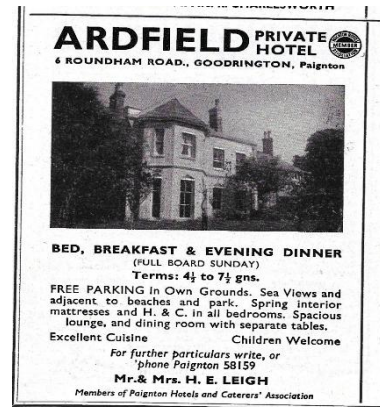


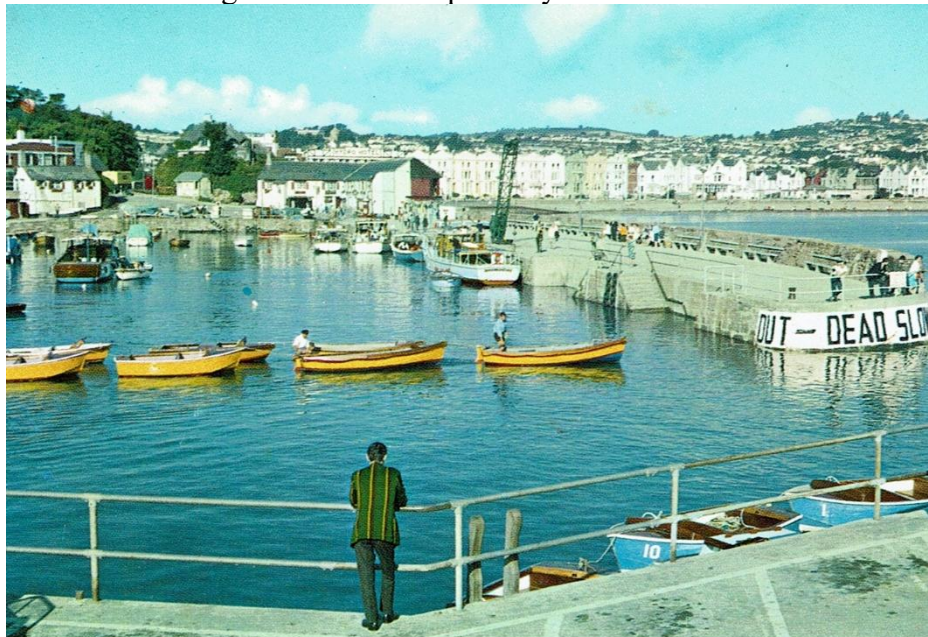
Paignton Harbour 1950 - 56

In the late 1940s two events changed my life. My parents took me on holiday to Paignton and my father was invalided from the Admiralty in London. A few months later we moved to a house in Hyde Road and then to Ardfield in Roundham Road. Ardfield had in the past been a doctor's home and surgery, a nursing home and a part of Roundham Prep School. My parents turned the house into a "private" hotel (the private bit meant that clients had to book for at least a week's holiday). My quarters were in a pine panelled room in the attic, accessed by a narrow staircase hidden from view in a cupboard. However when it became very busy, my parents moved up there and I had a bed in an old coal store in the back yard.



Being at loose end during the school holidays I soon discovered the harbour. My memory of the activities in the harbour in the early 1950s is that it was in two distinct areas. The prom side (north quay) was used for tourist activities and the south quay for business or local uses. The people who traded there were a very friendly bunch and only too happy to share their skills and experiences with a boy who showed an interest in what they were doing.

Approaching the north quay from the prom side, a kiosk sold ice cream and freshly cooked jam doughnuts. The aroma was wonderful to children and adults alike. The stone building on the left contained the winter storage for Mr Bradshaw's fleet of rowing boats and self-drive motor boats. Above this was the Harbour Light cafe with its speciality of Devon Cream Teas.



Entrance to Harbour, Paignton, Devon

Booking kiosks for the pleasure boats were positioned near the entrance and the harbour master's office kept an eye on proceedings. A hand wound crane was situated further along the quay. In the winter, the pleasure boats would be laid-up on the quay for maintenance.

The south side contained amongst others, a building for old Mr Read's banana wholesale business and sheds for Louis Gale/The Minnow Yacht Company; the Torbay Sailing Club; Browse Brothers shellfish processing and sales business; a hut for the Paignton Sea Scout troop and Cub pack; and "Uncle" Browse's boatbuilding business.

