



East Devon District Council

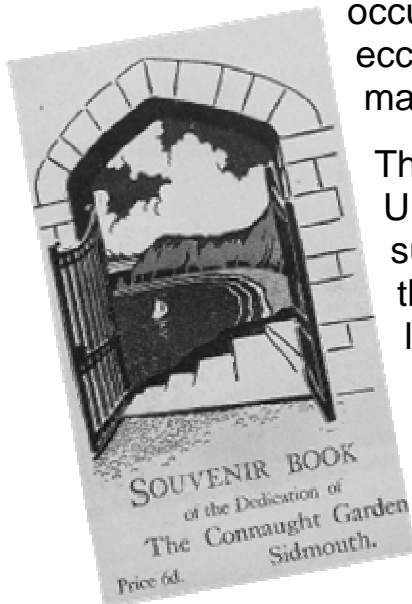
CONNAUGHT GARDENS, SIDMOUTH



Welcome to Sidmouth's Connaught Gardens! The Gardens are now nearly seventy years old and although they have changed and developed over that time, they still retain the unique character that makes them the special place they are today.

The History of The Gardens

The formal use of this land dates back to around 1820 when Emmanuel Lousada, owner of Peak House nearby, commenced construction of a detached marine villa, named Cliff Cottage, on the headland at the western end of the Esplanade. In the late 19th century, the property was renamed "Sea View" and continued to be occupied by a succession of private owners until 1930 when its eccentric and reclusive owner, a Mr Jemmett, placed it on the market.



There was much controversy at the time when Sidmouth Urban District Council decided to acquire the Gardens for the sum of £3,500. The Authority decided at the outset that these gardens required different treatment to the typical local authority park of the day which consisted of wide paths with massed flower beds and a children's playground. They therefore contacted the Gardens Department of Dartington Hall Ltd, based at Dartington Hall, Totnes, to design a scheme and carry out the construction works.

It was decided to demolish the old house as it was in such poor condition it could serve no useful purpose in the proposed layout. Some of the house walls, however, were retained and incorporated into the overall design. The main lawn was modified slightly and remains the focus today of activities in the Gardens. The high walls were considered essential in order to provide shelter and the old entrance drive was also retained. It is these features that still survive today and provide the main backbone to the structure of the garden and areas such as "The Jungle" remain much as they were then, as this old postcard shows.

The Gardens now contain a fine range of plants that thrive in the temperate climate including a new herbaceous bed by the main lawn. A leaflet with a guided plant walk is available from staff in the Gardens or by telephoning East Devon District Council's Parks Development Officer on (01395) 516551 who will be pleased to send you one by post.



Why “Connaught Gardens”?

The gardens were named after His Grace, The Duke of Connaught, Queen Victoria’s third son. Although the Duke’s first visit to Sidmouth was not until 1931, the Royal link with Sidmouth continues back over a century earlier when the young Princess Victoria, aged only 6 months, visited with her parents and stayed in what is now the Royal Glen Hotel. It was the Duke himself who formally opened the Gardens on 3rd November 1934 at the age of 84. The plaque marking this grand opening is still clearly visible within the Gardens overlooking the main lawn.



Connaught Gardens during the War

Connaught Gardens are located in an important strategic location, looking out to sea and along the coastline for some distance. During the Second World War, they played an important role in the defence of the south coast. They were closed to the public and two 138mm swivel guns, taken from the French battleship ‘Paris’ were installed looking out to sea (although a lack of shells meant that they were only fired a few times!). The clock tower was fitted with a searchlight and another gun was



placed in the Sunken Garden for practice. A concrete emplacement was built near the main entrance to the Gardens and this can still be seen today.

Even in the 19th Century, Peak Hill was used to defend against attack from the sea. Guns and a stone ammunition store were a permanent feature of the slope as shown in this painting.

Entertainment in Connaught Gardens

Since their opening, Connaught Gardens have been extensively used for a range of different activities including music, theatre and art exhibitions. Most weeks throughout the summer there is at least one band performing for your pleasure – why not settle back in a deckchair on the main lawn and soak up the warm sunshine and fine music! The notice board by the steps from Manor Road lists all of the forthcoming events and all are welcome. Occasionally, there is the opportunity to see theatre performed outdoors, either by a local company or even a nationally renowned company such as Cornwall’s Kneehigh Theatre!



Jacob's Ladder

Jacob's Ladder itself is the tall white set of steps that have been constructed to link the Gardens to the beach below. This is not, however, the first structure in this location. An access in this area actually dates back to the mid 19th Century when steps were cut into the cliff to give access to the beach below which had been largely inaccessible until then. This developed into a cart track that was used to transport lime (brought in by boat from places such as Branscombe) to the lime kiln which has now been converted into the Clock Tower Tea Rooms. The ongoing cliff erosion caused the path to fall in 1870 but access to the beach had become so popular with the Victorian population by this time that an extremely long ladder was built, like Jacob's ladder to heaven, hence its name. The steep ladder was not popular though, being difficult to use in the dress of the day, and so a new ladder was constructed in much the same style as the steps of today.



