

History Group notes from the meeting on 20th January 2025

Present: Brian, Ed, Ian, Peter, Margaret, Phil, Shan

Ed kicked off the meeting by recounting some of his findings from trawling through Tindall's diary. His full contribution is copied below.

Margaret updated the group on her researches in the town centre, focusing on the area between the URC Church and Fields. She plans to publish her next book in the Spring. Brian shared his speculative link between the salt house, the fish market and St Peter's chapel. Margaret had also been trying to place the location of several public houses, including the Kings Arms. A discussion followed on the origin of the naming of Kings Lane and was concluded by reference to POH's history which records Mr King being the owner of Beach House. Margaret also showed a picture viewing Prospect Place from the west which showed a thatched cottage where Pobby and Blue is currently, with the suggestion that King's Lane was not there. A discussion ensued as to whether it was hidden behind a bush. [post meeting notes: King's Lane is shown in the 1789 Manor Map. Is this the same Mr King who built/rebuilt Kings Cottage, now the Royal Glen?]

Shan reported that she had been looking at a photo album from the 1930s relating to fishing. A discussion followed on the role of inshore fishing in the livelihoods of Sidmouth people, and of the period when fortunes were made in the Newfoundland fisheries.

Shan also asked whether there was any plan to hold an event to mark the 80th anniversary of VE Day on 8th May. While it was believed that the Town Council and Royal British Legion would be arranging something at the War Memorial, no one was aware of any other plans. Brian offered to check with the Town Clerk.

Peter showed another reference to the new book on female spies, which refers extensively to Kathleen Pettigrew.

He also the matter of the POH drawing of Sidmouth Fort as it appears in Reginald Lane's *Old Sidmouth*. This is identical to the one (in colour) in the greenhouse in Connaught Gardens, mounted on the back wall alongside one of the Old Lime Kiln and numerous photographs of the construction of the gardens and the opening by the Duke of Connaught. The one in the greenhouse has a caption: "The old fort on the site of the lime kiln circa 1780". The one in the book is captioned "A drawing by P.O. Hutchinson of how the fort might have looked in 1697. He drew this from the memory of the Sexton of Sidmouth before the guns were removed some time after 1815". Lane's *History* also has a photograph showing "The guns on Peak Hill about 1870". They appear to be in an open field, not within any fortification, and are likely to be of a later date (and not removed from the fort c.1815) due to advances in technology.

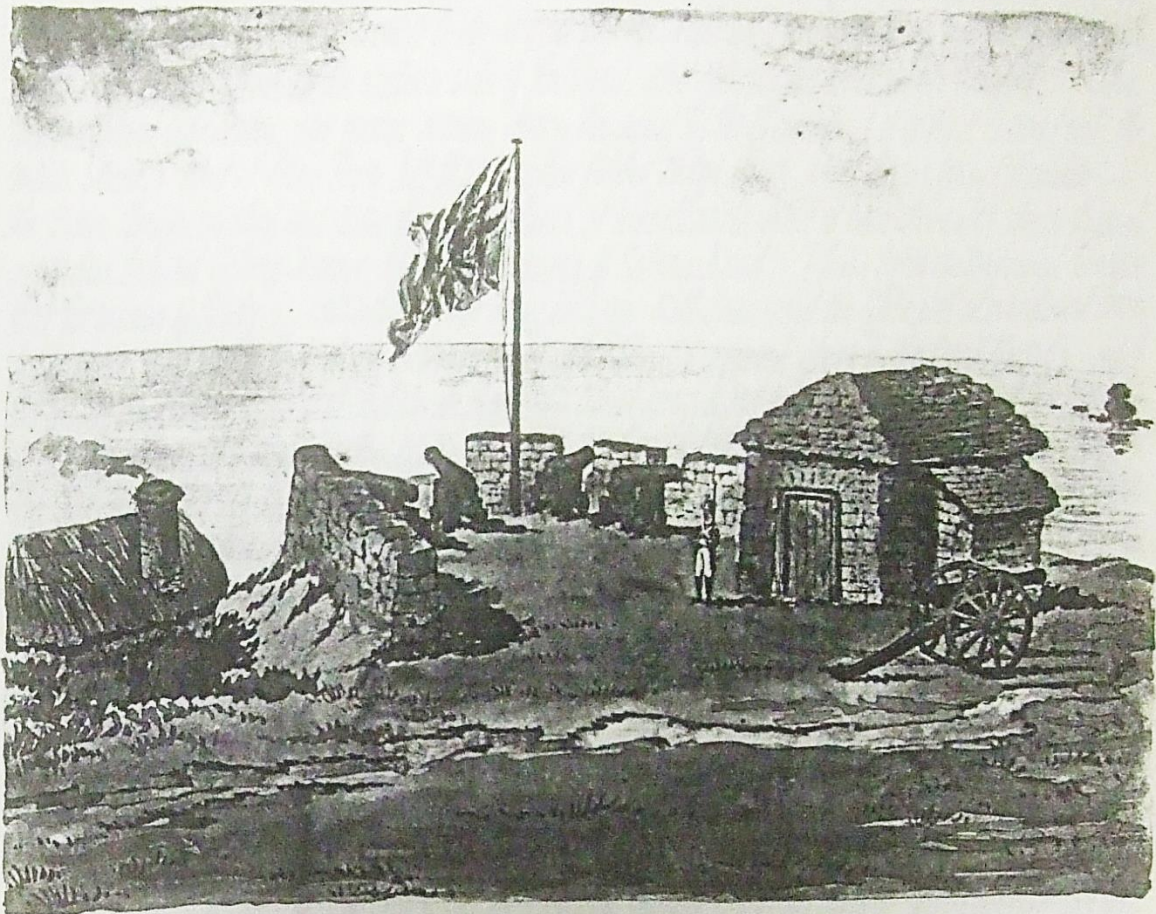
This raises several questions.

