

Notable People Associated with Bodmin

Like most towns, Bodmin has been the birthplace of, or home to, a number of notable people. At the risk of starting a mutiny, we have cooked up a few for you to toy with...

Captain William Bligh, of Mutiny on the Bounty fame, was born in Plymouth in 1754, although spent his childhood at Tinten Manor, St Tudy, between Bodmin and Camelford. Following the mutiny, in 1789, he and his loyal supporters reached the Dutch East Indies safely, despite being set afloat in a small boat. This was in no small part thanks to Bligh's remarkable seamanship - it has been written that he was "an exceptionally capable naval officer" and he was chosen to command the Bounty on its voyage to the Pacific because of "his experience and familiarity with navigation in the area and local customs". It is rumoured that, when not at sea, Bligh was the 'bouncer' at the Cornish Arms public house in St Tudy. This is a nice story, although not one that can be substantiated.



Charles Reginald Belling was born in Bodmin in 1884. In 1912 he started his own business in Enfield, manufacturing electric heaters, water heaters, cookers and immersion heaters. The Belling Engineering Scholarship was set up in his memory, to support students who wish to obtain professional qualifications in electrical or manufacturing engineering. The Institution offers at least one scholar ship each year, with a value of £3000 per annum, tenable for the duration of the degree course.

Left: A 1935 advert for a Belling cooker - available in a choice 2 enamel colours and 2 sizes - £13.15s (£13.75) and £16.15s (£16.75)

William Hamley, born in Bodmin early in the 18th century, founded what is today known as 'Hamleys', one of the world's largest toy stores. When he first opened a toy shop in London, Westminster Bridge had just opened to traffic (horses and carts) and gaslight would not illuminate the city's streets for another half a century. The year was 1760 - 89 years before Harrods opened. In 1881, Hamley's grandsons opened a new branch near Piccadilly Circus - 11 years before the appearance of the statue of Eros.

Growing up in Cornwall, Hamley might have become a tin miner, a farmer or a fisherman, although he had other ideas. He dreamed of opening the best toy shop in the world. In 1760 he did, cramming 'Noah's Ark', as it was known, with every kind of toy he could find: rag dolls and tin soldiers, hoops and wooden horses because he wanted the finest toy shop in the world.

A little man in a red coat and a tall black hat appears on Hamleys famous shopping bag. With him the tradition that William Hamley established **long before Nelson had a column** goes from strength to strength.

The date of William Hamley's death is unknown, as is his precise birth date.



Visitors to Bodmin often ask about a dog's drinking trough, placed at the entrance to Priory Park, which bears the tribute: "Presented by His Royal Highness, Prince Chula of Siam, in memory of Joan, a wire haired terrier who died in 1948. Further endowed in memory of the bulldog Hercules, 1954". Prince **Chula Chakrabongse** of Thailand cherished his dogs to the point of erecting public drinking fountains in their honour. But why is there one in Bodmin?



Prince Chula was born in Siam (now called Thailand) in 1908, a member of the royal family. This was an absolute monarchy and his forbear, King Mongkut, was the inspiration for the film and play *The King and I*. When Chula was 12 his father died and he was sent to England to be educated at Harrow and, later, Cambridge.

In 1931, Chula went home for the first time although soon decided to return to Britain. Shortly after, there was an uprising in Siam whereby the country became a democracy. This, and the WW2 invasion of Thailand by Japan, meant that Chula decided to settle in England.

In the 1930s, he developed an enthusiasm for motor racing and set up his own team, White Mouse Racing, based in Cornwall. He had considerable success at World Championship level before retiring from the sport in 1948.

In 1938, Chula married an English woman and they made their home at Tredethy, north of Bodmin. During WW2, he served in the home guard and Elizabeth became a member of St John's Ambulance.

During his time in Cornwall, Chula wrote several books and donated to various local amenities such as the aforementioned dog's drinking trough in Bodmin. He died from lung cancer in 1965. Bodmin Town Museum hosts an exhibition dedicated to his family life in Cornwall.

Guitarist and songwriter **Al Hodge** was born in Bodmin in 1951. He was one of the most successful singer-songwriters to come out of Cornwall, writing music for numerous TV programmes and appearing on many TV shows throughout Europe. He was a guitarist for Leo Sayer from 1981 to 1985 and for Elkie Brooks from 1999-2000. He did session work with the likes of Toyah Wilcox, Sade Café, Randy Crawford, Linda Ronstadt and Suzy Quatro.



Following his premature death in July 2006, after a 2 year battle with cancer, the Alstock Festival was held in Bodmin in July 2007 - a few bereaved friends decided to hold a music festival in his memory and the overwhelming support from musicians and the general public resulted in a large donation being made to Al's favourite charity, the RNLI. Al was not only a musician of international standing but also a well loved man with a kind and generous heart. The following year, the second 'Alstock' took place, with a much larger line-up of local bands. Alstock is now an annual event in Bodmin.

