# Plymouth

## The Centre of a Hundred Tours

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In 1926 Plymouth advertised itself as a 'Centre of a Hundred Tours'. To understand why they were doing this, we need to look at Plymouth's advertising campaigns.

Before the war, Plymouth Information Bureau was the city's main publicity centre for holidaymakers. It was opened by the Plymouth Mercantile Association pre-war at the Guildhall. When holidaymaking was swept aside by the tragic storm of war, the bureau had to be closed and it remained so until 1920. Mr Bruce Nicholls, assistant secretary of Plymouth Mercantile Association, worked at the Plymouth Information Bureau where he handed out maps, guidebooks and the cards of hotel and boarding-house proprietors, plus a weekly catalogue of daily events in and around Plymouth. The catalogue had an artistic title page, on a picture of Plymouth Hoe which was reproduced.[1]

In 1922, Mr Roberts of the Great Western Railway offered for the price of £210 to supply 1,000 posters advertising Plymouth per annum for three years along the whole of their system. This was agreed and a competition was held to supply a winning poster. The prize-winning posters for the advertisement of Plymouth on the Great Western Railway hoardings were on view at the Plymouth Mercantile Association. Mr Carlile Davis, Plymouth Mercantile secretary, remarked that they had received seventy-three applications and over thirty designs. Mr Solomon Stephens, chairman, described that the winning poster, by a Nottingham competitor, was of outstanding merit

> There was real poster art about it… depicting as it did a glorious scene of the Hoe and foreshore, with the spirit of Drake gazing down on the scenes and such a poster shown in New York would be an attraction for Americans intending to visit this country.[2]

[1] *Western Evening Herald*, June 1920.

[2] *Western Morning News*, 17 October 1922.

**Figure 1:** The winning poster, advertising Plymouth by train.[3]

Advertising was working, as during 1922 over 3,500 visitors called at the bureau for information regarding the district.

In 1924, the Plymouth Mercantile Association reported that they had done magnificent work considering their limited financial resources and had vigorously pursued the policy of advertising Plymouth as a health and holiday resort. They reported that the advent of so many conferences being held in Plymouth was due to the fact that they had advertised that Plymouth was an ideal centre for those who wished to take a holiday and combine with it a certain measure of work. Their poster,'the spirit of Drake' overlooking the Hoe, was exhibited at the local art gallery.

It is only during the last few years that Plymouth has given any serious thought to advertising her fame and possibilities. Before that she was content to let history books do in a very inadequate fashion what should be a civic responsibility. Mr Harold Roberts said that they needed to ask for more money for advertising. He proposed that the Town Council should be urgently requested to obtain powers to spend from £500 to £1,000 a year out of the rates for the purpose of advertising Plymouth as a holiday centre and a desirable place of residence for those in search of health and sunshine.[4]

In 1925, the *Western Morning News* reported that because of the motor touring holiday, Plymouth was becoming more popular as a holiday centre with Devon's gems being within comfortable travelling distance; as many of these beauty spots had little or no accommodation, the motorists were able to visit by car for the day with no problem. During the 1920s, Plymouth's lack of accommodation was the biggest tourist bugbear, however this was now improving.

[3] Travel Posters Online, <www.travelpostersonline.com>.
[4] *Western Morning News*, 15 April 1924.

Many hoteliers agreed that the summer of 1925 was better than average, which they believed was because motorists booked accommodation for one or two nights and then because they could travel to far distances, they often asked for another couple of nights.[5]

In 1926, the *Western Morning News* started a 'West is Best' campaign, not only with the idea of bringing people from other parts of the country to the West for their holidays, but persuading their readers that there was no better part of the country to visit. Each article showed Devon tourists attractions with pictures.

In August 1926, the Savoy Picture House in Plymouth showed a special advertising film showing beauty spots and points of historical interest of Plymouth. This film was to be sent to America for the American Hotel Keepers' Association, who had visited Plymouth during that year. They had been so impressed by the town's beauties that they asked if the film might be taken to show their friends in America.

**Figure 2:** American hoteliers in Plymouth with the Mayor, courtesy of Chris Robinson.[6]

Plymouth did have their own Publicity Committee, which was set up in the summer of 1927, but unlike the Mercantile Association it had no money to spend as the council was not allowed to vote any money from the rates for the purposes of advertising the town. The only money that was available was any profits that might be derived from such enterprises as the letting of chairs. In November 1927, the Plymouth Publicity Committee and the Mercantile Association wrote various articles in the newspapers saying how advertising was necessary:

[5] *Western Morning News*, 30 September 1925.
[6] Chris Robinson's Plymouth, <https://chrisrobinson.co.uk>.

> If Plymouth is to hold its own with both English and Continental holiday centres the town's attractions must be advertised. It is even more happily placed than other resorts by virtue of the fact that thousands of tourists from America and other countries land here every year. Yet because they do not know of the advantages to be derived from a stay in the town they pass through to London and other centres.
>
> Plymouth must realise that as a resort she is in keen competition with hundreds of other places, not only in this country, but on the Continent as well, all aiming at the same goal, that of attracting visitors. The town that scores first is going to have a big advantage over the others which is why she needs advertising.[7]

In 1929 the Advertising Committee of the Plymouth Mercantile Association decided – in view of the appeal for funds by the Plymouth Publicity Committee – for their publicity 'Plymouth: The Centre of a Hundred Tours' to discontinue, appealing for subscriptions to the association's advertising fund.