- Why is one version dated 1780 and the other 1697?
- Why does POH assign the date of his original drawing to 1697? As the Hutchinson family did not come to Sidmouth until 1825 how could the Sexton know what the fort looked like at least 128 years before POH would have spoken to him?

- If the POH drawing is of the fort east of the Belmont Hotel site how can it also be on Peak Hill?

[post meeting note: A copy of the original page from POH's history is reproduced below. The picture shows the Chit Rock to the right, clearly placing the fort on the Fort Field. There is no reference to 1697 – indeed he refers to the picture being of the state before the fort was dismantled (which was in 1815 – not 1780 or 1697). On the previous page, POH gives a list of references to disbursements for the fort in the parish records, the first of which was in 1697, but nowhere suggests this is the same structure. Finally, he refers to the new cannons set up in 1859, and moved to Peak Hill, of which Lane includes the photo. In short, the date is 1815 and the location is the Fort Field. POH also refers to Fort Cottage having replaced two, small, thatched cottages, one of which may be the one seen in the picture (consistent with the 1789 Manor map).

The copy of POH's drawing in Lane's book has the right edge cropped, removing the Chit Rock. He spuriously dates the picture as 1697 and places it adjacent to one showing the cannons after they were moved to Peak Hill. The result was misinterpreted by whoever put together the display in the Connaught Gardens. Such is how misinformation gets propagated!]



THE FORT, SIDMOUTH.

The above sketch of the Fort I drew at the dictation and description of the late Mr. Hugh Johnson, then Sexton of Sidmouth, standing at his elbow, and jelling down all the arrangements of the interior, until he was satisfied that my drawing was a correct representation of what he could recollect of its appearance before it was dismantled.

In 1859 the Sidmouth Volunteer Artillery Corps was formed. It was at first commanded by Gustavus Smith Esq. J.P., and two Lieutenants, of whom I was one for the first three or four years. J. B. Sorsada Esq. J.P. was the next Captain. We had two 24-pounders, placed in the Fort Field, near the side of the old Fort. Owing to the concussion the guns were removed to a platform at the foot of the cliff, 200 yards west of the Chit Rocks, and afterwards to the field above.

Brian concluded the meeting by referencing two inquiries he had received relating to Sid House. The first was from someone in Australia who was trying to find out more about the life of an ancestor who was a servant there in the late 19th century. The other was from a visitor to the town who asked about the Huyshe family that lived there at the turn of the 20th Century. Ian offered to check for any entry in his cemetery records for Salcombe Regis.

Next meetings, all at 12, Church Street

Monday 20th January, 7pm

Monday 10th March, 7pm

Monday 12th May, 7pm

Monday 13th July, 7pm

Pennington Point, a perspective from history - John Tindall's Beach Diaries 1922-31

John Tindall kept records of various aspects of Sidmouth's beaches for ten years from 1922-1931, including shifts in the shingle, storms and wind directions, cliff falls, and other significant local events. With current concern about the erosion of the easterly cliffs, particularly Pennington Point, Tindall's diaries can provide useful insights.



26th June 1925, a day after the rushure.