As someone said upon his death, Big Al should have, would have been a huge star had he not been so devoted to his beloved Cornwall. He toured the world but was always reluctant to venture too far from his Kingdom of Kernow, where he was the King. BBC Radio Cornwall broadcast a 3 hour tribute to him the day after he died. It's a shame the rest of the country, and the world, never got to share in the greatness of the man.



It is possible that **John Arnold** (1736-1799) the English watchmaker and inventor, was born in Bodmin. He certainly lived and worked in Bodmin, where he was apprenticed to his clockmaker father until, aged 19, he left England to work in Holland. (He is still remembered in Bodmin with a plaque over the entrance to the narrow passage where he lived - "Arnold's Passage"). He returned to England about 2 years later and set up in business as a watchmaker in London in 1762. In the 1760's Arnold made watches for King George III. Those watches, and his other productions, display the originality and ingenuity which brought him to the attention of the Astronomer Royal Neville Maskelyne who was seeking a watchmaker skilled enough to make a complex and technically very advanced marine timekeeper.

Arnold successfully presented a production model to the Board of Longitude in March 1771. Three of these timekeepers subsequently travelled with James Cook on his second voyage to the southern Pacific Ocean in 1772-1775, one of which was still working on his return to England.

By 1772 Arnold had finalized the design of his pocket timekeepers, and produced a number of them between 1772 and 1778, although he continued experimenting, inventing and perfecting precision timepieces for the rest of his life. One of these, a 60mm diameter chronometer housed in a gold case, has miraculously survived in a perfect and original condition. It can be seen in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich having been saved for the nation in 1993.

By the time of Arnold's death in 1799 he was the most famous watchmaker in the world and was recognised by all as the inventor of the precision chronometer.

James Jenny Finn VC (24 November 1893-30 March 1917) was a recipient of the Victoria Cross, the highest and most prestigious award for wartime gallantry that can be awarded to British and Commonwealth forces.

Finn was born near Truro, from where his family moved to Bodmin, where one of his many siblings, a sister, is buried with her father. Interestingly, the headstone at Bodmin Old Cemetery also mentions James, killed in action in 1917.

Finn later went to South Wales where he found employment at a colliery. On the outbreak of War he enlisted with the 4th Battalion of the South Wales Borderers.

It was on 9th April 1916 at Sanna-i-Yat, Mesopotamia (now Iraq), that 22 year old Private Finn earned the Victoria Cross for his bravery. After a night attack he was one of a small party which dug-in about 300 yards from the enemy's trenches. Seeing wounded men lying in front he went out and bandaged them all, making several journeys in order to do so. Unable to get a stretcher, he carried, on his back, one badly wounded man into safety. Aided by another man, who was wounded during the act, he then carried in another casualty. He was under fire throughout and was badly wounded. He was carried back to safety but later died of his injuries.



A memorial can be found at Basra, Iraq with the names of more than 40,000 British, Indian and West African personnel who died in the operations there from the Autumn of 1914 to the end of August 1921 ... including that of one James Henry Finn VC.

In 1966, Finn was also remembered at his home town at Bodmin when a housing estate was named “Finn VC Estate” in his honour. The ceremony was attended by many members of his family and members of his Regiment. The plaque commemorating the event was unveiled and be seen opposite the town’s (old) library. Sadly his VC medal is now kept locked away in a vault and has not been shown in public for many years.

Whilst his body was never returned to Cornwall he is, of course, remembered on his father’s headstone in Bodmin Cemetery.



Peter Mitchell was born in Surrey in 1920 although was educated in Taunton and Cambridge where he studied physics, chemistry, physiology, mathematics and biochemistry. He accepted a research post in the Department of Biochemistry, Cambridge, in 1942, and gained a PhD in early 1951 for work on the mode of action of penicillin. In 1955 he was invited to set up a biochemical research unit at Edinburgh University, where he remained until illness led to his resignation in 1963. For 2 years he withdrew from scientific research but supervised the Restoration of an attractive Regency-fronted mansion in the beautiful Glynn Valley, near Bodmin, Cornwall.

A major part of the mansion was adapted for use as a research laboratory. He co-founded a charitable company, ‘Glynn Research Ltd’, to promote biological research and finance the work of the Glynn Research Ltd’, to promote biological research and finance the work of the Glynn Research Laboratories. The original endowment of about £250,000 was donated by himself and his elder brother. In 1965, Peter Mitchell and associates embarked on a programme of research on chemiosmotic reactions and reaction systems for which the Glynn Research Institute has become known and for which he was awarded the 1978 Nobel Prize for Chemistry, having discovered the chemiosmotic mechanism of ATP synthesis. He died at the age of 71, in 1992.

