The Torquay Historical Pageant of 1924

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In 1924, the South Devon resort of Torquay held a historical pageant that attracted an estimated 25,000 spectators. Almost 2,000 local people volunteered to act out scenes from the area's past, all dressed in costume and accompanied by an orchestra and a large choir. It was a remarkable community effort, which is now all but forgotten, but it was not an event that emerged from nowhere. It was a local interpretation of a phenomenon known as 'pageantitis' that swept the country in the early part of the twentieth century.

To understand how the Torquay Historical Pageant came about, and why it took the form that it did, we must first examine the 'mother of all' modern historical pageants, which set the scene for those that followed.

In 1905, the small Dorsetshire town of Sherborne had staged a pageant to mark the founding of the town by St Aldhelm some 1,200 years earlier. In an inspired move, Sherborne had commissioned Louis Napoleon Parker (composer, playwright and former Sherborne schoolmaster) to organise the event. Parker had his own vision for this commemoration, which comprised a sequence of episodes, each relating to an event in the town's long history. No less than 800–900 of the town's 6,000 population had participated in these episodes, and it is estimated that around 30,000 people came to view the event.

Needless to say, the pageant attracted a great deal of positive publicity in the local and national newspapers. Remarkably, the pageant was filmed, and even more remarkably, the film has survived.[1] What is more, the pageant made a profit of £1,872, and the proceeds were used to lay out land donated to the council to create the Pageant Gardens.

With so many positives, it is no surprise that other communities quickly followed Sherborne's example in organising their own historical pageants. By the time Dover held its pageant in 1908, 'pageantitis' had taken hold of the country. On the cover of the programme for the Dover pageant, Parker was described as the 'Master of the Pageant'. He can be said to have created the role of what was later described as 'pageant master', and he set out his own format and rules for such events.

Parker calls the participants 'executants'. He is very inclusive as he states that:

> The executants must include every class of the community, both male and female: peers and ploughboys; dignitaries of the Church and all the clergy; ministers of every denomination; young men and maidens; old men and children; the beautiful and the

[1] *BFI Player*, 'Sherbourne Pageant' (1905), https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-sherborne-pageant-1905-online.

> less beautiful; youth is no hindrance, and age no bar; nobody is too good to be in a pageant and almost everybody is good enough.[2]

In 1911, a Pageant of London formed part of the Festival of Empire at the Crystal Palace. As befitted a pageant staged at the height of Empire, the conception and execution was vast in both ambition and execution. Around 15,000 ‘executants’ took part, and the original run of six weeks was extended to fourteen weeks, with over 1,000,000 spectators paying to see the spectacle.

Thus, in six short years from that ‘mother of all pageants’ in Sherborne, the historical pageant had now conquered, if not the world, then the British Empire. After the Great War, pageants once more resumed.

Planning the Torquay Historical Pageant

The impetus for a historical pageant in Torquay appears to have come from J. M. Scott, the town’s publicity director. Scott saw the value of a pageant in promoting the town and the wider area – his original concept was to involve other local authorities in South Devon. He certainly had grand ambitions – an early newspaper article said that he expected the Torquay Pageant to surpass in magnitude and attractiveness any previous pageant held in any part of the country.[3]

Scott tried to tempt the council with the prospect of any profits from the pageant being used to support local charities, such as the hospital. The councillors were more hard-headed, and as insurance against a loss being made, they insisted that Scott secured guarantors to a total of £1,000. This was quickly achieved, primarily from local hotel proprietors.

The next step was to find a suitable pageant master. Parker had now retired from the role, but this was not a problem for Scott, as he knew just the man – Arthur Gustavus Trugard Applin. Arthur Applin was eminently qualified – he was a Torquinian, having been born at Chelston Manor in 1873. He was also a well-known dramatic actor, who had moved into theatre direction, as well as writing sensationalist novels. In fact, he claimed to have written over 14,000,000 words during his lifetime.[4] Most importantly, he had already masterminded the successful Reading Pageant of 1920.

The official launch was reported in the *Torquay Times* on 15 February 1924. Applin addressed a public meeting, saying:

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[2] Louis N. Parker, *Several of My Lives* (Chapman & Hall, 1928), pp. 283–4.
[3] *Torquay Times*, 18 January 1924, p. 5.
[4] *Gloucester Citizen*, 12 September 1949, p. 6.