From 1926 onwards, Plymouth's advertising slogan became: 'Plymouth: The Centre of a Hundred Tours.' This was the slogan that Mr Ernest Underhill, chairman of the Publicity Committee of Plymouth Week was using.

In May 1927, as part of the publicity scheme for 'Plymouth: The Centre of a Hundred Tours,' Plymouth Art School designed a poster in eight colours, which was a view from the Hoe near the flagstaff, looking over the Pier and Drake's Island to Mount Edgcumbe and Penlee, which Plymouth's Publicity Committee would be issuing.

**Figure 3:** Poster designed by Plymouth Art School, which was exhibited in various parts of the country.[8]

[7] *Western Morning News*, 24 November 1927.
[8] *Western Morning News*, 17 May 1927.

In 1927 Mr Frank Potter, operating superintendent of the Great Western Railway, spoke to a *Western Morning News* reporter. He said that the Great Western Railway and the Southern Railway companies were willing and anxious to do everything in their power for the advancement of Plymouth – and Devon and Cornwall generally – as a holiday district. He said that the Great Western Railway authorities were convinced that Plymouth was an ideal holiday centre, and given good advertising could be made into a popular seaside resort. The first essential, however, he stated, was that the advertising of Plymouth should be placed in the hands of one central committee with which the railway companies can negotiate:

> The railway companies are deeply impressed with the tremendous possibilities of Plymouth and I know no place where a holiday of two weeks can be spent and a different tour can be enjoyed with different scenery on every one of those days.[9]

In 1928, Plymouth Publicity Committee started another intensive campaign to advertise Plymouth as an unrivalled touring centre. Again, there were posters designed by students of Plymouth Art School, and the Great Western Railway and Southern Railway companies co-operated with the Plymouth Publicity Committee to distribute Plymouth's posters to most of the railway stations in the United Kingdom.

In August 1928, a *Western Morning News* reporter asked this question to several of Plymouth's local businessmen, 'Can the publicity organizations of Devon and Cornwall combine into one central body or should we have a collective scheme for the systematic advertisement of the Westcountry throughout Great Britain and the United States?'

Mr E. Stanley Leatherby believed that Plymouth should have a scheme of collective advertising:

> I feel that the time for advertising the one town is passed. The advent of motor cars has made it possible for people to travel from town to town.
>
> Before a town could look after its own publicity but today people travel from place to place and will select a district appealing to them and the utmost a town can expect is for these people to spend two or three days in their vicinity.
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> If various towns in Devon and Cornwall will concentrate on unified publicity, they will ensure visitors, particularly from America, staying in the West. The amount that each town at present spends on individual advertising would, collectively, make a considerable sum, and advertising on a large scale could be carried out. Perhaps traders and business establishments in Plymouth might contribute towards one publicity fund.[10]

In February 1929, a group of businessmen in Plymouth were introducing a scheme for Devon to publicise to Americans and colonials who responded to the 'Come to Britain' movement the attractions that Devon has to offer. This group approached twenty-four towns to come to a conference. They were hoping that if all towns accepted, they would have publicity propaganda on such a scale that it would bring the attractions of Devon to the notice of millions.

In the course of an interview, Mr Ernest Underhill said:

> We are inviting towns such as Sidmouth, Okehampton, Barnstaple, Bideford, Ilfracombe with the idea that an association should be formed for the purpose of broadcasting the claims and features of

[9] *Western Morning News*, 24 November 1927.
[10] *Western Morning News*, 3 August 1928.

> the county as a desirable holiday and residential district, quite independent of any publicity work that is already in the hands of individual towns.[11]

But by August 1929 this scheme was put in abeyance as of the forty-four towns which had been invited to attend the conference, twenty-three replied in the affirmative, fifteen towns replied in the negative and from six there were no replies.

In August 1929, Plymouth was thinking of producing a film showing the city as "The Centre of a Hundred Tours," by a well-known London firm of cinematographers, with the cost to be shared between Plymouth Publicity Committee and the Great Western Railway. The film was to be used principally in America during the winter months and it was hoped that good and profitable use will be made of it in the North and Midlands for propaganda purposes.

In December 1929, the *Western Morning News* reported that the Savoy Picture House, Plymouth was showing Plymouth's own film, depicting its life, industries, ancient relics and lovely surroundings, made by the Pathé Company in co-operation with the Plymouth Publicity Committee and the railway companies, was nearing completion. Those who saw the film were delighted with the effective use that had been made of the material available advertising Plymouth as the 'Centre of a Hundred Tours'. The intention was to exhibit the picture throughout Great Britain, in America and elsewhere. Before the film was released for general exhibition it would be inspected and passed by the Publicity Committee. The following February, the film went to America.[12]

At the end of 1929, the *Western Morning News* reported that the motor car may be regarded as an unmixed blessing to those resorts who count their profits by the number of weeks their guests remain among them, but to the city of Plymouth the phenomenal increase in the popularity of the automobile, the increasing cheapness of reliable cars and the improvement of the roads in the West and in the country generally, certainly mean the enhancement of its attractions as a touring centre.

[11] *Western Morning News*, 15 February 1929.
[12] *Western Morning News*, 2 December 1929.