General **Sir Walter Raleigh Gilbert** was born in Bodmin in 1785 and is a descendant of the Elizabethan seaman Sir Humphrey Gilbert. At the age of fifteen he became a cadet in the Bengal Infantry. He rose to major-general and, through his conquests in Northern India, became a national hero. The army even issued a medal with his picture on it. Only Wellington, as an army officer, has had the same honour. The citizens of Bodmin decided to erect a memorial to him on the hill which overlooks the town. A tall, slim granite obelisk, one hundred and forty feet high with the story of his Sikh and Afghan campaigns written on the four sides of the base, was put up. The Indian Empire has now gone and those who fought there, like Gilbert, have been largely forgotten although the obelisk stands sentinel over the town where he was born. It stands in an 80 acre nature reserve with commanding views to the south. Gilbert died in 1853, in London.





H C McNeile, known as Sapper, was born at Bodmin County Gaol in 1888 whilst his father was the governor of the naval prison. He was one of the most successful British popular authors of the interwar period and creator of the character Bulldog Drummond. He was commissioned into the Royal Engineers in 1907 and sent to France in 1914 when World War I broke out. He saw action at both the First and the Second Battle of Ypres. He displayed considerable bravery and was awarded the Military Cross and was mentioned in dispatches.

McNeile's first work was probably published before the First World War, although this is difficult to verify as serving officers in the British Army were not permitted to publish under their own names leading to many works being published under pseudonyms such as McNeile's "Sapper". His writing caught the public mood at the time - it was grimly realistic enough to seem authentic, yet managed to conceal the horrific reality of trench warfare and life at the front line. Lord Northcliff, the owner of the Daily Mail, was so impressed by this writing that he attempted, and failed, to have McNeile released from the army so he could work as a war correspondent. In 1919, McNeile resigned from the army with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and became a full-time author, publishing his first novel, *Mufti*, in that year. In 1922, he moved to Sussex and lived there for the rest of his life.

He is mainly remembered as the author of the Bulldog Drummond books, the first of which was published in 1920. These brought him public recognition and considerable financial success. The film rights to one 1929 Bulldog Drummond film are reputed to have earned McNeile \$750,000. However, the bulk of his work was in the form of short stories that were published in various monthly magazines. He specialized in the twist in the tail and many of his stories upended the reader's expectations in the final paragraph, sometimes in the final few sentences. McNeile married Peggy Baird-Douglas and had two sons. He was an unremittingly hearty man who even his friend and collaborator, Gerard Fairlie, described as "not everybody's cup of tea". He died on August 14, 1936 at home in Pulborough, West Sussex. His funeral, with military honours, took place at Woking crematorium.

Sir **Bevil Grenville** was born just to the west of Bodmin in 1556 and he was a great-grandson of Roger Grenville, captain of the Mary Rose when it sank in the Solent in 1545. At the start of the Civil War in 1642 he raised an army in Cornwall so he could fight for the King. When the parliamentarians crossed the Tamar, his army fought a number of battles and threw them out of Cornwall. He won battles at Braddock Down near Lostwithiel and at Stratton Hill near Bude. He then led his men on a victorious march through Devon into Somerset. In 1642 the Royalists won a battle at Lansdowne Hill just outside Bath but Bevil Grenville was mortally wounded. His Cornish Soldiers refused to fight under any other leader and they returned home, carrying the body of Sir Bevil. It was buried in a tomb in Kilkhampton Church.

If you have found this interesting, you might want to research some other notable Cornish people:

Richard Trevithick: developed the high pressure steam engine.

John Adams: mathematician who predicted the existence of the planet Neptune.

Sir Humphry Davy: improved mine safety with his invention the Davy miners' lamp.

Thomas Flamank: co-led the 1497 rebellion against taxes.

Michael Joseph: co-led the 1497 rebellion against taxes.

Admiral Boscawen: seaman and MP with a Truro pub and street named in his honour.

Henry Trengrouse: inventor of the rocket line apparatus that fired a rope to stricken ships on the rocks.

Richard Lander: explored the River Niger.

Passmore Edwards: MP and generous benefactor - many major buildings were established as a direct result of his bequests: hospitals, drinking fountains, marble busts, libraries, schools, convalescence homes and art galleries.

William Oliver: inventor of the Bath Oliver biscuit.

James Ruse (convict): has agricultural colleges in Australia named after him.

Richard Lower: conducted the first vein-to-vein blood transfusion.

Reverend Hawker: introduced the idea of Harvest Festivals.

And now, let's turn our attention to the ladies...

Mary Bryant: a convict on the First Fleet to Australia in 1787. She later escaped and, eventually, returned to the UK, where she was pardoned.

Emily Hobhouse: brought the world's attention to the dreadful conditions in the British-run concentration camps during the Boer War.