

# The Filey Brigg Sea Serpent

With *monster mania* gripping the world in early 1934, as a result of Loch Ness, it was inevitable that the worlds press would seize any opportunity to promote similar stories, and there would be plenty, with no continent apparently without its own version of *the monster*. In early January of the year, it was the turn of the Yorkshire coast, when several *sea serpent* sightings were made and circumstances suggested that an unusual predator was in the area.

*There was excitement in Filey today when it was reported either that the Loch Monster had found its way to the Yorkshire coast or that Filey had developed a monster of its own. This morning a stroller along Filey near Scarborough reported that had seen a huge body with numerous humps and small head a short way out to sea. A search covering Filey Brigg and North Bay proved fruitless, but farther north, near Gristhorpe Bay, there was more excitement when a supposed monster was seen two hundred yards from the shore. When it was approached, however, the long line of humps separated, and the "monster " proved to school of large porpoises a line.*

*Dundee Evening Telegraph - Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1934*

In February, local fishermen had been wondering why fish had disappeared from the Filey coast and were experiencing a poor harvest, when a similar creature was observed at sea. One witness claimed it was bigger than a motorboat and had a *tree trunk neck*, while another described small eyes, a big head and a *long raking body with two bumps on it*.

*Fishermen at Cleethorpes are convinced that the monster that has been robbing their lines is a giant seal. One who claims that he has seen it twice during the week-end describes it as looking exactly like a seal, but says it is very big one—about eight feet long. Other fishermen who claim to have seen it confirm this view. Whatever it is, it has a voracious appetite, and yesterday, when a young fisherman went out to examine his lines found they had been torn clean from the buoy to which they had been attached.*

*Creature That Robs Fish Lines-Hull Daily Mail, Monday 5<sup>th</sup> February 1934*

A few days later the apparent culprit was caught.

*Bridlington fishermen believe they have solved the mystery of the monster, which was reported to have been seen off the Humber and is stated to have dragged fish off fishermen's lines as the lines were being hauled in. The crew of the fishing coble Cutty Sark yesterday arrived at Bridlington with a seal weighing over 16 stones and measuring nearly six feet long. The men who caught the seal were those who were wrecked when the Premier II went aground south of Hornsea last month. Bill Glenton, one of them, stated "we were fishing some*

*distance out the bay when I felt something heavy on one the lines. The weight of whatever I had caught had taken the lines right under the boat, and I did not know what I was pulling in. Suddenly I saw a huge head appear at the side of the boat, and I nearly let go of the line with surprise. First I did not know what it was, and thought of the Loch Ness monster. But when I saw the whole of the body I realised was a large seal. With the help of my brothers, Bob and Jack, and Collins, the other member of the crew, we dragged the seal aboard with a gaff, and killed it". The arrival of the seal at the pier caused considerable interest, and it was later sold to a Scarborough fish buyer, and taken to Scarborough.*

*The Humber Monster Killed-Nottingham Evening Post, Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> February  
1934*

However not everyone was convinced that this was the case and a much more exotic sounding creature with some similarities to a sea lion or fur seal was described by one of the fishermen in the same article.

*A Cleethorpes fisherman who says he has been fishing here for 51 years, and that he knows seals and porpoises well enough, refused to believe, before the news of the Bridlington catch, that the monster that has been robbing fishermen's lines Cleethorpes is a giant seal is Mr William Croft, and he said that what he and his two sons saw would be six or seven feet in the water, with a head like Great Dane. He added: it appeared to have ears and mane. Its neck was longer than a seal's, and its head was set differently. "We saw the best part of two feet of head and neck above the water, and it was distant only 50 yards so. I should judge the creature to be eight feet long".*

An eight foot long, aquatic animal with ears, a mane and a dog like head certainly suggests such an animal although none are indigenous to Europe or the UK. Ten days later however another potential suspect had been identified.

