

The cities that Col Fawcett never found

Researchers at Exeter University have recently published reports of astonishing discoveries in the Amazonian rainforests that have huge implications for sustainable living strategies.

The Torquay-born explorer Col Percy Harrison Fawcett has fascinated us here at the museum for many years, and we are always excited to learn of new discoveries in the region he explored.

Fawcett had an unshakable belief in a lost city that he named 'Z' in the Matto Grosso region of the Amazon rainforest.

Based on pottery and oral histories, he spent years researching and searching for this lost civilization in a region that science believed, at that time, could not support a large civilization, essentially urbanism in the jungle. Fawcett disappeared in pursuit of this discovery.

We have known for some time that in many respects Fawcett was correct, that these urban centers existed and

Barry Chandler,
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there were indeed lost cities in the rainforest.

However, the staggering scale of these sites is just being revealed.

Jose Iriarte, Professor of Archaeology at the University of Exeter, has recently published reports of his team's exploration in the Bolivian Amazon's Llanos de Moxos.

When Fawcett made the first map of Bolivia for the Bolivian government, he did it the hard way, on the ground, with a small team, a theodolite and ranging poles, a monumental task for which he earned a gold medal from the Royal Geographical Society.

What would Fawcett have made of



Portrait of Col Fawcett in Bolivia.
Credit: Torquay Museum

modern survey techniques?

Jose's team use something called flexible lidar, used from the air these 'lasers from the sky' scan the ground.

Work is carried out at the end of the dry season when many trees lose their leaves.

The work is still tough, forest fires interfere with flights and hot weather makes for nauseous hours spent in the air looking at computer screens.

Then in an act of modern digital magic, a vegetation removal algorithm renders the forest floor visible.

In an act equivalent to opening the door of Tutankhamun's tomb, Jose recalls 'revealed to our eyes were plans



Fawcett items in the Explorers Gallery. Credit: Torquay Museum

of dense, complex and a formally integrated archaeological landscape, with long-suspected civic-ceremonial centres within a multi-tiered hierarchy'.

He continues: "It showed that the core area of primary centres like Cotoca is built on 4-5 m high human-made terraces covering approximately 30 football fields.

"On top of these built terraces lay civic-ceremonial U-shaped structures, platform mounds and 21-m tall conical pyramids."

The team believe that The Cotoca site, with a conservative estimate, must have taken 570,690 persons/days to construct.

Collectively, the findings show a scale of monumental architecture that has no precedents in Amazonia.

The tide of evidence has now fully turned in favor of large complex pre-Columbian societies existing in the rainforest.

However, the most truly remarkable findings were in the sustainability of these civilisations.

The indigenous people managed local resources for thousands of years.

Through processes of soil fertilisation and limited use of forest clearance for crop cultivation, the forest canopy was kept largely intact.

Long-term food security was attained by the native Amazonians, who created urban landscapes in managed forests - a successful sustainable existence.

To discover more about Col Fawcett's extraordinary life visit the Explorer's Gallery at Torquay Museum.

Unique plaque details double anniversary

The request for this special blue plaque came in 2013, the year prior to the 150th anniversary of founding the Royal Torbay Yacht Club.

The yacht club secretary had contacted me to point out there was a double anniversary about to occur in 2013 when the 200th anniversary year of the Torbay Royal Regatta coincided with the founding of the yacht club originally called The Torbay and South Devon (sailing) Club - later to be changed to the Torquay Yacht Club.

Founded through the generosity of 23 Torquay gentlemen under the chairmanship of Lord of the Manor Sir Lawrence Palk, the club would eventually achieve a royal warrant from Her Majesty Queen Victoria and thereafter be known as the Royal Torquay Yacht Club.

Yet this was eventually changed again to become the present day - Royal Torbay Yacht Club (RTYC).

Having celebrated its centenary anniversary in 1963 and appreciating the RTYC 2013 anniversary was fast approaching, the possibility of celebrating a double anniversary with Torbay Royal Regatta was too good an opportunity for us to miss.

Once the sponsorship was agreed the history of the 200 years of regattas and a 150 years of races in Torbay was researched for a new pamphlet the Torbay Royal Regatta and Royal Torbay Yacht Club,

The stories behind Torbay's blue plaques by **Ian Handford**, chairman of Torbay Civic Society. This week: The Royal Torbay Yacht Club and Torbay Royal Regatta

written by local historian Mike Holgate. In addition to our historic pamphlet, Mr Holgate was asked by Torbay Council to produce a separate four-page A5 leaflet for their latest publication to the Local Studies History Series put out free in all libraries around Torbay.

Our official blue plaque unveiling, which celebrated this unique double event, took place at Torquay Royal Yacht Club on Beacon Hill at midday on Saturday, May 25, 2013.

In attendance at the ceremony were chairman of Torbay Council, Julian Parrott, and Torbay Mayor Gordon Oliver plus the commodore of the yacht club, Mr Mike Ellis, and chairman of the Torbay Royal Regatta committee, Mr David Selley, plus myself as chairman of Torbay Civic Society. A large number of club and civic society members were in attendance at the unveiling at the club's entrance.

During the presentations, everyone learned a little more of the background to these joint anniversaries and that our unveiling

ceremony was to merely kickstart a number of events taking place that weekend including the powerboat race championships and Brixham's Heritage Sailing Regatta.

We also learned that every year the regatta's organising committee continued to arrange social and recreational facilities for the so-called 'landlubbers' which over many years since 1813 have annually included a 'Grand Ball', firework displays, and in earlier times even a full funfair facility on Torquay Quay. Since 1988, there has also been a regular display from the Red Arrows and in this way, the annual tradition of the royal regatta - with only the exceptions the first and second wars that forced a break in continuity - making in effect the regatta concept as old as the Torquay town itself.

Meanwhile, membership of the Torquay Corinthian Yacht Club (TRYC) had soared from just 85 members to a staggering 450 by the time it celebrated its diamond jubilee year in 1955 and six years later it was absorbed into the RTYC which



The Royal Torbay Yacht Club

Credit: RTYC

itself then celebrated a centenary in 1963. That year the RTYC trials were held during a regatta which finally resulted in the club crew of Martin Pery, Peter Reade and Colin Harris then representing us at the 1964 Olympic Games held in Tokyo where subsequently they finished fourth in the yacht international dragon class.

The still unique blue plaque carrying the details of a double

anniversary may still be viewed when passing by the club premises on Beacon Terrace.

For the pamphlet setting out the history of this anniversary, send two second class stamps and a stamped addressed envelope to Torbay Civic Society, Office 1, 4 Palace Avenue, Paignton TQ3 3HA