CHAPTER I

SIDMOUTH PARISH

§ 1. Sidmouth is situated at the head of the largest bay on the coast of the English Channel, extending from the Isle of Portland to Start Point. West of Lyme Regis, where Dorset passes into Devon, the coast is a line of cliffs, and until we come to the estuary of the Exe there are only three gaps in the cliff rampart which are of sufficient width to favour the growth of seaside resorts. In these gaps stand Seaton, Sidmouth and Budleigh Salterton. The first gap is that made by the River Axe, and here is Seaton. The last gap is that made by the River Otter. On the west side of the mouth of this river is Budleigh Salterton. The Otter and the Yarty, the western tributary, or, more properly, component of the River Axe, rise close to one another, 16 miles from the coast, under Staple Hill in Somerset, the eastern extremity of the Blackdown Hills. In the first part of their course the basins of the Axe and Otter have a common watershed, but from Gittisham Hill and Farway Hill, 6 miles from the coast, they are divided by a broader spread of the Blackdown Plateau which now forms a separate drainage area of triangular shape where a number of small streams, of which the Sid alone carries the title of a river, make their way to the sea between Beer Head and Otterton Point.
The 11 miles of coast between the west side of Beer Head and the east side of Otterton Point is a recessed arc or embayment which is the foreground of the view from the esplanade of Sidmouth, but invisible from the sea fronts of Seaton and Budleigh Salterton. Of this coastal foreground the Sidmouth Urban District, bounded on the east by Branscombe and on the west by Otterton Parish, comprises the 3 1/2 miles from Weston Mouth to Peak Hill. This recently constituted urban area comprises the three civil parishes of Sidmouth, Sidbury and Salcombe Regis. The first two fall within the watershed of the River Sid, whose source is 6 miles from the sea. The parish of Salcombe Regis shares with Sidmouth the seaward end of Sid Vale (their common boundary the River Sid) and extends farther to the east, comprising Salcombe Hill and Dunscombe Hill with their included combe of Salcombe Valley opening to the sea, and beyond this the western side of Weston Combe. The land frontier of the Sidmouth district has a length of 14 miles. Except for Weston Combe, which occupies the first mile, it follows the crest to the hills all the way round from Weston Mouth on the east to the cliff of Peak Hill on the west, a line of heights rising from 500 feet near the sea to 800 feet inland. This line of heights is smooth and unbroken except for the notch called Sidmouth Gap where, between summits of 700 feet one mile apart, the level drops to little more than 300 feet, and has thus provided the historic route connecting Sidmouth with Exeter, the capital of the county, and later with the Southern Railway system.
The area of 11,466 acres, about 18 square miles, comprised within this frontier is a plateau furrowed by combes. Most of the plateau has a thin capping of clay containing flints, beneath which is the Upper Greensand, channelled by deep combes that cut through this formation and into the underlying Red Keuper Marl of the Triassic period. The upper slopes are steep, the lower more gentle, and the trough of the valleys has a perfect V-shaped section, for there is no flat alluvial bottom except in one small portion of the lower Sid.

§ 2. During the Napoleonic Wars when Mediterranean resorts were debarred the wealthy and leisured classes went for winter sunshine to the south coast of England, those who desired more especially a mild climate seeking the south-west.

Among the places chosen was the little town of Sidmouth in East Devon, situated at the back of a shingle beach less than half a mile in length between Salcombe Hill and Peak Hill, each more than 500 feet in height.

Documents of Plantagenet times refer to the harbour of Sidmouth, but the River Sid being little more than a torrential stream, it is unlikely that there was an estuary capable of harbouring ships. The port was presumably a sea anchorage with its main shelter on the west, where the Red Sandstone reef of the Chit Rocks, still uncovered at low tide, projects far into the sea. The range of tide is small, and if the rocks have been worn down at the rate of only a quarter of an inch each year the reef would in those days have been an effective breakwater. On the eastern side of Sidmouth there was less shelter, but even
here there remain some relics of off-lying rocks beyond
the Red Sandstone cliff which has imposed a limit on the
wanderings of the River Sid.

At the time when Sidmouth became a seaside resort
there was less shelter for anchorage, but there was still a
steep bank of shingle fronting the marsh or ham near the
mouth of the Sid. This marsh was considerably below
the level to which shingle was piled, and the permanence
of the latter, so useful for launching boats, was ensured
by the circumstances that during any storm which oc-
curred when the tide was high the rampart was pushed a
little further inland, not sucked away by backwash from
a sea wall.8

The earliest account of the beginning of Sidmouth as
a seaside resort is contained in the final chapters of the
Rev. Edmund Butcher’s Excursion from Sidmouth to
Chester. This book appeared in the form of letters, and
Butcher dates the final letter October 20th, 1803. It
was written from Sidmouth, “which after all my wanderings, I am truly glad to see”. He proceeds to
give a description of the place. This is illustrated by a
frontispiece, for which “the author is indebted to the
friendly and elegant pencil of Hubert Cornish Esq. . . .
The view is taken at low water, and from Salcombe Hill,
which rises on the east side of the town. A part only of
Sidmouth is included; but the beach, and the distin-

1 An interesting account of the building of a small yacht at Sidmouth
and its launching from the steep shingle beach is given in Robert Leslie’s
A Waterbiography (1894). Of the conditions of sea fishing from Sidmouth
a realistic account is given in a work entitled A Poor Man’s House (1908)
by Stephen Reynolds.
guishng features of its coast, are sketched with fidelity and spirit.”