> To have this pageant is a noble, inspiring and jolly thing to do. It is your pageant. It is up to you to see that every boy and every friend has to come into it and rouse the understanding and enthusiasm in each of your fellows to make it a real live pageant.[5]

There was a move to delay the pageant by twelve months due to the colossal amount of work required, but on a vote it was agreed by a large majority in June 1924.

The following week, a list of the twelve proposed episodes was published. It was confirmed that the neighbouring towns of Paignton, Brixham, Dartmouth, Newton Abbot, Totnes and Teignmouth had been invited to, 'furnish episodes dealing with notable historical events in their history'.[6] Later, it was found that all had declined the invitation. As a result, the proposed episodes of the departure of the Pilgrim Fathers from Plymouth and the landing of William of Orange at Brixham were dropped from the programme.[7]

Applin and his team were quickly into action. In early March they attended meetings of the local organisations that had been asked to lead on each of the episodes.[8] For example, the Torquay Hotels and Caterers' Association agreed to adopt two episodes – The Wedding of Rufus and The Challenge of the Earl of Totnes. Each organisation formed its own committee to supervise the preparations for their assigned episode(s).

Next, a large advertisement appeared in the local press, appealing for 2,000 performers and voluntary helpers. The helpers required included dressmakers, box office and cloakroom attendants and stewards.[9] It was hoped that a majority of the performers would provide their own costumes, which were described as being quite simple to make up using inexpensive materials.

By the middle of March all seemed to be going well. The date of the pageant had now been fixed as running from 23 to 28 June. Permission had been given for the use of the Rockend estate, with room for up to 9,000 spectators, and there were hopes of substantial fees from photographers and cinema rights – the pageant was to be filmed by F. Harold Bastick. Great Western Railways were proposing to issue 5,000 illustrated posters to stations around the country.

The venue of Rockend was the site of a large villa, built around 1840 in the Italianate style. It stood in 20 acres of land on the coast between the harbour and Daddyhole Plain, a lovely spot. The front lawn was in the form of a bowl or amphitheatre, making it ideal for performances, with audiences seated on the encompassing banks. Indeed, it had been used for many charitable fayres and events down the years. For the pageant, capacity would be

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[5] *Torquay Times*, 15 Februar1924, p. 5.
[6] *Torquay Times*, 29 February 1924, p. 5.
[7] Torquay *Times*, 14 March 1924, p. 9.
[8] *Torquay Times*, 7 March 1924, p. 5.
[9] *Torquay Times*, 14 March 1924, p. 5.

expanded by the installation of grandstands. In 1924, the estate was owned by Empire Hotels, who had ambitions to build a superior hotel on the site.

By early May, warning signs were beginning to appear. Applin was obliged to state that no less than 1,000 men would be required during the following couple of weeks, otherwise the success of the pageant would be jeopardised. The newspaper made a plea for employers to co-operate by releasing men for the cause.[10] The following week, the Mayor followed up this appeal with an open letter in the local press, making a direct appeal to employers.[11]

The performers had to be rehearsed, and a particular issue was that few were experienced in acting or public speaking. We should remember that this was a large outdoor venue with the prospect of wind and wave noise in the background, and no amplification, so those with speaking roles had to be taught how to project their voices.

As the date of the pageant approached, advertisements began to appear that quoted ticket prices from 1s 2d (6p) for admission to the grounds only, with seating ranging from 2s 4d in the cheapest part of the enclosure up to £1 for the best seats in the grandstand.[12] At this time, it was envisaged that evening performances would commence on Tuesday 24 June, with matinees on the Wednesday and Saturday.

Sandwich board men were now parading along Oxford Street, Trafalgar Square and other parts of Central London, advertising the pageant.[13] The Great Western Railway posters had been displayed at its stations for some time, and extra trains were to be laid on for the pageant.

The official list of the main performers was published in the *Torquay Times*[14] in the week leading up to the pageant, and other participants were listed in the *Book of Words*.[15] However, most of the participants would inevitably remain anonymous. Dress rehearsals were now possible, so one could see Queen Elizabeth I stepping out of a motor car, while a ‘caveman’ lounged nearby, smoking a cigarette.