During the summer, Mr Bradshaw operated his boat hire business from the sands of Paignton Beach, near the harbour. Each morning, weather permitting during the season, the string of boats would be towed around from the shelter of the harbour to be anchored just off the beach. A gangplank on wheels would be positioned so that the visitors could access the boats without getting their feet wet. At the end of the day, the boats would be towed back to the harbour and moored below the quay. At the end of the season the boats would be stored away for maintenance. All boats were of course wooden and required a great deal of work rubbing down and revarnishing or repainting.

A number of pleasure boats operated from the steps at the end of the quay. *Coral Star*, *Colina*, *Boy David*, *Boy Richard*, *Shalimar* and *Look Ahead* were definitely operating at that time. However, *Sparkle* and *Minerva* were also on the scene at some stage. They were mostly licensed to carry twelve passengers. The boats were all shapes and sizes. Some were ex RN 36' harbour launches (*Coral Star* and *Colina*), another (*Shalimar*) had a soft rubber fender surrounding the hull which I was told was so that it could operate with seaplanes, some were built for fishing, and some were purpose built for the job.



Eric Swift on *Look Ahead* 1952

Weather protection on the boats was varied, with some having a canvas spray hood which could be raised when needed, and some had no protection at all. *Coral Star* was very smart with a deck house with a dummy funnel perched on top and she was the only one with an onboard loo.

The trips they offered were a choice of two-hour mackerel fishing; half-day voyages to Babbacombe or Brixham; or full-day trips to the River Dart with a landing at Dartmouth. Boat trips would also be organised to view the many Royal Navy ships which visited Torbay at that time, providing extra interest for the visitors. On one occasion the Home Fleet, were anchored almost filling the bay. I identified the battleship *HMS Vanguard*, aircraft carrier *HMS Glory*, cruisers *HMS Jamaica* and

Apollo, five destroyers, eight frigates, the fleet tug *Reward* and also several MFVs to provide transport ashore for the ships' crews.

The annual Tall Ships race with graceful sail training ships started from Brixham was a fine sight and an opportunity for the pleasure boat operators. On day trips to Dartmouth, the three master schooner *Result* could often be seen loading stone at the foot of Berry Head or an Everead coaster tied up to the Brixham breakwater.

During the summer holidays, youngsters of 12 or 13 were employed on the pleasure boats as "bow-boys". Their duties included attending the mooring ropes, helping the passengers on and off the boats, steering whilst the skipper chatted to the visitors, and gutting and stringing the mackerel after a successful trip.



The worst job was at low tide, rowing or sculling the large rowing boat carrying passengers from the steps out to the boats, which were moored outside the harbour, especially against a strong head wind as above.

Western Lady operated a ferry service between Torquay and Brixham. Two boats operated at a time. One leaving Brixham and one from Torquay, crossing in mid-bay. They, and their sister ships were ex RN *Fairmile B* rescue motor launches (small wooden ships developed for coastal anti-submarine and convoy escort work, but also adapted for many other purposes during WWII). Sisters *Pride of Paignton* and *Pride of the Dart* operated tourist trips.

In the winter, many naval and merchant ships used Torbay as shelter from bad weather, and at one time tugs towing sections of the wartime Mulberry Harbour could be seen at anchor.

On the south quay (or perhaps on Cliff Road?) Old Mr Reed operated a banana wholesale business. Through his open doors could be seen large bunches of green fruit hanging from hooks. Whenever I passed by, Mr Reed seemed to be standing in the doorway surveying the scene around him. I seem to remember that this was the only brick building on this side of the harbour. The others were wooden or corrugated iron sheds. In future years this building became an aquarium run by Les Jackman, the well known marine naturalist and wildlife camera man..

A large shed accommodated Louis Gale Boatbuilder/Minnow Yacht Co. Louis Gale built the carvel Class J boats before WWII and Bruce Reed (old Mr Reed's son) had designed and built the Torbay Minnow after WWII. They were a beautiful class of clinker built, 16' Sailing dinghies with a centerboard which could be lifted so the boat could dry out on the moorings at low tide. Bruce told me that he had commanded a destroyer during WWII.

Next door was the two storied Torbay Sailing Club. On the ground floor was the sail-drying loft whilst upstairs was housed the clubroom with its kitchen facilities, tables and chairs. During the summer months, the TSC held races on Wednesday and Saturdays for the Torbay Class II and Torbay Minnows boats. There could be 25 boats racing and as each had a crew of three, The teas afterwards were quite lively. The boats all had cotton sails and these had to be carefully initially stretched before use and then dried afterwards in the loft. Mr Edmunds, a retired RN petty officer, acted as officer-of-the-day and operated the twin cannon from the flag pole at the end of the quay.

