Torquay, Torre Abbey and the Annings in the 1920s

Caroline Skelton

William and Minnie Annings lived in Torre Abbey from June 1921 to 1930, renting it from the Cary family, who could no longer afford to live there. William had been the head of Messrs. Anning Brs. Shipowners in Cardiff, chairman of the Cardiff and Bristol Shipowners' Association and a director of the North of England P&I (Protection and Indemnity insurance) Association.

They moved to Torre Abbey from Hatherleigh in Newport. William had not been in good health and was advised to 'take the sea air', as was common in the early twentieth century. However, he had to have his leg amputated after standing on a jellyfish on a nearby beach (although it is not certain when or where this happened).

Torquay had a lively yachting scene and William owned the 136-tonne steam yacht, *The Ursula*. He was also a member of the Torquay Yacht Club. Although the Annings were fairly elderly when they moved to Torquay and we have no record of their lives down here, they were a wealthy couple. When William Anning died in 1939, he left £112,500 in his will, which equates to between £6 and £9 million, depending on the rate of inflation used.

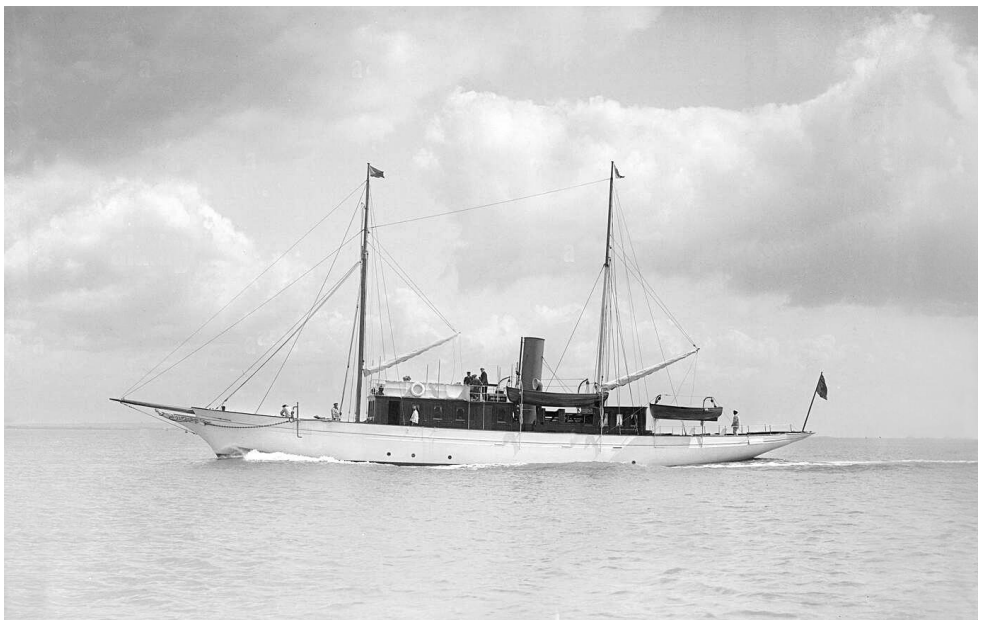

Figure 1: *The Ursula* (1911), owned by William Annings.[1]

[1] George Berg, https://www.album-online.com/photos/prev/ODQ2YTU1MA/album_alb4202361.jpg (accessed 6 October 2025).

Torquay in the 1920s

Torquay at the time was a prosperous resort, and the social scene for those who had time and money to spare was interesting and diverse.

Figure 2: Torre Abbey sands, not far from the Abbey, was a popular beach spot during the 1920s.[2]

Figure 3: The Marine Spa (in the background) and the Imperial Hotel (in the foreground) were both popular places for socialising during this period.[3]

[2] Torquay Museum, PR26636.
[3] Torquay Museum, PR4157.