One notable difference from today which can be seen in the postcard to the right (dating back to 1910, some 24 years before the opening of the Gardens) is that the only access to the beach is via the ladder or round the base of the cliffs (only then possible at low tide). The chine with the zig-zag path down to the beach was not created until the 1950's, the esplanade walk around the base of the cliff being completed a few years later.

Peak Hill Slope

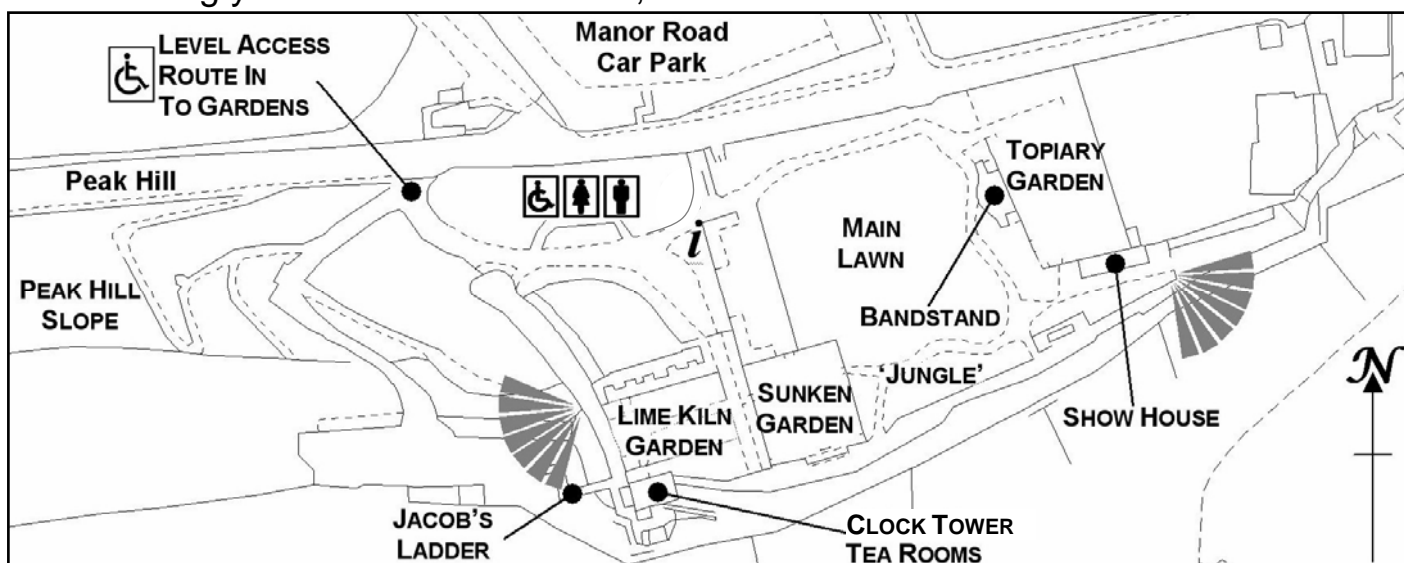
Although the Gardens offer a peaceful relaxing environment, there is nowhere better for energetic children or dogs to let off steam than the long grassy slope of Peak Hill. Why not take a walk up to one of the benches and take in the view while the kids see just how many roly-poly's they can do...

Peak Hill slope is also one of the finest places to watch the Red Arrows perform when they visit Sidmouth. You don't need to climb far up the slope to find yourself above the planes as they perform their breathtaking manoeuvres below you!



Around The Gardens

During your visit to the Gardens, here are five activities not to be missed!



1. **Take a look at the plants in the showhouse:** This contains a range of carnivorous plants and cacti. The sweet smell as you enter the showhouse comes from the citrus trees along the back wall.
2. **Stroll through the Topiary Garden:** This small peaceful garden with its sunken centre and water feature was originally the kitchen garden for Clifton Cottage immediately to the east.
3. **Explore 'The Jungle':** This winding route takes you through the overhanging Holm Oaks and has changed little since the Gardens were open (see the picture on the front cover). A must for children with vivid imaginations – see if they can spot the fossilised shell on the grotto arch!
4. **Enjoy the views along the cliffs:** Some of the finest views along the Jurassic Cliffs of this World Heritage Site are to be seen from Connaught Gardens. Look west through the gothic arch from the Lime Kiln Garden and be amazed!
5. **Relax with a cup of tea or ice cream:** The "Les Routiers Guide" recommended Clock Tower Tea Rooms offer anything from a refreshing warm drink to a fine meal. Ice cream is also available in the kiosk below!

Sir John Betjeman and Connaught Gardens

A devoted fan of Sidmouth was the Poet Laureate, Sir John Betjeman. His love of the West Country is self evident in many of his works and he wrote a poem dedicated to Sidmouth, a verse of which is included below.



***Pause on Peak Hill, look eastward to the town,
Then to the Connaught Gardens wander down
And in the shelter of its tropic bowers,
I see its bright and outsize Devon flowers.***

Sir John Betjeman, 1906 - 1984

If you have any comments or suggestions concerning Connaught Gardens, please contact East Devon District Council's Parks Development Officer on (01395) 516551