

# *Meteorite*

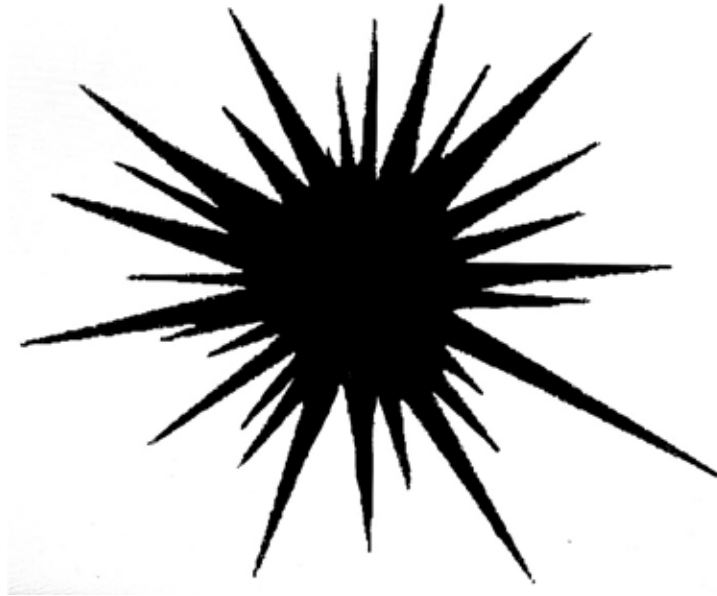
- a text written by Philip Hoare to accompany *The Tale*

*The Tale* is a journey across the landscape of Torbay through a series of artworks and performances. It is produced by Situations in association with organisations and groups across Torbay and is funded by Arts Council England through an Ambition for Excellence Award.

The full list of partners, funders and supporters along with artists and participants involved in the project can be found at: [the-tale.co.uk](http://the-tale.co.uk)

**SITUATIONS**

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### Dark Star, Jonathan Anderson, 2017

Sometimes, out on the grass or a beach, we look up into the sky and see it explode. The annual arrival of meteor showers, with their mythic names such as the Perseids, the Leonids and the Orionids, take us into deep time. ‘Lying on our backs’, as the artist and critic John Berger wrote, ‘we look up at the night sky. This is where stories began’. When we witness a meteor shower, we are watching our planet hurtle through the remains of a comet, their fragments burning in the atmosphere. Streaking through that night sky as if they’d scratched open the firmament and shown us infinity beyond, these natural signs and sidereal wonders struck fear and excitement in our ancestors.



In Albrecht Dürer’s enigmatic engraving, *Melencolia I*, (1514) a comet speeds across the Renaissance sky as an omen, watched by a gender-less angel surrounded by symbols that might be alchemical or mathematical. Dürer believed ‘the new art must be based upon science - in particular, upon mathematics, as the most exact, logical, and graphically constructive of the sciences’. To contemplate the infinite, as Dürer’s angel does, was not to dwell on mortality. Rather, as the contemporary German writer, W.G. Sebald, author of *The Rings of Saturn*, wrote, ‘Melancholy shares nothing with the desire for death. It is a form of resistance’.

Dürer's relationship to the natural world was intense, explicit and, ironically, mortal. He would eventually die of a fever, apparently caught in 1520 when trying to reach a whale stranded in Zeeland ('sea land') in the Netherlands ('never lands'), which he wanted to draw. A dead whale might, like a comet, signify disaster or good fortune (in fact, it is now believed that whales may strand because their navigation systems are upset by solar storms). Dürer was fascinated with such phenomena. 'The most wonderful thing I ever saw occurred in the year 1503', he wrote in his common-place book, 'when crosses fell upon many persons ... I have also seen a Comet in the sky'. Later, on the back of his painting of St Jerome and the lion, concealed as if it were some secret vision, the artist painted an exploding comet or star, burning red and incandescent in



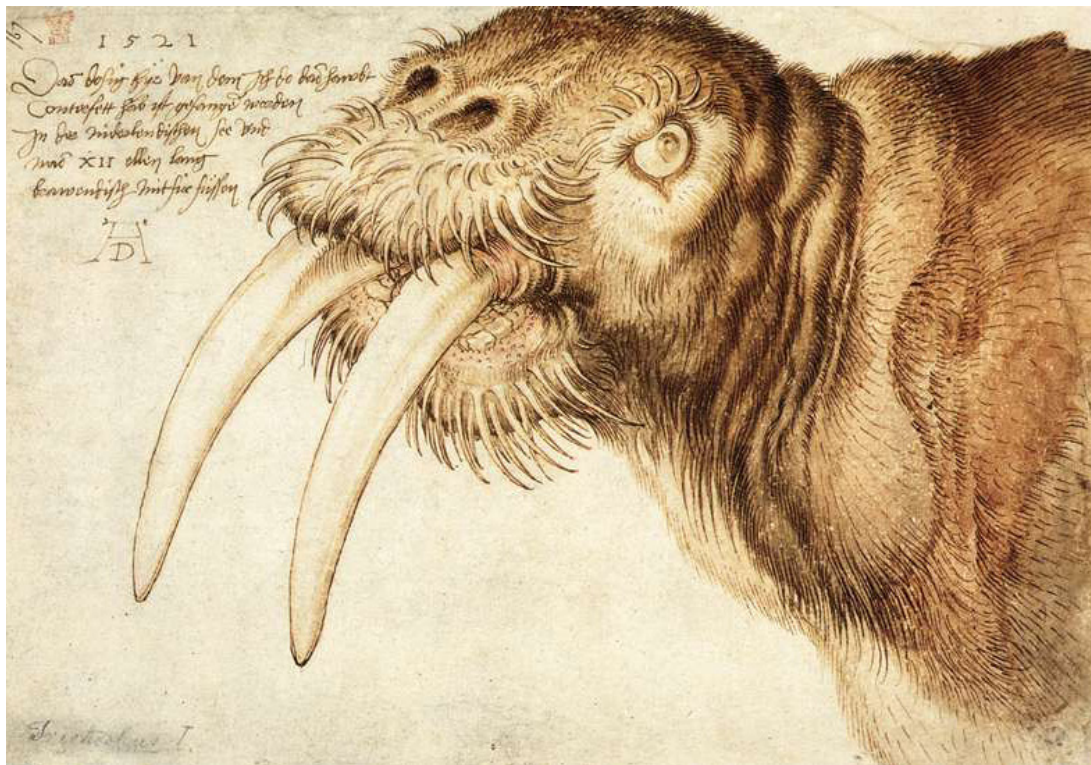
the moment of its meeting the Earth's atmosphere, as if in that moment, a new genesis might occur. It could be a Renaissance version of Jonathan Anderson's Dark Star, recreated out of coal dust for *The Society of Lost Souls*, humming with power and sending out static electricity of its own.

