

Seaton Hole's 150th anniversary

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The year 2020 has marked the 150th anniversary, or sesquicentenary, of the small suburb of Seaton Hole, between Seaton proper and Beer. Estate agents have been known to refer to the area as East Beer, but residents are proud of their Seaton identity; a proposal in 2018 to hive the area off from Seaton into the Beer electoral ward aroused a lot of opposition. This article is an attempt to outline some of the area's history. The author would welcome corrections or additional information via martinshaw34@gmail.com.

Situation and early development

Seaton Hole is the site of the Seaton Fault, a very visible geological transition where the red Murcia mudstone cliffs, which begin at the eastern, town end of Seaton beach, give way to the yellowish greensand and chalk of White Cliff, which dominates Seaton Hole. The fault runs roughly north-south (more or less under the current care home). The name 'hole' refers not to a hole in the normal sense of the word, but to the small bay at the end of Seaton beach where the Beer Brook - which is also rather confusingly named since it is not the brook which runs through the village of Beer - flows into the sea.

In the years before houses were built in the Beer Brook valley, the beach was used by the famous Beer smuggler, Jack Rattenbury (1788-1844), who says in his memoirs: 'Having landed a cargo at Seaton Hole one dark night, I was going up the cliff with a keg at my back, when I had the ill-luck to stumble over an ass, which began to bray so horribly that together with the noise occasioned by my fall, woke an officer who was taking a nap below, in consequence of which he seized nearly forty kegs, being the whole of the cargo.'

The first house in the lower section of the Beer Brook valley appears to have been The White Cliff Glen (now simply The Glen), a large turreted house in a mid-Victorian style on the south side of the valley. In censuses in 1871 and later, only servants (many local-born) were living at the house at the time of the enumerator's visit, suggesting that from the start it could have been a second home.

By the 1860s, the Hon. Mark Rolle (1836-1907), the owner of the land in the valley, was in discussions with the main landowner in Seaton, Sir Walter Trevelyan of Calverley Lodge (later known as the Check House) about a development of a dozen large villas on the northern hillside of the valley, as part of Trevelyan's plan for a 'seaside housing development' including a gothic seafront for the town. The twin proposals are displayed in large, impressive prints in Seaton Museum.

The new scheme seems to have been planned alongside the opening of the branch railway to Seaton in 1868, which ran down the Axe valley from the main line and was central to Seaton's transformation from a fishing village into a small resort town. (It was closed in 1966 and the route as far as Colyton is now used by the Tramway.)

Trevelyan's seafront was not constructed, but three identical villas were in fact built in or around 1870 on Rolle's land at Seaton Hole and appear to be the only part of the grand scheme which was actually completed. The new houses were named Swallowcliffe, Lynwood and Whinhurst, and a 'New Road' (as it was called on contemporary plans), which is now the western end of Old Beer Road, was constructed from the bottom of Beer Hill and must have connected to Couchill. A pair of large semi-detached houses, one of which was Woodlands, was built further to the west from the three villas.

Rolle, the developer of Seaton Hole, was born Mark Trefusis and inherited his estate in 1842 from his uncle by marriage John, the first Lord Rolle, whose surname he later took. Lord Rolle, of Bicton Park, was one of the largest landowners in Devon (and a slaveowner), and his first wife was Judith Walrond, of Bovey House, Beer, whose family had held the Manor of Beer since the 13th century. It seems likely that it was through this marriage that Mark Rolle came to own the land around Seaton Hole. In turn, since his own two daughters could not inherit, on his death his estate passed to his nephew, the 21st Baron Clinton. Most undeveloped land around Seaton Hole is still owned by Clinton Devon Estates.

Expansion and change

Although Seaton Hole was never officially named, it can be argued that the 1870 development marks its beginning as a distinctive area. For the next quarter of a century, the six large houses were fairly separate from the town, although reliant on it for services, while servants and gardeners must have been mainly recruited from there or from Beer. There was only Highcliffe, which had very spacious grounds, between them and the town end of the road into Seaton, where Seaforth House had recently been built. Around the turn of the twentieth century, however, two large houses in an Arts and Crafts style, Upcott and Whiteacre, were built between Swallowcliffe and Highcliffe, and a third, Lew Hollow, was constructed in an old quarry opposite The Glen.

Surprisingly, this group of houses was virtually unaltered for half a century after the Edwardian development. Some of the original villas were added to, even in the Victorian era, but otherwise very little seems to have changed in the valley, although ribbon development took place along the new Beer Road overlooking Seaton Hole after its construction in the 1930s. Old Beer Road received its present name after the new road was opened.

The Victorian and Edwardian houses are, of course, very large and there were many changes of function. Lynwood became a school in the 1920s - with a covenant that no bells or whistles were used, so as not to disturb the neighbours! - and was also one in the 1950s, before being divided into flats and then turned back into a single dwelling. The White House was also a school, run by Roland and Dorothy Doran, in the 1990s and 2000s. A much-expanded Swallowcliffe became a care home specialising in dementia, and was renamed Lyme Bay View in the last decade. Upcott was a bible college for a time and an extra accommodation block was constructed; it has since been used for large-group holiday rentals. Upcott's groom's cottage and Whiteacre's steward's

cottage (the latter built by a retired admiral after the Second World War) became separate houses, now Kincora and Robins on Beer Road.

