prominent English poets,

Veronika Valigurská
from Torquay Museum

John Keats, written to his muse and fiancée Fanny Brawne.

Sadly, their love didn't have a happy ending as Keats died of tuberculosis aged only 25.

Poems are intrinsically linked to Valentine's cards, an invention of the 18th century.

Initially these cards were decorated with romantic symbols such as flowers and love knots, often including puzzles and lines of poetry.

Those who were less inspired could buy volumes that offered guidance on selecting the appropriate words and images to woo their lover.

These cards were then slipped secretly under a door, or tied to a



Heart-shaped box by Wedgwood

Pictures: TORQUAY MUSEUM

door knocker.

However, not all Victorian Valentines were so romantic.

The less loved-up were able to buy 'Vinegar Valentines' - cards designed to insult.

These typically criticised a man's profession or a woman's appearance.

If we stay in the social history collection, we find hollow blown-glass rolling pins also known as 'Bristol Rollers' that were probably made in Bristol or at nearby Nailsea.

Rolling pins were used in various ways either as a container for gin or eau-de-Cologne imported or smuggled by sailors as gifts for sweethearts or as practical rolling pins.

As love tokens they could be hung up on ribbons in the parlour

and as long as they remained there, the sailor lover was safe but should they fall down and break, this was a sign that he had been shipwrecked and would probably never return.

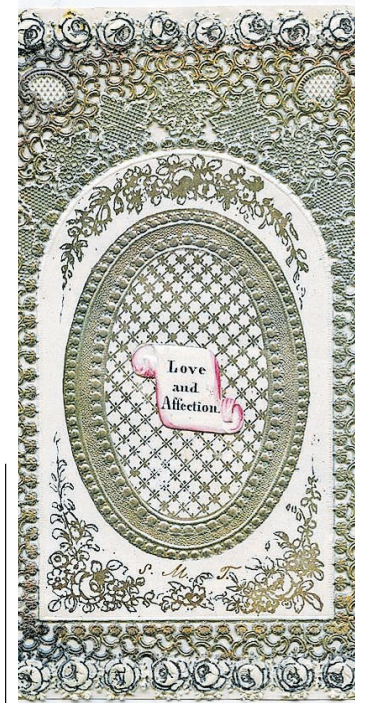
The museum's world cultures collection contains a secret love token, a love letter in a form of a necklace.

Before the writing of letters and cell phones, the Zulu women of South Africa would create a beaded necklace and give it to their lover as a symbol of love and affection.

The combination of coloured beads was very important.

While black and white placed next to each other meant marriage, red next to black symbolised an aching heart.

These objects and a few more



A Valentine's card from the museum's social history collection

can be seen in a new display specially curated for Valentine's Day in the museum's entrance hall until February 27.

There is no need to have an entry ticket to see the display so please come in and, from all of us at the museum, have a happy Valentine's Day!

Covid-19 procedures in place, we are installing now!

Advertisement Feature

Struggling to climb out of your bath?



ANDREW WARD is managing director and sales director of Ability Bathe, a family-run independent bathroom installation company which was founded by Andrew and his wife in 2012.

Andrew has owned and run a complete bathroom supply and installation company for 25 years, fitting all types of bathrooms and wet rooms in the North of England. Since expanding into the South West, Andrew - together with a small team of employees - has specialised in installing and fitting not just bathrooms, but also walk-in showers and wet rooms.

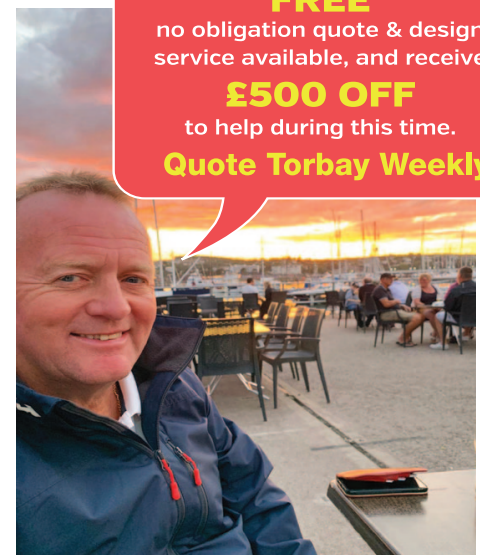
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Andrew personally goes out to the initial consultation, paying great attention to detail and customer requirements. On commencement, he again attends and personally sets up the installation, running through all points raised with his employees, who will do the hands-on installation.

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