*For a few minutes yesterday Filey people believed that they were being visited by a monster, but their hope for a new attraction for the summer season were soon dashed. Mr. Titch Jenkinson, skipper of the Filey motor boat Heather, saw what seemed to be a huge creature when he was two miles from shore. It appeared to be resting near the Brigg. Other fishermen also noticed it and raced towards the Brigg. When we got near it." said Jenkinson, "we found a huge seal, the biggest I've seen, resting on the rocks. The rocks behind it gave the appearance of a long body. When we got near it the seal dived into the water and swam away."*

*Hopes of a Filey Monster Disappointed, Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail - Saturday 17<sup>th</sup>  
February 1934*



### Filey Brigg

Then in March a very British encounter with a sea serpent, seen on land, took place at night and was apparently reported in the Daily Telegraph for the 1/3/1934. A further account can be found in The Yorkshire Evening Post-13/3/1934. Bernard Heuvelmans included it in his seminal work; *In the Wake of the Sea Serpents* and gives the name of the witness as a Mr Wilkinson Herbert, a name subsequently repeated in all published accounts of the episode, including my own. However a review of contemporary newspaper sources suggests it was recounted by a Mr B. Harbert, a local Coast guard who had taken a wrong turn along the sands at Filey Brigg in Yorkshire during the course of his duties. Mr Harbert was returning from watch on Carr Naze, on a path near the water's edge, when he spied an object crawling over some black looking seaweed.

*Last night I was going along Filey Sands on duty. The rain had stopped and stars were shining. In the darkness I missed the top path to Filey Brigg and took one near the water's edge Near Filey Brigg rocks I heard a growling like a dozen dogs ahead, walking nearer I switched on my torch and was confronted by a huge neck, six yards in front of me, rearing up 8 ft. high! The head was a startling sight- huge eyes like saucers, glaring at me, the creatures mouth was a foot wide and neck would be a yard around. The monster appeared as startled as I was. Shining my torch along the ground I saw a body about 30ft. long. I thought this was no place for me and from a distance I threw stones at the creature. It moved away growling fiercely and I saw the huge black body had two humps on it and four short legs with huge flappers on them. I could not see any tail. It moved quickly, rolling from side to side, and went into the sea. From the cliff top I looked down and saw two eyes like torchlight's shining out to sea 300 yards away. It was a most gruesome and thrilling experience. I have seen big animals abroad, but nothing like this.*



Sea lion at La Jolla Cove (Jarek Tuszyński) [CC 4.0](#)

Harbert's description initially seems to suggest a large pinniped such as a sea lion from its movement and morphology. The indigenous pinniped species of Europe however are all phocid (true seals) and have claws rather than *flappers* and would lurch or bounce along, not roll from side to side, again hinting at a sea lion identity. In a further account of this encounter Harbert stated that the head looked like a *porpoise*, rather bizarre. But if this had been a mature sea lion then the development of a sagittal crest (below), may have made the head look unfamiliar and perhaps more porpoise like in the darkness.



**Sea lion at Morrow Bay, Mike Baird [CC 2.5](#)**

At face value this account and description seems to suggest a long necked pinniped, apparently related to the otariidae (fur seals and sea lions). However things get slightly more complicated when we consider some of the findings of our research, i.e. a number of sea lions such as the California sea lion have escaped captivity or been deliberately released over the years in the UK and Europe; perhaps this was one such errant animal. But just to confuse the issue even more there is another factor which needs to be considered. This is that at the time, Filey did in fact have its own resident monster pinniped. His name was Bonzo.

Bonzo had been discovered on a local beach in the mid-1920s, as a pup by some fishermen, the Jenkinson's, (also possibly the same fisherman who reported seeing a huge seal, initially mistaken for a monster on some rocks and reported in the press in 1934). The men took Bonzo to some baiting sheds where they cared for him eventually building a concrete pool. As he grew he became tame and



developed a repertoire of *party tricks*, becoming a popular local attraction. By 1934 he was described as *approaching the size of The Loch Ness Monster*. In fact he was given the title of *largest grey seal on record*.