Three hundred years after Dürer, Percy Shelley, who shared his Romantic science fiction with his wife, Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein: A Modern Prometheus*, a book charged with its own celestial electricity, composed *Adonaïs*, his tribute to John Keats:

I am borne darkly, fearfully afar;  
Whilst, burning through the innermost veil of Heaven,  
The soul of Adonaïs, like a star,  
Beacons from above, where the Eternal are.

And a hundred years later, Wilfred Owen, fresh from the sea at Torquay, aspired to be a meteor, 'fast, eccentric, lone | And lawless'. The teenager too was fascinated with astronomy and science, and in a letter home, he had sketched a new comet he'd seen in the night sky. In five years' time, as he faced the Armageddon of the First World War, Owen told his fellow poet, Siegfried Sassoon, 'I was always a mad comet ... a dark star'.





## Walrus by Albrecht Durer

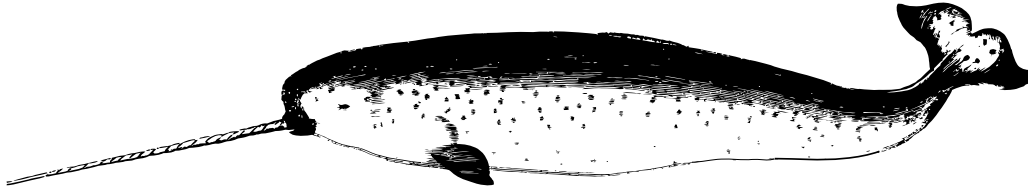
This strange skull resembles some Hadean cyclops or a chimeric human-alien hybrid, but the reality of its owner is scarcely less strange. The walrus - from the old Norse *hvalross*, hairy whale - was a kind of composite, mythic creature of the Arctic, a beast to be feared. 'To the far north ...' as Olaus Magnus, the 16th century chronicler of all things strange in the sea wrote, 'there lives a mighty creature, as big as an elephant, called the walrus or morse, perhaps so named for its sharp bite; for if it glimpses a man on the seashore and can catch him, it jumps on him swiftly, rends him with its teeth, and kills him in an



instant'. When he failed to see his whale in Zeeland in 1520, he was shown another fearsomely toothed creature: a walrus - then occasionally seen on the more northerly coasts of the North Sea. This rare specimen was 'taken in the Netherlandish sea', wrote Dürer, 'and was 12 Brabant ells long and had four feet'. The artist would later recycle its image as the model for a dragon.

As lumbering as the suborder of pinnipeds - walruses, seals and sea lions - may seem, they can move faster than a human can run. Walruses (*Obendus*

*rosmarus*) were once thought to hang off the ice by their tusks or climb up cliffs 'as if they were going up a ladder', sometimes falling asleep in that position, before rolling back into the sea. In fact, they reach three metres in length, mostly feed on fish, diving for up to 130 metres, and can stay underwater for nearly half an hour



### Narwhal, William Scoresby, *An Account of the Arctic Regions*, 1821 Narwhal tusk and model, *Monodon monoceros*

This Arctic cetacean derives its name from the old Norse, *nar* and *hvalr*, meaning 'corpse whale', because its spotted hide resembled a dead body. In medieval times, the narwhal's tusk - in fact an erupted tooth - was sold as the true horn of a unicorn, and believed to bestow magical power. If ground down, its powder could prevent against poisoning. Elizabeth I was given a tusk by Sir Martin Frobisher, who had sailed to the Arctic. It was so valuable she could have built a new castle for the price it would fetch. It was later made into a sceptre, charged with royal power. Narwhals were believed to duel with their tusks, or dig for fish in the sea floor with them. In fact, modern science indicates that their ivory is highly sensate with nerves, and may act as 'thermometers', enabling the mammals to sense the air temperature and warn them of closing ice. They may also rub one another's tusks as a means of sensual communication - and only recently were indeed filmed using their tusks to fish with.

One of the first Europeans to accurately describe and illustrate the narwhal was the celebrated Whitby whaler, William Scoresby. His book, *An Account of the Arctic Regions*, also described the bowhead whale - which can live for up to three hundred years old - and illustrated the microscopic complexity of snowflakes. Scoresby later became a vicar, and preached in a Floating Chapel in Liverpool Docks. He retired to Torquay, where he became fascinated by mesmerism, which he practised on the young ladies of the resort, to the certain scandal of townsfolk.

## Raven, *Corvus corax*



The Norse god Odin had two ravens, Hugin and Munin, who would sit on either shoulder, then fly off around the world each day to spy on the activities of humans and bring back the news to their master. They were his avian internet. The Vikings saw them as one of their 'beasts of battle', carried into war emblazoned on their flags - carrion birds who would soon be picking the bones of their enemies. Ravens are the largest of corvid family in Great Britain; they have been proved to be among the cleverest of all birds, able to trick, deceive, lie and murder. Ravens

maintain a stronghold in the south-west of England, having been forced there by encroaching farming practices. The act of looking at any animal is an act of anthropomorphy, since we always see ourselves reflected there. 'The eyes of an animal when they consider a man are attentive and wary', John Berger wrote. 'Man becomes aware of returning the look. The animal scrutinises him across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension'.



## Grey whale vertebra, *Eschrichtius robustus*

Collected by William Pengelly and found on Babbacombe Cove, this beachcombed bone, the vertebra of an Atlantic grey whale, is a powerful object. It speaks of the first modern extinctions. Grey whales are now confined to the Pacific Ocean, but until the medieval period they swam in Atlantic and even the English Channel; they might be cetaceans from Atlantis. Their extinction more than two hundred years ago, probably caused by humans, heralded a new age, the Anthropocene, in which we have irrevocably altered the world.

Because they spend much time at the surface, grey whales were a particular targets for the hunters. They were known as devil fish for the ferocity with which they fought back. Yet these same whales (and they may be the *same* whales, since individuals can live for one hundred years) now allow themselves to be petted by humans when they come alongside boats. The great whales represent, perhaps more than any



other animal hunted by humans, the huge gulf, and yet also the narrow margin, between ourselves and the natural world.

