

Sidmouth is so worth saving



Sidmouth: jewels of seaside architecture

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Thanks to a generous legacy from one of its many admirers, the south-coast resort will never lose its 'timeless charm'. Candida Lycett Green is delighted

Yesterday I read something that would have delighted my father, the late Poet Laureate Sir John Betjeman. Keith Owen, an investment banker from Ottawa who died from cancer, has left most of his fortune to the seaside resort of Sidmouth in Devon because he believed it was just how England used to be and exactly how it should be.

My father felt that, too. He loved Sidmouth, describing it as a town "caught still in a timeless charm". And I am sure he would have agreed that Mr Owen, who was born in Devon but became a Canadian citizen, has done a wonderful thing in helping to preserve it for future generations to enjoy.

As for me, a regular visitor to its sleepy shoreline, I love it all - the long sweep of shingle on Jacob's Ladder beach, the flamboyant bedding plants in Connaught Gardens, the esplanade with its Regency terraces, wacky bow-fronted houses and elaborate balconies. The walk along the coastal path up Salcombe Hill is sublime and flush with primroses now, too.

This may sound like the stuff of many other well-preserved seaside resorts - but Sidmouth is better. On my first visit there, via a trickle of a road from nearby Otterton, the weather was balmy. A path led up and up to the thick line of beech woods on Peak Hill, and then suddenly out into the bright light - 500 feet above the sea.

The first sight of the town below and the slow, arched shoreline between towering red cliffs took my breath away.

It is, of course, quintessentially British, but Sidmouth must also be the nearest thing to the Italian Riviera we possess. The climate is remarkably mild. The tree-clad hills form an enfolding and protective horse shoe-shaped bowl, rising higher than the cliffs, around the town. In winter, Sidmouth is six degrees warmer than London and has less rainfall than any other south-coast resort.

Its dramatic natural setting has prevented too much unplanned and ugly suburban sprawl, and dotted around its slopes are some of the greatest jewels of seaside architecture you will find. In the past, its safe distance from London kept day-trippers at bay. This might account for the settled - even *recherché* - atmosphere Sidmouth retains, which many other Regency resorts have long since squandered.

Just as Keith Owen was inspired in wanting to retain and enhance this atmosphere, so also was Emmanuel Lousada, who founded the resort. The Jewish businessman recognised the physical beauty and potential of what was then a small port nestling on the mouth of the River Sid.

He bought up as much land as he could in the late 1700s and set about developing a genteel, yet exotic holiday venue. He built the first cottage orné - a large house dressed up as a cottage and often thatched with pretty bargeboards, which appealed to the holidaying aristocracy of the day. Lousada was a brilliant publicist and attracted an ever-widening circle of *grandees* to build their own holiday houses a little above and away from the sea. They now form the best collection of cottages ornés in the country.

When the Duke and Duchess of Kent, with their baby daughter Victoria, the future Queen, took Woolbrook Cottage for their holiday, it sealed Sidmouth's status in social and architectural terms. But for me this was not Sidmouth's heyday - that time is now. The *grandees* may have forsaken it for the south of France 150 years ago, but they have bequeathed us their architectural legacy. My father immortalised Sidmouth in his poetry. Keith Owen's legacy is just as important - to preserve it in real life.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/features/3636203/Sidmouth-is-so-worth-saving.html>