Focusing on Pennington Point and the cliffs east to Salcombe Mouth, Tindall records 116 falls, he uses the old fisherman's term rushures, over the ten years. These varied in scale but 72 of them were significant to substantial. In the last ten years 2015-24 there have been fewer than half that number with 26 falls on East beach significant enough to be mentioned in the Sidmouth Herald.

The significant falls were not distributed evenly over Tindall's ten years, there was a major change to the foreshore in the middle of the decade and this appears to have caused an acceleration of the erosion of Pennington Point and the eastern cliffs. Checking through the diaries, from 1922-25 before the work began Tindall mentions 18 significant falls at the Point and on East beach, from 1928-31 after the work was complete he records 39 significant falls.

In an effort to stabilise the shingle at Port Royal where the boats were hauled up, the guiding wall alongside the river was extended and the rocks from the disintegrating Dunning's Pier were piled alongside the river. Tindall raised a concern about the impact.

Our striking headland, Pennington Point, has suffered this year considerably. Its outline is, in profile, altered, and we may look forward to further falls of rock and marl till a state of equilibrium is attained. Its position to leeward of the new easterly groyne may perhaps account for some of this. Apart from this, the everlasting chafe of the waves will take its toll. Suitable Notice Boards have been placed to warn Visitors who prefer their ease and pleasure to the maxim of "Safety first". The rushures from the Point, extending at times to the water's edge, no doubt contribute to the denudation of the shore on the lee side - which is usually the eastern side.

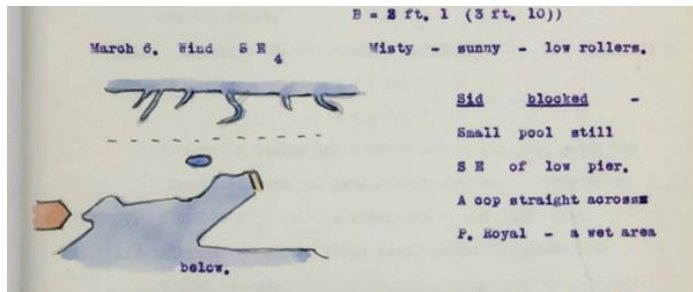
1927/8 Diaries, summary p.2, scanned p. 285



10th January 1926, working at Port Royal

The effect on the shingle was marked. During the early 1920s, Pennington Point was protected from wave action by a huge bank of shingle. This would wax and wane according to storms, but it was usually substantial enough to not only protect the cliff but to close the river. From 1922-4 the river was closed by shingle on average 223 days of the year. After the work on Port Royal, from 1929-31 it was only closed for 63 days each year on average.

In the 1890s, a new sewer outfall was constructed from a storage tank under The Ham, across the river and discharging well along East beach. The shingle was sufficient to need a permanent 'manhole' in the river to allow access to the pipe below. After the extension of Port Royal the 'manhole' often stood proud of the river bed and, in 1927, the sewer outfall was exposed and needed urgent repair. Incidentally, the sewer outfall was operated manually with a sluice gate on the storage tank opened when the tide was running eastwards.



March 6th 1924, Tindall sketch of river seeping through shingle bar, the left hand red block is Pennington Point.



December 1927 town drain exposed

Of course, the cliff falls are not just caused by wave action. Ground water leaking at the boundary between the Mercia Mudstone and the underlying Otter Sandstone causes an undercutting of the cliff and extremes of sun and temperature cause some falls on the cliff face. The weather over the ten years of the diaries was very variable, there were some very cold winters, one of the resident swans had to be freed from the ice on the river in March 1923, severe storms, and annual rainfall ranged from 29.98ins to 44.83 ins. The total number of falls in a year recorded by Tindall varies from 19 in 1922 to 85 in 1924.

Groundwater and weather have an effect, but a comparison between falls on the eastern and western cliffs highlights the impact of the Port Royal work. As stated above, there was a doubling of large falls at the Point and on East beach after the work. On Jacob's Ladder beach there is no dramatic change, from 1922-25 Tindall records 71 significant falls and 72 from 1928-31.

In 2015 much was made of a picture of cumulative erosion. Again, there is nothing new, Tindall was able to show just as striking a change in 1929.



The large rock at the cliff foot is a useful reference point.



Cumulative montage, Sidmouth Herald 15th May 2015

When working to protect Sidmouth from the sea, the shingle beach has an important part to play, but it is important to take a long term view and to be aware of the limitations of our understanding of unintended consequences.

Ed Dolphin