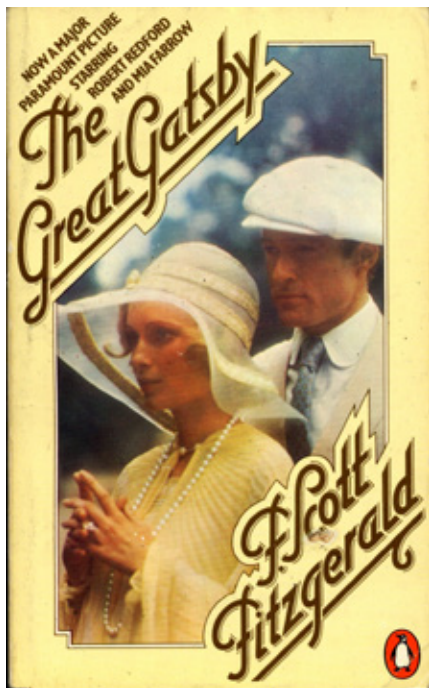


Angela Cockayne, 'Intelligent Life', pewter, 2014  
Sperm whale, *Physeter macrocephalus*

The sperm whale is the whale we all drew as children; its great square head and low-slung jaw - containing the biggest teeth of any animal - suggests something enigmatic. In the years of whaling, sperm whales were hunted for their spermaceti contained in those heads, and originally believed to be the whales' semen. This oil was used for use as lubrication, lighting and candles; the unit of light itself, the lumen, derives from the product of these deep-diving animals. On long voyages, sailors carved the whales' teeth into tattoo-like scrimshaw, using soot from the fires that boiled down the blubber.

We still know very little about sperm whales. They share a matrilineal, highly social culture and use echo-locating clicks to hunt and to communicate. They possess the largest brains on the planet, but we do not know what they do with them. They intrigued 19th century scientists and writers: William Pengelly of Torquay noted that his friend, Charles Babbage, the inventor of the computer, and of the cowcatcher, remarked that 'for anything that appeared to the contrary, there might possibly be a world of intellectual whales'. And having written 136 chapters about the whale in *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville concluded, 'I know him not, and never will'. He also addressed the possibility of the whale's extinction, but decided that as the seas rose and our civilisations were flooded, the whale would 'spout his frothed defiance to the skies'.

## F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, paperback, 1974



Scott Fitzgerald's celebrated story of the mysterious, handsome and wealthy Gatsby who appears on Long Island near New York and attempts to woo Daisy Buchanan, is a modern myth of America, of yearning and longing, of heroism and hedonism, of love and betrayal. In 1974 it was filmed with Robert Redford and Mia Farrow in the starring roles, prompting a wave of nostalgia for the 1920s, and modern versions of Twenties fashions, evoking the scene in which Daisy is reduced to tears by the beautiful shades of Gatsby's shirts. Gatsby's mysterious origins remain speculative: 'there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away'.



## Pieter Breugel, *Landscape with The Fall of Icarus*, c.1550s

## Walter Tevis, *The Man Who Fell to Earth*,

## film stills & paperback, 1976

## Ettore Sottsass, *Memphis lamp*, c. 1985

Walter Tevis set his science fiction novel, which he wrote in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, in 1985. Thomas Jerome Newton, an enigmatic, flame-haired figure arrives in America and creates a multi-national media and technology empire. Like Gatsby, he lives as a recluse at the waterside, and becomes the subject of suspicion by the authorities, who seek to suppress him and his activities. His strange arrival on Earth seems to be pre-announced in history by the fall of Icarus, the wax-winged boy who got too close to the sun, and fell into the sea and drowned as a result of his ambition. Newton, who has come from his



parched, devastated planet to warn of the dangers of nuclear war and environmental destruction, would meet the same fate as the winged boy. In an early scene in the film, Professor Nathan Bryce receives an art book produced by World Enterprises. It falls open at a reproduction of Breugel's painting and a verse from W.H. Auden's poem:

... the sun shone  
 As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
 Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
 Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.



**Songs of the Humpback Whale, 1970.**  
**Ellen Gallagher, Watery Ecstatic (whale fall), 2010**

It wasn't until the invention of naval sonar - itself inspired by whale sounds - that recordings were made of humpback whale songs. In the 1960s, Frank Watlington, an American scientist working for the US Navy during the Cold War, was using hydrophones to listen for Soviet submarines when he heard a haunting, eerie, apparently animate sound. Although sailors had often listen to such noises through the hulls of their ships, or rising through the surface of the sea as if its skin were a vast loudspeaker, they had turned them into the voices of lost souls, their drowned shipmates.

Watlington kept his discovery secret because he feared whaling ships would use it to detect and kill the animals. But when Roger Payne released the songs as a best-selling album in 1970, the world changed. An animal which had been dumb and unable to protest its abuse now had a voice: a lament for its condition, a poetic expression of its culture. While the space missions of the time proposed an exploration of the

solar system and even an intimation of extra-terrestrial life beyond - as emitted by the perpetual hum from the monolith in Stanley Kubrick's film, *2001: A Space Odyssey* - we discovered that the aliens were living among us all the time. Indeed, we knew what the world looked like from outer space before we knew what whales looked like underwater. As Arthur C. Clarke, the author of *2001*, said, our Earth would be better named Ocean.

The songs recorded on this vinyl album, reproduced by a needle running in a groove which elsewhere might pick up the sounds of Bob Dylan or Led Zeppelin, did more than anything else to save the whale in the twentieth century. Our culture was changed by the whale's culture. After the implementation of a voluntary ban on the hunting of great whales in 1986, humpback whale populations appear to be gradually recovering. In the spring of 2017, a young humpback whale appeared off the south Devon coast, swimming from Start Bay to Torbay and Berry Head, where it was filmed breaching out of the water.

In Ellen Gallagher's painting, we see the after-life of the whale in its last little dance. The semi-decomposed carcass of a humpback slowly falls to the ocean floor, swaying with the benthic currents, to lie down there in the dark, where species of bone-eating worms known as osedax spent their entire life cycle feeding off its remains. We know that life itself began down in those depths; and that in creating this new ecosystem, the dead, sacrificial whale, is contributing to the sequestration of climate-changing carbon from our atmosphere.

*Those are pearls that were his eyes;  
Nothing of him that doth fade,  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange.*

*Ariel, The Tempest.*



## **2001: A Space Odyssey soundtrack, 1968.**

Stanley Kubrick's science fiction masterpiece, filmed in England and released in 1968, echoed contemporary hopes and fears about technology. Made around the same time as the launch of NASA missions to the moon - and the history-changing view of earthrise from our own satellite - as well as the launch of the new supersonic airliner, Concorde, Kubrick's mythic film was based on the book by Arthur C. Clarke, which predicted the dangers of sentient computers overtaking human endeavour.