The weather had been poor in the weeks leading up to the pageant, but it suddenly improved. The grandstand was filled for the pageant service, held on the Sunday afternoon. Revd T. C. Walters gave a stirring address, referring to, ‘the noble heritage which is ours as English people’.[16] It was an unashamedly patriotic speech, in which he emphasised the tremendous responsibility of an imperial people.

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[10] *Torquay Times*, 2 May 1924, p. 10.
[11] *Torquay Times*, 9 May 1924, p. 4.
[12] *Torquay Times*, 13 June 1924, p. 12.
[13] *Torquay Times*, 13 June 1924, p. 7.
[14] *Torquay Times*, 20 June 1924, p 2.
[15] Arthur Applin, *Torquay Historical Pageant* (Committee of the Torquay Historical Pageant, 1924).
[16] *Torquay Times*, 27 June 1924, p. 10.

The performances

The pageant was opened by Vice Admiral N. A. McCully of the United States Navy. McCully was commanding a squadron of four old battleships that were in European waters on a goodwill and training mission, and which were anchored in Torbay at the time. With this formality concluded, the pageant could finally begin. The descriptions below follow those used in the *Book of Words.*

Episode 1 – Palaeolithic man

The Shadow of Life summons the first characters. Stone Age families appear, dance and then head off-stage to capture a deer. As they start feasting on the deer, a hostile band appears, and a fight ensues. The attackers win the day, kill the men of the other tribe and carry off the shrieking women into captivity. The Shadow of Life appears, and despite the gory scenes just witnessed, declaims her prophecy of the future greatness of Britain in ages yet to come.

Finally, a band of fairies, pixies and gnomes enters, followed by a band of excited children, trying to capture these 'elusive spirits'. Failing to do so, they instead start playing their favourite games.

Episode 2 – The Dammonii of Dartmoor

The episode opens with a procession of Druids bearing oak branches, stone vessels and sacrificial knives. The Arch Druid demands the sacrifice of three young maidens, and three volunteers step forward. They are bound and laid on the altar of sacrifice, but the omens are wrong; ravens appear instead of the expected golden birds, and confusion reigns. Just then, Roman soldiers arrive, seize the Druids and release their victims. They tell them that Constantine is their emperor, he is a Christian, and the Dammonii must also embrace Christianity. This they do when the omen of the golden birds appears in the shape of a cross.

Episode 3 – The foundation of Torre Abbey

This episode did not appear at the pageant for reasons that are not altogether clear. Perhaps lack of volunteers may have been the cause.

Episode 4 – The wedding of Reginald De Mohun to Alicia De Briwere in 1205

The Manor of Torre was held by the Briwere (later Brewer) family who had founded Torre Abbey in 1196. The bride was the daughter of Lord William de Briwere, and the groom's family was based at Dunster in Somerset. With this marriage, the manor becomes Tor Mohun, and as Tormohun it survives today as the name of part of the town.

The rehearsal of the wedding procession was the subject of a painting by Charles Gray Kennaway, a Scottish artist who had retired to Torquay. Most of our images of the pageant are fuzzy black-and-white newspaper photographs, but here we have a full-colour painting that reveals some impression of the numbers involved, the costumes and the spectacle. The

painting is set against a backdrop of Torre Abbey, as this would have been the location for the filming of this episode.

Episode 5 – Carew's challenge

The basis of the episode was substantially taken from the ballad, 'The Earl of Totnes', and is set in the early- to mid-sixteenth century.

Sir Arthur Champernowne of Dartington challenged Sir George Carew of Haccombe (the eponymous Earl) to a horse race, the prize to be the other man's manor. Champernowne was confident, as he had a Barbary steed (a valuable Arab horse) but Carew had only a Devonshire roan. However, this was to be a race with a difference, as the winner would be the man who could ride his horse the furthest out into the sea in Torbay.

The horsemen disappeared, and, according to the ballad, as the two competitors got out into the Bay:

> The wind blew hard and the waves beat high,
>
> And the horses strove for the mastery;
>
> Till Sir Arthur cried, "Help, thou bold Carew!
>
> Help, if thou art a Christian true!"

