

History of the Byes

The Byes refers to the flood plain of the River Sid in its lower reaches: sometimes just between Sid Lane and Salcombe Road; at other times the whole way up to Sidford. The name is usually attributed to the word “baiz”, a Somerset dialect word meaning the part of a field that cannot be reached by a plough at its ends and corners. However, in his papers on the history of Salcombe Regis, John Anderson-Morshead refers to medieval documents in which the name of the land holding on the western slope of Salcombe Hill, immediately to the north of Salcombe Hill Road, is called Biside (at this time the river’s name was spelt Side or Sede, and seems to have always been pronounced “Seed”). The present hamlet of Sidford takes its name from this, although for many years it was named Milltown after the nearby mill. It seems more likely, therefore, that Byes is a shortening of this old name, Biside.

When King Athelstan gave Salcombe Regis to the monastery in Exeter, later the Cathedral, he included the River Sid so that they had access to water power. As a result, Salcombe Regis’s mill was situated on a leat from the River Sid at Questant Lane near where Sidcliffe now stands. The lane over the hill from Salcombe Regis to Milltown was built for donkeys to carry grain over the hill from Salcombe Regis and to carry the flour back afterwards. The manor controlled milling and it was all done at the mill on the Sid – on pain of a hefty fine.

Lower down the river, south of Salcombe Hill Road was medieval Sudvill, the earliest part of Salcombe Hill to be farmed. It later became Holway Farm, the remnant of which is now The Old Farmhouse in Hillside Road. In the late 19th Century it was run by Farmer Laskey after whom Laskeys Lane is named. The foot of the hill, near the ford, was called Holway Foot and was held by the Sidmouth poor charities from the 17th Century. As Sidmouth developed in the late 18th Century, this was a popular location for new houses and the land was broken up into several separate holdings: Mount Pleasant, Egypt, Myrtle and Woodbine (now Honeysuckle). Following the building in 1804 of Salcombe Hill House up on the slopes of Salcombe Hill, George Cornish acquired the whole of this land and subsequently became Lord of the Manor of Salcombe Regis.

Higher up the river, above Sid Lane, were medieval Milltown and Ripstone. The latter became Griggs Farm, which was purchased by Sofia Fortescue in the 1820s and then bequeathed to an orphan, James Pike, whom she had befriended. Her cottage was

subsequently renamed Fortescue House, in her memory, and has now given its name to the road and the hamlet of which it is part.

Returning to the river reach above Salcombe Road, we find The Lawn and Salcombe House, of which The Lawn was once part. Salcombe House was built in about 1770 for Mrs Brutton. It was purchased by the Rev'd Jenkins, vicar of Sidmouth Parish Church, in 1801 and then by the Rev'd Cockburn, Dean of York in 1822. In 1849 it became the home of Charles Cornish, second son of George Cornish, in whose family it remained until 1938. In the 1940s it was turned into an hotel and since 1958 has been owned by the Fisher family who renamed it Hunters Moon after the Georgian Country House in Ivor Novello's "Perchance to Dream".

In the early 20th Century, the Byes had become badly neglected, lying at the back of the new estates, as Sidmouth grew northwards, and owned by no-one. Annie Leigh Brown, sister of Lady Lockyer and descendant of the Carslakes of Cotmaton, purchased land between Lovers Walk and the Sid Bridge and bequeathed it to the National Trust when she died. Sidmouth Urban District Council purchased "The Lawn" in 1935 and built the footbridge shortly afterwards. Additional bridges were added at Lymebourne in 1964 and for the cycle track in the 1990s. The publicly accessible area was extended northwards when Livonia Field was given to the SVA in 1997 as part of a development deal. The Gilchrist Field was originally part of the Sid Abbey estate, owned by Maj Gen Hunt (who gave his name to the pond) in the early 20th Century, and by Lt Col Gilchrist from about 1930. It was bought by the SVA in 1996. Next to it, Margaret's Meadow was purchased with money from the SVA/ National Trust Landscape Fund in 2002 and the golden copse was planted the following year to mark the Queen's Golden Jubilee.

The foundation of the Friends of the Byes in 2011 marked the start of a new chapter in the preservation of this unique asset, ensuring that it will remain one of Sidmouth's brightest jewels for many years to come.