Beginning in the prehistoric past with human apes summoned by a siren-like alien sound - a kind of extra-terrestrial tinnitus - from an eerie monolithic black block found buried on the moon - its search for meaning ends over unknown alien seas. With its classical and avant-garde soundtrack and balletic space sequences and its air of a science-fiction documentary from the future, 2001 inspired a new generation of science fiction films, as well as a song called 'Space Oddity'. Like its lost astronauts, we knew that our planet Earth was blue, and there was nothing we could do.



### Elizabeth Barrett Browning, autograph and portrait engraving, 1861.

Elizabeth Barrett came to Torquay as a young woman in 1832, suffering from an obscure condition that has yet to be properly diagnosed, but which required her to sleep suspended in a 'spinal crib'. Her body was subject to strange therapies such as cupping - the application of hot glasses - and setons, strands of cotton threaded through her skin as though she were a piece of embroidery. But in Torquay, she experienced a more benevolent cure: the sea. Although she complained that the invalids made the resort resemble a hospital, she was in love with the water. From Beacon Terrace, she overlooked the harbour. 'Our house here is *in* the sea', she wrote - 'at least to my imagination it is' - and she loved to go sailing with her maid, Crow. The Bath House at the end of the terrace was actually flooded by the sea, by invitation. Established in 1817 during the Regency craze for sea bathing, its lower floor allowed the tide to flow 'through the wall of the pier into a spacious reservoir'. In this therapeutic machine, a human aquarium, Elizabeth could experience the salt water cure.



Elizabeth's spirits were further cheered by the arrival of her beloved elder brother, Edward, who came to look after her. He'd lie on her bed for hours, talking. But on Saturday 11 July 1840, he and his friend Charles Vanneck set off from Babbacombe for a day's sailing. They were never seen alive again. Six days later, one corpse was pulled from the water by a Brixham trawler, crewed by the two sons of the fishing port's vicar, Francis Lyte. It took three more weeks before Edward's body was found, floating a mile and a half out in the bay. 'On being examined it was found a little mutilated in the face and hands'. Sixteen silver shillings, and a handkerchief marked E.M.B. were still in his pockets.

This tragedy passed into legend - Victorian books showed a distraught Elizabeth on her balcony, watching her brother's yacht sink, an entirely imaginary scene. But her love of the sea had turned sour and the sight of it intolerable: 'The associations of this place, lie upon me, struggle as I may, like the oppression of a perpetual night-mare.' She believed her family was cursed because of its exploitation of slaves on its Jamaican plantations, and that she had 'black blood'.

Addicted to opium and wearing black mourning, Elizabeth left Torquay in a specially-built suspended carriage, never to return. She seemed destined for a life of reclusion and invalidity. But her ferocious poetic voice denied that repression, and she shocked society by eloping to Italy in 1846 with Robert Browning (also of a slave-owning family and himself part Creole). She gave birth to a son, Pen, whose gender she declined to define and whom she dressed in extravagant clothes. She protested against slavery and the oppression of women, and supported the revolutions under way in Europe. Elizabeth returned to the sea shortly before her death, to dip her body in the water. She died in 1861 as the century's most celebrated female poet, uttering her last word, *'Beautiful'*.



Wilfred Owen as a young boy, dressed as a sailor, 1908.

John Keats, manuscript letter to Fanny Brawne, c.1819.

In 1910, seventeen-year old Wilfred Owen came to Torquay to stay with his uncle and aunt who lived above their bookshop at 264 Union Street. For the boy from Birkenhead, the great allure of this place was clear.

'The whole day... centres around the bathing, the most enjoyable we have ever had, I think', Wilfred told his mother. The fact that he had grown up far from the sea only made it more powerful to him. Wilfred's hero, John Keats, had stayed at nearby Teignmouth (where he complained that the place was so wet its inhabitants were amphibious). Wilfred was obsessed with the doomed Romantic poet, whose epitaph read, 'Here lies one whose name was writ in water'. Wilfred told his mother he was 'in love with a dead 'un', and wrote his own ode to Keats: 'Eternally may sad waves wail his death'.

From his uncle's house in Union Street, Wilfred walk past the former residence of another of his favourite poets, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and from there to his favourite beach, Meadfoot. Angela Burdett-Coutts, the richest woman in the country had lived in the stucco terrace above this shore; the Romanoffs had a villa nearby. Charles Darwin had stayed here, too, and Wilfred was fascinated with Kents Cavern which lay in the tree-lined hill like a portal to another world. Most of all, he loved the beach, where the sun rose and where Shag Rock seemed to have been driven into the bay like something from outer space. Swimming stirred his poetic imagination. Sitting on the rocks at Meadfoot, Wilfred read a book by the French writer, Alphonse Daudet, about 'this lovely intoxication of the soul. You are not thinking, you are not dreaming either. All your being escapes you, flies off, is scattered. You are the plunging wave, the dust of foam which floats in the sun between two waves ... everything but yourself'. All of his life lay ahead of him, in that turquoise blue bay.

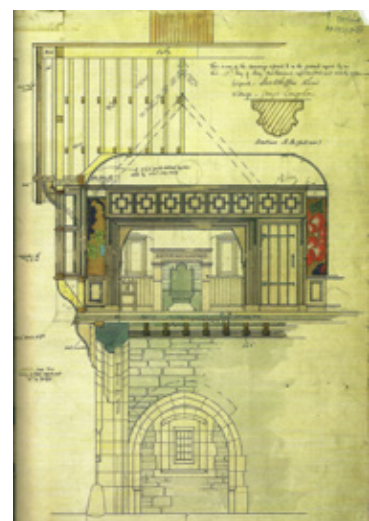
Five years later, in 1915, Wilfred enlisted in the army, to fight for poetry, and his men. Even as he trained to become an officer, he managed to find beaches, rivers and pools in which to swim. Later, in action, he carried an edition of the poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in his pocket. The last thing he did in England was to swim off Folkestone beach on the eve of September, 1918. Three months later, fighting in France, he was shot and killed whilst trying to cross a canal. It was one week before the declaration of peace; his mother received the news as the church bells rang to mark the Armistice.