Hubert Cornish (1757–1823), my great-great-uncle, had not been trained as an artist, landscape painting being the occupation of his leisure, and this may perhaps partly account for the fact that he did not exaggerate the slopes of hills in the way that so many professional artists of that time seemed to regard as a duty. The drawing referred to shows the low ham behind the beach as open ground. This occupies the area of what is now the eastern part of Sidmouth town. The old town, which had very little sea front, is shown running diagonally inland, approximately conforming to the foot of Peak Hill and Bulverton Hill. The population at this time was about 1250.

Butcher’s description of the seaward slope of the shingle beach is an interesting record of its state before the erection of the sea wall. The beach is, he says, “...a natural rampart of pebbles, which rises in four or five successive stages from the surface of the sea at low water. With every tide the exterior parts of this shifting wall assume some different situation; are sunk either higher or lower, or are driven to the east or west, according to the strength and direction of the wind. At low water, considerable spaces of fine, hard sand are visible.... At the head of this shingly rampart, a broad commodious walk, which is called The Beach, has been constructed, and furnishes a delightful promenade.”

1 The appearance of the beach since the erection of the sea wall and the accumulation of the shingle at the east or west end according to the direction of the wind was recorded by a careful observer, the late John Tindall (see Trans. Devon. Assoc. 1926, vol. LVIII).
The final chapter of *The Excursion from Sidmouth to Chester* formed the basis of the first guide book to Sidmouth, published under the title of *The Beauties of Sidmouth Displayed*. It is written in a formal style to which we are now unaccustomed, but the author displays a considerable critical faculty with reference to the aesthetics of scenery. The following is a condensed quotation from this later work:

“The immediate vicinity of Sidmouth abounds with lanes, many of them of considerable length and variety, more or less sequestered, in which the delights of solitude may be enjoyed. The beach, on the contrary, offers to such as are most happy in a crowd, a walk, in which, amusement and health are to be found.”

As a health resort, Butcher writes:

“Sidmouth yields to none of the retreats of Hygeia. An air mild and salubrious, a soil uncommonly fertile, the purest water continually flowing, and a situation defended from every wind but the south, give it a pre-eminence.”

When our author deals with the practice of sea bathing, which had recently become fashionable, he indulges in grandiloquence:

“In some situations, man is almost an amphibious animal and at some seasons to find ourselves plunged in the refreshing wave, and wrapped round with the liquid element, is a most delightful sensation. Health and pleasure are equally consulted in these salutary ablutions, and to many a wan countenance has the blush of the rose
been restored by an occasional residence on the margin of the sea, and a frequent application of the purifying surge to the debilitated limb.”

Hubert Cornish’s small drawing of the sea front of Sidmouth was published in 1805. His next drawing, on a very large scale, was published separately as an engraving in 1815. It shows the way in which the housing plan of Sidmouth was changed by development as a watering place. This followed the usual custom of building as many houses as possible facing the sea and on the very front. Eastward of No. 1, Marlborough Place (where in old days the Monks of Otterton had their lodging and private chapel, of which some relics still remain), a terrace was built on the ridge of the beach, and most of the marsh behind became the eastern town, although then ill suited for habitation. On the west of the town the Fortfield Terrace was built to face the sea but at a considerable distance from the shore. The Fort Field in front of Fortfield Terrace, and other meadows between the terrace and the church, have remained unbuilt upon. These open spaces contribute greatly to the charm of Sidmouth town to-day. Being very valuable as building sites, curiosity is aroused as to the reason for their remaining thus undeveloped. It is unlikely that this was due to forethought in town-planning or to generosity on the part of landowners. A clue seems to be provided by a large-scale MS. map of Sidmouth Manor in A.D. 1789. On this the area is shown in long strips about a chain wide (a “chain” being the length of a cricket pitch). Most of these strips run westwards from
the built-up area of the old town and parallel to the shore. The arrangement suggests that the strips were held by the townspeople for cultivation or pasture. Parts of several strips running parallel to the shore would have to be purchased in order to provide space for a villa facing the sea with a suitable garden attached. Moreover, experience of certain transfers of, and of failures to transfer, property in Sidmouth suggest that some of these strips may have been held “on lives”, which would make their purchase for building very difficult. The most important part of the open spaces thus preserved is the Fort Field, now the well-known Sidmouth cricket ground. It gives the tower of Sidmouth Parish Church a spacious foreground, and this fine feature of the Perpendicular period is enhanced in its beauty by the background of Salcombe Hill. The natural feature is at a sufficient distance to be somewhat softened in tone, and the massive tower enhances its apparent distance, being, as French artists say, a repoussoir. But such effects are reciprocal, and in this particular case, according to my experience, the chief benefit resulting from the combination is the enhanced massiveness of the stately tower, erected in the culminating period of church-tower building, of stone from Dunscombe Hill.¹

§ 3. The “Long Picture”, as Hubert Cornish’s panorama is commonly called, was drawn from opposite

¹ Of the Upper Greensand formation, a geological term which includes a variety of substance from light mould to building stone. The new Woolbrook Church is built of the same stone, and so we know how the tower of Sidmouth Church appeared when new.