Architecturally, however, Seaton Hole was an unusually intact small Victorian-Edwardian suburb until the 1960s, after which the modernist Higher Glen, wedge-shaped Dutch Glen and Long Orchard were built in the grounds of The Glen. The Dutch Glen was owned and designed by an architect from the Netherlands and built over the brook, originally with a Japanese water-garden. The Glen itself, owned for a while by a member of the Dodge family who were major property-owners in the area, went through several enlargements to become a four-storey block of flats, most of them now second homes. Between the late 1980s and early 2000s, the original Woodlands was demolished to make way for a row of 8 houses, with a replacement Woodlands built above them, while Lynvale was built in Lynwood's and Seabrook House in The White House's gardens.

Although the number of properties has more than doubled compared to the 1960s, all new building seems to have occurred within the grounds of the existing houses. In 1963 most of the countryside surrounding Seaton had become part of the East Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and the remaining countryside between Beer Road and Old Beer Road was protected by the East Devon Local Plan as an Area of Great Landscape Value. Although the latest version, adopted in 2016, abolished that category, EDDC has continued to reject applications to build on land outside the Built Up Area Boundary which is classified as 'countryside'.

Development around Seaton Hole became increasingly controversial and residents campaigned against a number of planning applications, including for houses the field to the south of Beer Road just inside the Seaton boundary (known to some older locals as the 'Floof Field' because Floof House, now Westdale Edge, stands above it). One for this site was rejected in 1977 and another in 2020 has been opposed by over 60 residents. In 2013, Seaton Hole residents were primer movers in setting up the West Seaton and Seaton Hole Association, which in addition to concerns about planning has campaigned about the quality of the water in the Beer Brook, which has been contaminated by runoff and slurry from local farms.

It is strange that the Seaton Conservation Area, defined in 1991, was confined to the town centre and did not include Old Beer Road (or for that matter West Cliff Terrace and the Check House), unlike the Beer Conservation Area which included the comparable development along New Road. Reviews of the Seaton Area for EDDC in 1999 and 2012 have drawn attention to this discrepancy, the former stating that Seaton's historically important buildings are 'scattered ... well beyond the existing conservation area boundary', and the latter recommending that a westward extension to the Conservation Area be considered. EDDC has not responded to either of these comments, although it adopted the Seaton Design Statement of 2009 which also drew attention to the important buildings in the area.

The beach and coastal erosion

During the Second World War, according to Jean Kreiseler who then lived in The Glen (which was still a house), the beach was off limits and a large artillery piece was positioned near where the cafe was later built. After the war, Seaton Hole was a much-visited end of Seaton beach, popular with locals and visitors alike, as photos from the 1950s show. Probably only in 2020, under lockdown, have visitor numbers returned to similar levels.

At least two pathways to the beach were lost to erosion in the second half of the twentieth century. A fall in the 1990s led to loss of the beach access near the cafe, leading to a vigorous campaign to restore it by the local community with support from Margaret Rogers, a well-liked Liberal Democrat councillor (Jean wrote up the episode for the Museum Newsletter at the time). In the end volunteers, led by Gordon Wellington of The Dutch Glen, constructed what is now known as 'Gordon's Way', which is now maintained by EDDC.

In 2012, a major cliff fall in Old Beer Road, to the south and east of Highcliffe, separated Seaton Hole from the town. The revetment installed in the early 1990s had slowed erosion from the sea, but this fall from the mudstone cliffs was mainly caused by rainfall acting on the tops of the cliffs, and precipitated (many believe) by drilling by the water company. A petition to keep a footpath was rejected by EDDC, but the path was lost within two years anyway. A new permissive path, the Clinton Way, was opened through the wood owned by Clinton Devon Estates connecting Old Beer Road and Beer Road, where the South West Coast Path now continues into Seaton. It is also worth noting that the path from Beer to Seaton passed originally in front of Lew Hollow's garden; it now passes at the back, up Beer Hill, instead.

Ted Gosling tells the story of how, during the war, he used to walk from Seaton to Beer and back every day for work. One morning there were a couple of trees on the sea side of Old Beer Road; by the afternoon they had disappeared, ending up at the foot of the cliff. However the rate of erosion can be exaggerated. A photograph of the cliff under Highcliffe from the 1920s shows the road already right on the cliff edge. It took a further 90 years for the 2012 collapse to occur. A 2020 study of the coast between Sidmouth and Lyme Regis by Plymouth Universities scientists suggests that even without taking into account sea defences, Seaton Hole should be safe for another century. EDDC has now approved a plan to renew these defences, which is currently almost fully funded. The area looks forward to its second 150 years.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for information and comments by Rob Ashworth, Karen Curnock, Eric Gordon, Jean Kreiseler, Anna Philpott and Julia Roebuck.