**Claude Grahame-White, photograph, c.1910.  
Crowds at Naval Review, Torbay, 1910**

Dressed in a tweed knickerbocker suit of plus fours, a floppy cap, and a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, the young airman-entrepreneur Grahame-White was the glamorous hero of a new technology. In 1910 he became the first Englishman to hold an aviator's licence. That year he flew his fragile biplane over Torbay during the giant Fleet Review, assembled to celebrate the forthcoming coronation of George V, and a new age.

Watched by thousands of spectators - and the teenaged Wilfred Owen - Grahame-White's plane took off from the field by Torre Abbey and flew high above the King's yacht and HMS *Dreadnought*. As he flew, in a flimsy craft made of cloth, wood and glue, saluted by the new king who waved his telescope in greeting, Grahame-White demonstrated that for all the mighty imperial firepower below, no naval gun could swivel upwards and face the future - an attack from the skies. But for the crowds in their picture hats and straw boaters, the sight was astonishing: the first time they had seen a man in the sky.



**R.H. Sherard, Oscar Wilde, 1905.  
Designs for Babbacombe Cliff House, c.1870.**



The first biography published of Wilde, shortly after his death, in disgraced exile, in France in 1900. Robert Sherard was one of the playwright's friends who remained loyal, yet even he could not address the cause of Wilde's downfall, 'the aberration which brought this fine life to shipwreck so pitiful'.

In 1892, already world-famous and beloved by the middle classes who thrilled to his intimations of decadence, Wilde had escaped to Babbacombe Cliff House, which had been remodelled for the Pre-Raphaelite patron and animal rights champion, Georgiana Cowper-Temple, and decorated with works by her friends Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris. Renting the house for the winter, and installed in a grand room called Wonderland with a wooden balcony overlooking Babbacombe Cove, Wilde wrote his plays *Salome* and *A Woman of No Importance*, and looked after his two young sons while his wife was away. He also invited his friend Lord Alfred Douglas, known as Bosie, to join him. Rumour has it that Wilde, who was an inveterate sea swimmer and according to his son, Vyvyan, could swim like a shark, also swam off Babbacombe Cove. But the idyll of life with Bosie, who had also become his lover, ended as the young aristocrat stormed off after an argument.

'Bosie - you must not make scenes with me - they kill me - they wreck the loveliness of life', Wilde wrote, talking of his lover's red rose-leaf lips. The letter, later stolen from Bosie, was used in evidence at Wilde's trials. Sentenced to two years hard labour, the experience was in effect a death sentence. He left England as soon as he was released, and went directly to France to swim in the sea, using a specially-built beach hut. He claimed to be a reformed man. But a few weeks later he wrote to Bosie, telling him he had a new bathing suit ready for him.

## Brixham

At Brixham, the trawlers are followed by clouds of gulls swooping and eddying behind the boats below Berry Head, where the Reverend Francis Lyte wrote *Abide With Me*, the eventide falling fast. His house, built as a military hospital during the Napoleonic Wars, is now an hotel. In 1815, the ship taking Napoleon into exile moored off Berry Head, and hundreds of sight-seers came to peer through the port-holes at the man who had been regarded as the Anti-Christ. A hundred years later, as the imperial fleet of Britain assembled in the bay in 1910, secretly-built, state-of-the-art submarines, moved darkly through the water.

Brixham is one of Britain's last thriving fishing ports. It is unaccommodating place, inward-looking place, even as it looks out to the wild open sea. William of Orange may have made landfall here in 1688, invading the country in his 'Glorious Revolution' to claim the British throne, followed, commemoratively in 1828 by his namesake and heir, Prince William, later the Sailor King, greeted by the Reverend Lyte with a fragment of the bridge on which his forefather had stood; but such

grandeur was later reserved for Torquay's esteemed visitors.

This is a working place, its hills reserved to farming, its harbour to fishing - both known as Cow Town and Fish Town. A vast breakwater reaches out into the bay like a spine, ending in a lighthouse which once burned the oil of whales. The little shingle beach arcs into the rocks. In 1797, the bodies of two naval mutineers, William Lee and Thomas Preston who had been hanged from their ship in Torbay were put into coffins drilled with holes and dumped in the waters off the headland, only to be retrieved by Brixham fishermen and respectfully and respectfully buried on land.

Other young men had a more dandy time here. 'Brixham is crowded with fishermen', observed twenty-year-old soldier, William Thornton, and 'we have no other place to promenade in, and you may suppose do not stand upon the same ceremonies ... that we should in Brighton or Bond Street, and could you see our gents perambulating there you would be struck dumb with surprise, or killed with laughter, it being the rage now to wear hats with brims and quarter of a yard of white beaver, with red wrappers for cravats and loose great coats - a very suitable undress for such a place, for it is dreadfully dirty and in every respect no better than Billingsgate'.



## Paignton

In the nineteen-seventies, we would drive in the early hours of the morning from our home in Southampton, to Devon. When we saw the red

earth we knew we were nearly there. In Torquay, we'd park by the Palm Court. I'd look at the white building and imagine musicians in evening dress entertaining elegant guests. Then we'd drive south to Paignton, with its amusement arcades and its pier, before the car climbed up the hill to Beverley Park's caravan. There we would spend fourteen days of freedom - from school, from household chores, from work in a factory. And the sea always beckoned - beautiful and fearful to a boy who had never learned to swim.



In the wide theatrical arch of the bay, imagination took hold of what the past had left behind and became a modern myth. Oldway Mansion was built by the Singer family - famous for their sewing machines (with which my mother sewed me a pair of pink satin Oxford bags) to replicate the Palace of Fontainebleau, its huge rooms panelled in oddly garish and liver-coloured marble and guarded by eroded sphinxes. It now sat in a suburban park, surrounded by the town.



But I knew that this splendid house - which really ought to have been in the outskirts of Paris - was associated with Isadora Duncan, the dancer. I was too young to be told that she was Paris Singer's lover. Her fame, which was distant but still evocative - Vanessa Redgrave had played her in the 1968 film, *Isadora*, partly shot at Oldway - was somewhat overshadowed by her gothic death: she was strangled by her own silk scarf when driving her car in Nice in 1927. I somehow transposed the dancer's last scene from the real South of France to the English Riviera, as if we might have passed her in our 1960s Wolseley, as



the divine Isadora careered into oblivion in her open topped vintage car, her long, hand-painted scarf flying in the wind before being yanked into eternity.

