

Torquay Museum voted 'best school day ever'!

Torquay Museum is such a wonderful place and really makes for 'the best school day ever'.

Take one university degree in social anthropology and study of religions. Add 15 years of teaching in schools followed by an escape to the library service and training in massage therapy. Sprinkle in a temporary dalliance with penguins at a coastal zoo before adding a second dose of school teaching and a move to specialist post-16 SEND education, running concurrently with private tutoring.

Shake and mix well with a global pandemic. Exchange said mix for full-time self-employment. Let stand for a year...

If anyone asks me how I got to work at Torquay Museum, well this was the recipe, my route, and it's one I'm so glad I've been able to take.

Working as a learning officer on the education team at Torquay Museum is a privileged position for a former teacher who loves the teaching but prefers the freedom that comes with freelance.

I get to talk about a world of adventure and mystery, awe and wonder, beliefs and mythology; of

Claire Barnett,
learning officer at
Torquay Museum

ancient Egyptians, local explorers and stone age ancestors: a dream job for an ex-RE teacher with a penchant for role play. Just ask anyone who's taken part in our embalming and mummification ceremony.

In that same workshop, we ask the children the following question: "If you could choose one thing to take with you to the Ancient Egyptian afterlife, what would it be?"

Surprisingly, Nintendo Switch and Xbox are often further down the list than anticipated. 'My mum' is often up there, along with 'my books' and 'my hamster' in the last session we had just a week ago.

And so our young people get to explore their own notions of belief and value from exploring another civilisation within the museum setting.

After one such workshop earlier this year, one child announced he'd had



Pirate Claire

'the best school day ever!' My dream job just got even better.

Since my first museum education workshop 16 months ago, I've had the pleasure of working not just with primary schools but with a whole host of people: from a vibrant home education group, to shy and excited new Year 7s before their first day at secondary school and the great British



Big Fish Little Fish pre-Valentine's rave at Torquay Museum

public, from toddlers to those living their second childhood.

Seeing visitors in their 70s and 80s enjoying making candy cane mice was a joy! I've celebrated World Book Day, Halloween and Christmas. I've tapped into my seafaring side as 'Pirate Claire' and enjoyed sharing many a story time with some of our youngest visitors.

This weekend, I'll be channelling peace and love as Big Fish Little Fish present the museum's first family rave.

Whatever will they think of next? Watch this space!

The culmination of a meandering life and career path has brought me to Torquay Museum and it's somewhere I'd like to stay a while. It's a wonderful place, I hope you'll agree. Come and visit us soon.

To find out more about the museum's education service, visit torquaymuseum.org

Celebrating Torquay theatre that Agatha Christie, Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde appeared in

When Torbay Civic Society realised the importance of Merlin Cinemas donating their Odeon Cinema in Abbey Road, Torquay, to the already established Unleashed Theatre Company, a community interest company formed in 2014, it was decided to try and help the trust promote itself as a social action theatre company for people in the community that are vulnerable, homeless or on a Twelve-step programme.

Apparently, typically 30 people meet every week and have already grown into an 'inspirational community of actors' making steady success to recovery.

The charity with its board of directors led by Martin Harris some three years ago launched the Unleashed Community Drama and Unleashed Community Choir, a social action group that produced two large-scale Big Homeless Musicals titled Under One Roof and Under Roof Two, which were performed at the Princess Theatre, Torquay, and involved more than 70 actors, singers, musicians and technicians.

The launch of an Unleashed Community Choir followed the first production, although the first play performed by this company had been at the Little Theatre off Meadfoot Road, Torquay, some 20

The stories behind Torbay's blue plaques by **Ian Handford**, chairman of Torbay Civic Society. This week, The Royal Lyceum Theatre in Torquay

years before, since when there have been a range of musical dramas and later films, all adding to a message of hope to the diverse community within the charity.

On learning of all this history and that Merlin Cinemas had given their old Central Cinema - our old Royal Theatre, previously the Royal Lyceum Theatre - to the charity, Torbay Civic Society decided to assist by offering a blue plaque to the historic building.

The society was fortunate in finding one member willing to sponsor the plaque honouring the building on its 160th birthday since becoming a theatre in January 1825.

The Royal Lyceum Theatre was originally converted from Torquay's first public Assembly Rooms in 1865 before a name change to simply call it the Royal Theatre came in 1880. Later, this was changed to the Royal Lyceum Theatre.

By 1890, a Royal Command Performance was being staged at the theatre when Queen Victoria's daughter Princess Louise came to a

concert featuring Songs of the West.

Among the names who appeared at the Royal Lyceum were Agatha Christie, Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde.

During decades following, in the 20th century, variety stars came to Torquay and the now Royal Theatre, including Gracie Fields, George Formby and George Robey.

The Royal Theatre survived the Second World War although popularity of live theatre was on the wane. The Royal Theatre finally closed when a twin-screen cinema was installed by the Odeon Company in 1974, which remained until 1999 when once again the centre closed.

It re-opened as Central Cinema in 2000 once bought by Merlin Cinemas.

Then, in 2021/22, Merlin moved into new premises on Union Street, Torquay, at which time the old Central Cinema was given to the Unleashed Theatre charity.

Having visited the premises that year, Torbay Civic Society's commitment started and my hope



The Royal Lyceum Theatre, formerly the Central Cinema in Torquay

now is that members will be able to visit and see the whole site once the full refurbishment is complete. Having personally undertaken a tour of all three levels of what was the Odeon, I can fully appreciate there is much work ahead before any visits can happen.

Meanwhile, on January 27, the formal blue plaque unveiling ceremony went ahead as planned with the Civic Mayor of Torbay, Councillor Mandy Darling, fronting the 160th anniversary ceremony. Large numbers of the public, the Unleashed Company and Torbay Civic Society members attended, so that now the plaque may be viewed

by everyone on the theatre wall on Abbey Road.

With refreshments served and the unveiling complete, special presentations were then given in the theatre concerning the history of the building, by two prominent local historians Kevin Dixon and Mike Holgate.

A pamphlet, Royal Lyceum Theatre Torquay, may be obtained by sending two second class stamps and a stamped addressed envelope to Torbay Civic Society, Office 1, 4 Palace Avenue, Paignton TQ3 3HA