*Crowds of visitors and fisherman gathered on Filey Promenade today to witness the moving of Bonzo, the famous seal to its new home. Bonzo has had an adventurous life of six years. When Frank Jenkinson an unemployed fisherman found it on Filey Brigg it weighed only a stone and measured a yard. Today Bonzo weighs 20 stones and is nearly eight feet long. Mr Jenkinson has trained the seal to do his bidding. It will now jump out of the water at the shout of Bonzo and will beg for fish. Thousands of children including the Princess Royals two sons have been entertained by its quaint antics. In January last, Mr Jenkinson who was unable to pay the rent for the building in which he kept Bonzo was ordered out. Many offers came along for Bonzo from England, Scotland and Wales but Mr Jenkinson decided to stick to the seal and eventually he was able to build a new home for Bonzo. At today's moving in Mr Jenkinson put a huge cage near Bonzo's tank and the seal jumped in. Fishermen then had a difficult task lifting bonzo. After many rests they arrived at the new building where they tipped the cage and Bonzo dropped into a tank three times the size of the old one. Almost immediately afterwards Bonzo jumped on to it new performing platform and appeared quite at home.*

*Yorkshire Evening Post- April 14<sup>th</sup> 1934.*

*Bonzo the captive Yorkshire seal, well known to hundreds of East Coast visitors has already had a good deal of publicity; and now he has acquired a little more. His distinctions are set forth in the learned pages of the Naturalist, official organ of the Yorkshire Naturalists Union and that is a thing which many a Yorkshire scholar has tried in vain to achieve. Apparently a leading member of the union a Mr W.J. Clarke FZS, the Scarborough Naturalist, this year visited a seaside show to see Bonzo-the biggest seal. Possibly he did so with an indigent manner of the expert towards the simple enthusiasms of the layman. However he was impressed he found himself confronted by the second Yorkshire specimen of the Great Grey or Atlantic seal ever known. The only other one to occur in Yorkshire was killed at Saltwick Bay, near Whitby in 1913. Bonzo moreover holds the record for size being six inches longer than the seven feet of his rival. He was caught as a pup at Filey Brigg in 1927 and was then three feet long. But the naturalists now want to know what business he had to be swimming around Filey Brigg at all.*

*The Yorkshire Post, October 12<sup>th</sup> 1935*

In addition Bonzo was also known to take *time out* as detailed in a rather tongue in cheek article published in 'The Yorkshire Evening Post 6<sup>th</sup> June, 1936 entitled *Bonzo`s Cruise*.

*I have word on Bonzo, the seal that for some time now has made its headquarters in Scarborough Harbour. At the moment he is absent. It is believed he is on a cruise like so many of the best people nowadays. It may be that he objects to Spring-cleaning; for the*

*dredger Rockchime is scouring the harbour and has brought up such a swirl of mud that Bonzo could not see his way to stay and could hardly see the way to go either. Another explanation of Bonzo's departure is that his cruise is for recuperation after his recent four days in hospital. Kind hearted fishermen found Bonzo on the slipway one day, evidently very out of sorts. So he was taken ashore in a bag and treated for what is thought to be the effects of motor oil from motor craft. At length he was discharged-cured-on a handcart and was soon listening to the greetings of his old friends the Harbour side fishermen. Bonzo by the way is fond of music. It is suspected that he listens to the Spa Orchestra from the South Bay, without paying admission to the grounds. From this it is thought he comes from Scottish waters.*

So how does this confuse the otherwise apparently straight forward account by Harbert? Well firstly, despite Bonzo being such a local celebrity and surely well known amongst the fishing and coastal community, there is no mention of him in any article I have come across, or any comparison made between his celebrity, size, and the apparent *monster* seen by Harbert, despite being resident to the area. This strikes me as a bit unusual; the local press would surely have made some sort of comparison given the climate of the time. Secondly the fishermen who discovered Bonzo appear to be directly involved in sighting the *largest seal they have ever seen* in February 1934, but again no mention is made of him. Thirdly, Harbert refers to the head of the animal he saw in a one account as resembling *a porpoise*, perhaps a sly reference to the sighting of a sea serpent at the beginning of the year off the Filey coast which turned out to be a school of porpoises swimming. Did Harbert encounter Bonzo and subsequently weave him into some form of local *monster* story to attract publicity and encourage tourism, or given the fact that an unusual animal, possibly an eared seal, had been seen in the vicinity prior to his account, did he in fact encounter an errant sea lion?

Adapted from *The Seal Serpent*