Oldway's most remarkable construction was its Rotunda, originally known as the Arena. Built for the exercise of horses and for the entertainment of humans, its wooden floor could be removed to reveal a swimming pool, so that house guests too might indulge in Torbay's water cure. After the end of Paris Singer's affair with Isadora - during which she came to Oldway, only to spend her time looking out of the window at the rain - the building was turned into a hospital for soldiers during the First World War, its arena now filled with the casualties of Armageddon who posed, unaccountably, with roses tucked into their dressing gowns, standing in the ancient sunlight by the side of the all-seeing sphinx.



In the 1950s, Oldway was reinvented again - as a film studio. It was hoped that Devon would see its own film industry, like Elstree or Shepperton, offering an alternative film-making location at the seaside, 'where, after all, it all began', as one observer noted. (An earlier attempt, the Torquay and Paignton Photoplay Company, had been set up in a nearby drill hall in the 1920s with the intention of making 'clean pictures for clean-minded people' - but made only one film, *The Great London Mystery*, in 1920, while at Watcombe Hall, Babbacombe, Torquay, Raleigh-King Productions set up two daylight stages - making use of the bay's natural lighting - for the Ealing studio - a burgeoning British film industry which Evelyn Waugh satirises in *Decline and Fall*). Unfortunately, the venture was 'an expensive and protracted disaster'. The circular building was sound-proofed and readied for new, glamorous visitors. But the actors never came.



## Paignton Picture House

I must have walked past Paignton Picture House many times on holiday. Perhaps we even went to see a film there on a rainy day - but I was unaware of its charms, its fragile survival. It was built in the first year of the First World War, 'a picture house distinctly superior to any of the provincial houses', it claimed - with its decorative details and stained glass caught between the *fin-de-siecle* art nouveau and the modernism of art deco. It was advertised as 'the coolest house in Paignton', boasting air conditioning, as well as electric light. When I visited the empty building recently, I found spools of film strips curled up in the dust, as if they'd run out of time. When I picked one up and held the cell to the fugitive light, I saw a scene from *Free Willy*. A black and white killer whale, a memory of the first whale I ever saw in the 1970s, imprisoned in a dolphinarium in Windsor Safari Park, now Legoland, an image which still replays in my head.



## Berry Head

The rocks here lie parallel to sea, then rise perpendicularly sixty metres to the headland that shelters all of Torbay from the south-westerly winds, presenting a refuge for its inhabitants; for boats at anchor or hardy bathers in the sea. At this natural bulwark, the built gives away to the wild. This was a defensive outpost from the Iron Age to the Napoleonic. But equally, you might stand on its cliffs and watch a humpback whale launching itself out of the sea.

Two hundred years ago, this was a bleak posting for young men stationed on Berry Head's wind-swept fort. 'My dearest Mother', the twenty-year-old William Thornton wrote in 1811, 'I write this from the Guard House fronting the wide ocean ... surrounded by fortifications and cannon, and the ramparts are on the edge of the rocks, from which it would turn you giddy to look down on the foaming deep "where the choughs and crows, that wing the midway air seem scarce as large as beetles'. Now gannets plunge like yellow and white missiles into the sea within sight of a quarry which, in the twentieth century, provided the limestone for the steel to construct Ford Cortinas in Dagenham, as ships moored alongside the steep rocky shore to take away that rock, load by load.

This is an ancient, pre-human place, under-cut by caves and fissured with other rock formations in which are imprisoned - in the way it was said live frogs could be found in pebbles - the fossils of trilobites, corals and cephalopods, as if waiting for a new deluge to awaken them from their stratified sleep; one drop of salt water and they might swim off to repopulate the twenty-first century sea with their archaic forms. In the imagination of Victorian scientists and explorers like William Pengelly, Berry Head became a lost world, as fictionalised by Arthur Conan Doyle (himself inspired by Torquay's own lost explorer, Colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett). One could easily imagine terrible lizards here, too - Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkin's Victorian dinosaurs, concrete gothic dragons from Crystal Palace, or the denizens of Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*. They might wander down to Paignton's sea front and along to Torquay, basking under its palm trees.

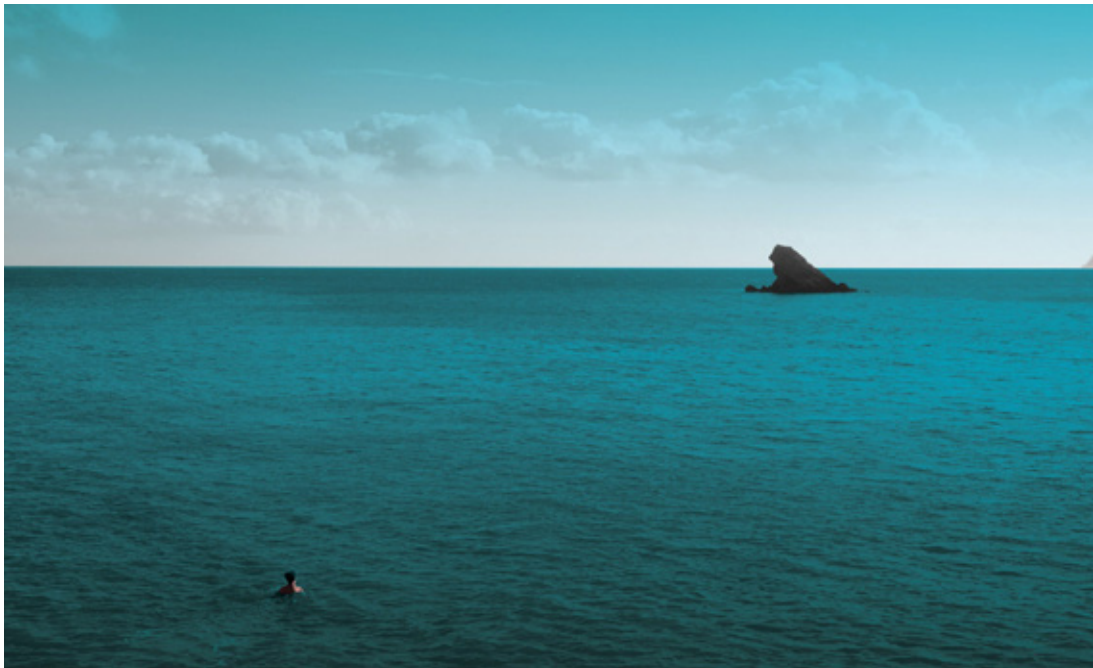
In 1830, the geologist Sir Charles Lyell, writing before Pengelly excavated Brixham's caves and found new evidence of prehistoric life there, predicted that the climate might warm again 'in the summer of the "great year"' and 'then might those genera of animals return, of which the memorials are preserved in the ancient rocks of our continents. The huge iguanodon might reappear in the woods, and the ichthyosaur in the sea, while the pterodactyle might flit again through umbrageous groves of tree-ferns', and 'coral reefs might be prolonged beyond the arctic circle, where the whale and narwhal now abound. Turtles might deposit their eggs in the sand of the sea beach, where now the walrus sleeps, and where the seal is drifted on the ice-floe'. Lyell's prophecy was derided at the time, and parodied in cartoons. But with polar ice caps rapidly melting and the



possibility of regenerating extinct species via clones, his vision seems oddly less ridiculous two hundred years later.