There were lots of places where the Annings could have listened to music. There were bands playing in the bandstand in the Princess Gardens, and listening to these would have been a genteel pastime during the summer months. The Pavilion also regularly hosted concerts by the Torbay Municipal Orchestra, together with guest performances from big names of the music world.

Figure 4: The Marine Spa was another meeting place, and it may have offered tea-dances.[4]

The following painting can be found in Torre Abbey. Dated 1930, it gives a flavour of what was then called 'the locals beach'. In the late nineteenth century, this had been a ladies-only beach, and the famous Torquay born author Agatha Christie had swum there in her youth.

Figure 5: Beacon Cove by Edwin Earnest Morgan.[5]

[4] Torquay Museum, PR11021.
[5] Torre Abbey Collection.

Torre Abbey house and gardens

Figure 6: The Abbey would have looked very different when the Annings moved in.[6]

The beautiful Torre Abbey gardens were not opened to the public until 1930, after the Abbey had been sold to the council. However, even though Torre Abbey was being rented by a private couple, the grounds were used by other Torquay groups. In 1924, the Torquay Natural History Society celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, and a party was held in the grounds of Torre Abbey. It would appear that the attendees were dressed in costume from 1874, when the Society was founded.

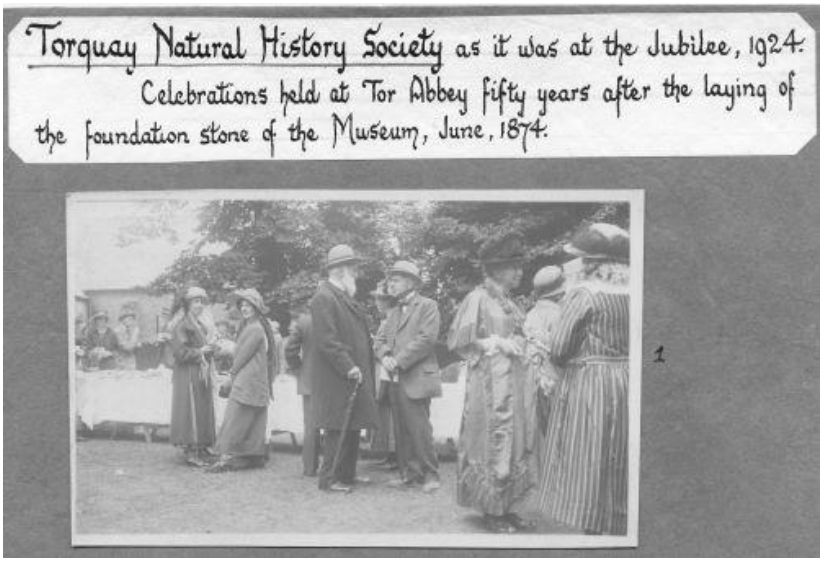

Figure 7: Torquay Natural History Society's fiftieth anniversary celebration in the Torre Abbey gardens.[7]

[6] Torquay Museum, PR26640.
[7] Torquay Museum, PR7008.

Wylam House, Torquay

Minnie died in July 1930, at the age of 68, while still living in the Abbey. It is thought that in the Easter after her death, William left the Abbey and it is likely he moved to and died at Wylam House in Torquay. He died in August 1939 at the age of 78.

Figure 8: Wylam House, Torquay.[8]

The house had a lift, which would have been helpful to a man with possible mobility problems. There was also a stunning conservatory and many beautiful bedrooms.

Figure 9: The interior of Wylam House, Torquay.[9]

[8] https://wylamhouse.com (accessed 6 October, 2025).
[9] Photos: Caroline Skelton, with kind permission of George and Caroline Berg.

Figure 10: A bedroom in Wylam House.[10]

After the Annings left, Torre Abbey was no longer lived in as a private house. Henry Cary, facing bankruptcy due to high death duties, sold the Abbey to Torquay Borough Council in 1930 for the bargain price of £40,000. Thus began a new chapter in the life of the Abbey.

[10] Photo: Caroline Skelton, with kind permission of George and Caroline Berg.