Needless to say, Carew did rescue the struggling Champernowne, and in the pageant he returns to the amphitheatre with his challenger across his horse. Carew then gallops off to his home in Haccombe, where he releases his horse from all further service and has the horseshoes nailed to the church door. If you visit the historic church of St Blaise at Haccombe in its delightful setting today, you will still see the remnants of four horseshoes on the door.

Episode 6 – Plymouth Hoe, 19 July 1588

Famous sea captains such as Walter Raleigh, Lord Howard and Martin Frobisher are playing bowls on Plymouth Hoe as Sir Francis Drake joins them. A deserter rushes in to report the sighting of the Armada and Drake utters the famous words, 'There's time to finish the game and beat the Spaniards too!' Eventually a drum roll and trumpet calls summon them all away.

Episode 7 – Defeat of the Armada

Drake and his victorious fellow captains return to the sound of gunfire, ringing bells and a shouting, jubilant crowd. Drake is hoisted shoulder high and feted amidst an outbreak of rejoicing. They all then join in a psalm of thanksgiving.

Episode 8 – Princess Victoria visits Torquay

The young princess (aged fourteen) and her mother, the Duchess of Kent, paid a surprise visit to Torquay during the Regatta on 1 August 1833. The scene reflects the excitement and commotion when the approach of the Royal Yacht is recognised, with the hasty assembly of a

reception party. A local band appears and children rush forward with flowers, while the National Anthem is played.

The episode includes a rather gruesome event. A Mr Dart, a local bootmaker, dashed forward with a pair of boots that he wished to give to the young princess. The local coastguards had been charged with protecting the Royal party from the crush, and in the confusion they contrived to stab poor Mr Dart in the eye with a bayonet. The Duchess of Kent has him sent off to hospital, and subsequently ensured that he received a pension. Following music and dancing, everyone departs the arena.

Episode 9 – Worthies of Devon

The Shadow of Life again summons the pixies, gnomes and fairies of old Dartmoor. Then the music commences for a parade of familiar characters, ranging from Sir Walter Raleigh and Uncle Tom Cobley's party through to individuals rather forgotten today, such as the prophetess Joanna Southcott and two ladies rather cruelly nicknamed the 'Alphington Ponies'.

Episode 10 – Triumphal March of episodes

General Buller, nowadays a somewhat controversial figure, is bidden to take command of this episode, in which Love is unmasked and breaks the sword of a nearby soldier. At this signal the Triumphal March is played and the performers parade around the arena, bringing the event to a close.

Reviews

Due to the success of the pageant, extra performances had to be arranged on the Monday and Tuesday evenings, and on the Wednesday afternoon and evening.[17]

Attendees were rapturous in their praise. Someone signing themselves as, 'Bristolian'

wrote to the *Western Evening Herald*, advocating that Plymouth might follow Torquay's

example:

> Torquay – that most beautiful of Devon's orchids – has a natural advantage which possibly we may not enjoy locally. The setting of the pageant in the beautiful grounds of "Rockend" was, in itself, an inspiration. In a natural amphitheatre, ringed with trees of beautiful foliage, with peeps of the sea to add to the maritime atmosphere, one felt that on a glorious sunlit June evening here was a stage upon which any real play might well be produced with every prospect of success.[18]

[17] *Western Morning News*, 30 June 1924, p. 5.
[18] *Western Evening Herald*, 3 July 1924, p. 2.

It was reported that scenes of remarkable enthusiasm followed the close of the final performance. Applin was chaired into the arena amid loud cheering, and a series of presentations were made to key figures. The Mayor said, 'The wildest dreams of the widest optimist had been exceeded'. In eulogistic terms he expressed grateful thanks to Mr Applin, Mr Rhodes and Mr Goss, and also Mr Scott, Mr Callaghan and the owners of Rockend.[19]

The same edition of the newspaper also asked what the pageant had accomplished. It concluded that it was far more than entertainment, advertising or making money for local charities. It believed that historical representation was the most important aspect, and that:

> 'there was nothing from beginning to end of the representations, but what was artistic, instructive, wholesome and inspirational. It was the sort of thing which boys and girls. and refined women, could thoroughly enjoy without any sense of moral shock or harm'[20]

Aftermath

The film of the pageant was rapidly edited to produce a complete story in five parts entitled, *Glorious Devon*. It was heralded as, 'an Extraordinary Success, and […] a Triumph for the Producer and Actors' and played for 65 minutes. By 18 July it was being screened for a full week at the Electric Theatre with three viewings per day.[21] Sadly, the film does not appear to have survived.