And in the process, these monsters themselves have changed: they are not the same animals we believed them to be: shape-shifting from the scaly beasts the Victorians imagined, to the still strange creatures I grew up with, and now to the feathered reptiles as we know them to be today, direct ancestors of the birds that fly over our heads, all those little bright-eyed dinosaurs on our streets and beaches. Who knows when they might transform again, slipping through new identities out of these silent stones? The past is always being reinvented; like the sea, it never stays the same, even as it seems to remain unchanged.

Berry Head has regained its sublime allure after its industrial exploitation. Fulmars ('foul gulls' in old Norse), guillemots (from the French for William), and peregrine falcons, the fastest animals on earth, fly around its cliffs. Endangered greater horseshoe bats roost in its crevices, and harbour porpoises feed in the deep blue waters below, circling on themselves like marine clockwork toys. Around them, gannets plunge into the waves with their pale blue stiletto bills, their heads protected by inflatable sacs like air bags in a car. Anyone might feel launched into the gulf of eternity here. On the limestone floor of this excavated space, you stand on the ancient bedrock composed of billions of marine creatures, whilst next to you, the sea itself runs cold and deep and full of life.



## The Sea

The sea is the great paradox: something sublime and beautiful, wonderful and terrible. It is the deepest source of imagination, a place in which our dreams are invested. It is our last available wilderness, our last frontier; mortal and immortal. It is our first experience: we first hear through

the salty amniotic fluid of our mother's womb. We are all little fishes in there, with residual gills and fins; as we unfurl, we might well emerge as something else entirely - a selkie, a fish, a whale or a bird - born into the fluid state of the sea, where jellyfish change sex and gender and species are as mutative and transitional as the great element that constitutes most of the Earth's surface and into which its most ambitious animals dive deep into the darkness where the sun's never reach.

And even that water has its own separate history - it can be four hundred to four thousand years ago. Poets have drowned there, ambitions burgeon and fail, the uncaring sea giving and taking, stolen peoples too, trafficking from remote coasts over which we exerted our dominion and which we have abandoned in turn. And Coke cans roll on the floor of the deepest abyss, plastic may well outweigh marine life by the middle of this century, hormones we allow into the water turn fish from male to female, and the invisible anthropogenic pollution of chemicals and sound collaborate to create a sea that is the cistern of our sins.

In our constrained, continental lives we fix all our attention on our little blue screens, forgetting that big blue screen beyond. We forget it is where we came from; that it is what gives us life; and can take it, just as easily. Once we looked out from the shore and saw the people we wanted to be, the future we cannot remember. The tide rolls in, renewing and forgiving, with the promise that it will all begin again: *The thrill of it all.*



Edwin Morgan Beacon Cove, 1930.

Torquay's first bath house was built in 1817 for Dr William Pollard - whose ancestor had owned Torre Abbey - on Beacon Terrace. It was here that Elizabeth Barrett dipped her body. During work to install a lift in 1929, the old baths were discovered under the drawing room. With its construction, Torquay turned the incoming tide into a force of fashion and recuperation. Tennyson arrived and declared the place 'the loveliest sea village in England', as if it had been dragged up from the bay. Caught between the rivers Teign and Dart, the place had its own microclimate - its 'mild, soothing air' was recommended for consumptives, as the wonderfully-named Octavian Blewitt noted in his *Panorama of Torquay* of 1832, 'by acting as a sedative on the affected organs'. 'In summer the avenues of Tor Abbey, the shaded lane of Torwood, the breezy sands of the Abbey and of Meadfoot, always refreshing. "In this respect," Dr Clark observed, "*Torquay is superior to every place in our island*".

Thirty years later, in 1862, Charles Dickens came here to give a public reading. He thought it 'a very pretty place - a compound of Hastings, Tunbridge Wells, and little bits of the hills about Naples; but I met four respirators as I came up from the station, and three pale curates without them who seemed in a bad way'. He returned in 1869, to the Imperial Hotel, 'an immense place, built among picturesque broken rocks out in the blue sea' (although he also complained that the Royal Assembly Room, where he was to perform, was 'something between a theatre, a circus, a riding-school, a Methodist chapel, and a cow-house'.) The sea drew those seeking solace or fun. It was a democratic pleasure; no one could charge you for going in it. But there were hierarchies and degrees - literally. At Elberry Cove in the early nineteenth century, Lord Churston had his Regency style bathing house built into which heated salt water would be pumped to warm his aristocratic body after he had submerged it in the sea. His descendents resorted to its benefits for their arthritis: one remembered it as a child, 'like a little magic place, all whitewashed walls and plain pretty things. Smelling of the sea and totally unforgettable'.

In 1852, new baths were built on Beacon Head itself, rising like a Victorian marine temple waiting to be tenanted by mermaids. A ballroom and saloon were added, turning a geological headland into a recreational spa, excavating its rock to create a sheltered sea water refuge for those who did not dare to venture into the open water. Four arches opened into a swimming pool, 45 by 43 feet, graduating in depth from seven to three feet, reached by steps from the dressing rooms and allowing bathers access to deep water whatever the state of the tide.

But the cavernous space was dark and sunless - reminiscent of the subterranean seaside aquarium in Brighton, where whales and dolphins swam as if in an underground car park. A new pool was built in 1914; but great events stood in the way of its completion; war forestalled the pleasures of the sea, as that imperial fleet which had occupied Torbay in 1910 was pressed into action.



In the 1920s, a palm court and a solarium were installed. New therapies offered Douche Massage, Seaweed Baths, Electric Baths and Nauheim, Sulphur and Pine Baths, a veritable à la carte menu of aquatic cures to heal the ailments of the twentieth century. A Vita Glass Sun Lounge, 'the largest in the kingdom', was added in 1929, conserving its inhabitants like a giant greenhouse. The site grew as an architectural reaction to the burgeoning business of leisure, as people other than the independently wealthy could afford to take holidays. These modern facilities opened up to a new age. They looked onto Beacon Cove and its arena-like steps. Its lifeboat house was repurposed as a tea room, from which starch-aproned maids would emerge with tea and cake to sustain the sun worshippers, as shown in Morgan's glamorous painting of 1930.