The Minnows starting a race off Roundham Head 1955.

L-R 16 Bruce Read in *Centrina*, 11 Charlie Howe in *Sea Horse*, 14 Mr & Mrs Belfield in *Tetra*, 9 Mr & Mrs Ken Leigh in *Sunfish*. Out of the picture would have been Jack Chisholm in *Pandora* and also the Minnows *Bonito* and *The Drum*. Some 60 years later, 16 *Centrina* turned up in a barn in West Wales still in a seaworthy condition.



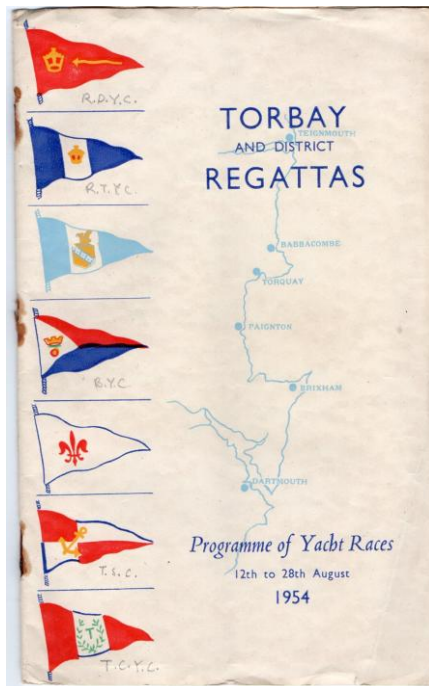
The Torbay Fortnight was a series of regattas held during the second half of August each year. Each town's sailing club from Teignmouth to the Dart hosted a regatta with a series of races for different classes of sailing boats. These ranged from large sailing cruisers down to the Yachting World Cadets for the youngsters. The boats were all beautifully craftsman built wooden boats including the graceful International Dragon, National 18s and 12s, Fireflies, and West of England Redwings to name but a few. Each of the clubs raced a preferred class or classes of boats and some of the turnout was quite large. Prince Phillip quite often sailed his Dragon Class *Bluebottle* in the Edinburgh cup race which he sponsored.

The 1954 regatta programme lists Torbay Sailing Club at Paignton starting 13 different races to cater for these different classes of boats.

The highlight of the Brixham Regatta was the sight of Brixham Sailing Trawlers racing. These 60' to 80' working boats from earlier in the 20th century had been lovingly restored and their powerful hulls and tanned sails made a wonderful display.



Brixham Trawler
Pas de Loup 1955



The sailing clubs involved were the Teign Corinthian Yacht Club; Shaldon Sailing Club; Babbacombe Corinthian Sailing Club; Torquay Corinthian Yacht Club, Royal Torbay Yacht Club (both at Torquay); Torbay Sailing Club (Paignton); Brixham Yacht Club; and the Royal Dart Yacht Club, Dartmouth Sailing Club and Dittisham Sailing Club on the Dart.

Further along the quay the Browse Brothers had their shed. They operated an inshore fishing boat and set pots in the bay to catch crab and lobster. The processing was carried out on the premises before being sold on to hotels and shops.

Old “Uncle” Browse carried out his boatbuilding business from another shed. He built beautiful lightweight dinghies from larch on oak. The design was all by eye and without any plans. I spent many winter days during the holidays helping him with the riveting of the planks to the frames. I also kept warm at the same time with the heat from his steam chest where the timbers would be made pliable for fitting.

Paignton Sea Scout Troop and Cub Packs were both thriving and had their hut on the quay. Pete Pannel was the scout master and organised wide games, badge sessions and hikes for the youngsters. During the summer, the troop had the use of a sailing ex-RN 27’ whaler and also a 32’ ex-RN rowing cutter.

In conclusion, Paignton Harbour in the 1950s was a wonderful playground for youngsters, “helping” the friendly people who were only too happy to share their skills and experience with them. At low tide, the rocks around Roundham Head could be accessed to visit the wreck of the 1914-18 German Torpedo Boat T189 which was under tow for scrap in 1920 and which broke its tow line in a storm. The boat was washed onto the rocks off Roundham Head and broke up, but was still visible at low water.

Boat skippers were always looking for crew for the races, and the youngsters learnt the techniques of sailing on the job. This was before the days of formal Health & Safety rules and when Risk Assessment was common sense learnt from peers and experience.

Hopefully my memory is fairly accurate, but it was a long time ago!

John Leigh
Cardigan 2026