By 9 July, a warning note was being sounded in the *Western Morning News*, 'there is an erroneous impression that enormous profits were made during the pageant. It was a great spectacular success, but Mr Scott doubts whether the cost will be met fully owing to the extraordinary heavy expenses.'[22] When the balance sheet was published, it made for disappointing reading, showing an overall loss of £879. The guarantors were asked to pay up 17s 6d in the £ of their guarantees.[23]

The *Torquay Times* was remarkably supportive of the Pageant Committee, despite the inevitable disappointment that local charities did not benefit as expected. It did comment that the restricted time period that had been imposed had meant that it was impossible to recruit sufficient performers and to arouse the necessary enthusiasm:

> There was no time to educate the people on the importance of such an event to Torquay, and there was an appalling amount of apathy and indifference which might have disappeared if more time had been allowed for propaganda work.[24]

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[19] *Torquay Times*, 4 July 1924, p. 7.
[20] Ibid.
[21] *Torquay Times*, 18 July 1924, p. 1.
[22] *Western Morning News*, 9 July 1924, p. 5.
[23] *Torquay Times*, 26 September 1924, p. 2.
[24] Ibid., p. 6.

Conclusion

As an event, on the one hand the pageant was a rip-roaring success. It was organised within a very short time, and a great part of the community was mobilised to participate and support. The venue was superb and the weather glorious, with additional performances having to be arranged. It has been estimated that the total attendance was around 25,000. Arthur Applin and his team did an excellent job, and there is no evidence of negative reports at all.

On the other hand, the reputation of the pageant did suffer from losing money. Quite why this should be is not clear – with bumper attendances, the entrance fee income was very low at just £1,637 after tax. Expectations had been raised, and the charities who missed out on their anticipated bonanza and the guarantors who had to stump up significant sums would have been left with a sour taste in their mouths.

Perhaps the pageant would have benefited from a longer gestation period. Delaying it by twelve months would have avoided conflict with two much bigger pageants that took place in 1924. The Bristol Pageant took place earlier in the year and attracted much more attention in the regional media. In London, the Pageant of Empire formed part of the huge British Empire Exhibition and ran from late July to 30 August, with 15,000 performers plus many animals, and was attended by an estimated 1,000,000 people. The Torquay Pageant paled into insignificance in the face of such competition.

The financial losses sustained by the pageant forestalled some later attempts to hold similar events in the area, such as one considered for Paignton. A Coronation Pageant was held at Compton Castle and in the millennium year there was a Torbay Pageant with around 200 performers.

Serious historians might quibble at some of the pageant's content. There were clear anachronisms, such as the reference to the conversion of Druids to Christianity. The inclusion of pixies and fairies and the legend of the Earl of Totnes were not purely 'historical'. However, myths and legends are part of our history. We must also remember that the pageant had to entertain, and that opportunities for all members of local society to perform, especially children, had to be found. The pageant was a highly effective means of mobilising the local community, of generating interest in local history and in raising the profile of Torquay.

While it might seem that historical pageants as envisioned by Louis Napoleon Parker may have had their day, some were performed for the millennium, and it could be argued that the opening ceremony of the London Olympics in 2012 was a modern interpretation of the historical pageant. Interest in the subject abides, not least in a major research project, 'The Redress of the Past', funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and hosted by King's College London.

Nowadays, there are few reminders of the 1924 pageant. It is mentioned on an information board at Daddyhole Plain, and Torre Abbey holds both Kennaway's painting of the Alicia de Briwere episode rehearsal and a plaque from the now-demolished Marine Spa that refers to the pageant. The Rockend estate was redeveloped for residential purposes in the 1950s. However, such a significant event does not deserve to be forgotten, and hopefully this article

will assist in its remembrance and also stimulate interest in the other historical pageants that have taken place around Devon.