The sea was being mimicked, as if all the bay might be contained for the convenience of visitors. The beach became a stage set where everyone might be a star. As Sandy Wilson's musical, *The Boyfriend*, would declare, 'There's no knowing who you are going to meet'; on the beach, 'everyone looks the same'. A fashionable tan cost nothing; and in the androgyne twenties and thirties, class, gender and even identity became, like the sea, a fluid thing. At Meadfoot, as at Torre Sands and Beacon Cove, stairs descend into the sea with helpful handrails to ease one's passing into the receiving waters of the bay. At Shoalstone, a lido scoops up the sea into a bright white and turquoise pool, creating a sea from the sea. These delightful, utilitarian, frivolous structures emphasise our connection with the sea; they enable rather deny our association with the water.



## The Alphington Ponies

The Alphington Ponies, Arabella and Eliza Durnford, born in 1800, were a pair of sisters who had come to the town after a bizarre and tragic

incident in which two brothers had fought over them, resulting in the death of one of the young men.

As if preserved by their grief, the pair were stalled, moving, stopping, then moving again. They were a performance double act, and became so famous that they were recorded in engravings and modelled in pottery. Each day they'd leave their thatched cottage on Tor Abbey Avenue, where they lived with their mother and kept no servants; they made their expeditions only after the three women had done the work of the house. Thus liberated, the sisters would essay their daily outing along the Strand and Victoria Parade, occasionally varying their route to include the town. Their garb, ostensibly that of the fashion of the time, was a subtly strange variation on the nineteenth-century constrictions of female attire, and was all the odder for the way they exactly matched, as if they had dressed using each other as a mirror. Their fastidiousness was balanced by this binary aspect, their primness subverted; they might have been figures coming out of a weather clock, or life-size mechanical mannequins, and their movements were as regular.

'Their shoes were generally green but sometimes red', noted one later account (these being the colours, of course, of Torbay's red sands and green lawns). 'They were by no means bad-looking girls when young' - the writer, who could not possibly have seen them but relied on reports of their mythical appearance, reluctantly conceded - 'but they were so berouged as to present the appearance of painted dolls'. They were as seasonal as animals in their habit. Their brown hair was curled under tall straw or felt hats - depending on the time of year - and in winter and autumn they wore broad lace collars that fell over their backs and their breasts. Their gowns and long, waisted jackets were loudly checked in plaid. But in summer they exposed their décolletage, their bare flesh showing off matching necklaces of coral as if fished from the sea.

Such a sense of the anthropomorphic was defiantly underlined by the fact that, under their short gowns - 'so short indeed as to display about the ankles a good deal more than was necessary', our correspondent harrumphs - and their equally scandalous bloomers, the closest Victorian women came to wearing trousers - the sisters wore metal structures on their feet to raise them from the mud. These hoof-like extensions clattered on the pavement as they walked, creating an aural warning of the approach of the Alphington Ponies.

It was this equine quality - combined with the fact that when they first arrived in Torquay, they brought with them a pair of pretty ponies - that earned the Miss Durnfords their identity - as if they had become horses themselves. Not everyone approved. Disturbed by his sisters' popularity, their brother, an army major, was annoyed and embarrassed 'by their singularity of the costume', and offered to increase their allowance if they stopped dressing up. They refused. They didn't care. They carried on with their performance.

‘They were remarkably good walkers, kept perfectly in step, were always arm in arm, and spoke to no one but each other’. And isolating themselves from the society and life of the resort around them, from residents and visitors alike, they made sure that when they had finished their perambulation, ‘they carried back home no captured heart’.

But the sisters’ sense of otherness may be explained by a new discovery: the fact that their mother, Barbara Ann Blake, was the illegitimate daughter of a West Indian plantation and slave owner, Sir Patrick Blake, of Irish descent, and Margaret Shea, a mixed race woman from St Kitts. Such an ancestry, like Elizabeth Barrett’s, set the women apart. Or perhaps they simply felt at home in the cosmopolitan and liberal atmosphere of Torbay. Responding to the theatrical arena of the sea and the beach, they could assume new identities.

### Kents Cavern, Torquay

Kents Cavern, which runs deep under the headland of Torquay, was carved out of limestone by the action of water during the Pleistocene. It has been home to humans for 500,000 years, and may be one of the longest human-occupied spaces in Europe. As well as the remains of cave bears, scimitar-toothed cats, woolly rhinoceroses and mammoths that found their way into its recesses as if they’d wandered out of Narnia, there is evidence of three species of human have lived here: *Homo heidelbergensis*, Neanderthal, *Homo sapiens*, as demonstrated by the Museum’s 40,000 year old maxilla - a piece of jawbone and remnant teeth - the earliest anatomically modern human remains found in northern Europe. In fact, their own ancestors had come here from Africa, under the same equatorial sun that had burned these rocks red in the further recesses of deep time when Torbay was where Africa now lies.

This part of southern England is truly ancient; it gives its name to a geological period, the Devonian, the Age of Fish, first diagnosed in the 1830s from the fossil reef found in Torquay’s Lummaton Quarry, a site of global significance. Around the same time, Kents Cavern was being excavated by a Roman Catholic chaplain, John MacEnery. He was fired up with the fashion for connecting human history to geology and myth, and was trying to discover if the Roman god of the sun, Mithras, had been worshipped here. Faith and science were about to move further apart, however. William Pengelly, the celebrated Torquay amateur geologist and archaeologist, was one of the first to provide fossil proof that the Biblical age of Creation - dated to 4,000 years before Christ - could not be right.

Pengelly’s remarkable work in Kents Cavern from 1858 to 1880 confirmed the presence of extinct animals and humans living together, at a time when Charles Darwin - who spent time recuperating at Meadfoot House in Torquay in 1861- had revealed new ideas about the origins of our species, and those of the evolution of the rest of the natural world. In its dark spaces, half a million years ago, prowled by strange creatures and early humans, culture, too, may have been enacted, in ritual



performances and perhaps even music - at other such sites, flutes made of animal bone have been found. Silent now, in the dark caves, which I remember from my childhood visits, when the guide turned off the lights and told us that this was the darkest darkness which we would ever experience. Then we walked out into the bright sunlight of Torbay.

Philip Hoare, *The Tale*, Torbay, September 2017