



*Duke of Connaught (left), with Equerry, on the Esplanade (Sidmouth Museum)*

November 1934. The event is recorded on a plaque on the rear wall of the terrace. In the 1980s part of the garden of Clifton Cottage was sold to the Council for inclusion in the Gardens and now forms the area behind the Band Stand.

The Gardens are one of Sidmouth's most attractive features



*Connaught Gardens*

and enjoyed by locals and visitors alike. From June to September, the Town Band plays concerts on Sunday evenings and, over the years, the Gardens have helped Sidmouth to win many awards in the Britain in Bloom Competition.

*Julia Creeke*

## 20 COTMATON OLD HALL *(site of)*

**Originally a Tudor house, rebuilt in the 17th century and destroyed by fire in 1934. It was inherited in 1810 by John Carslake, who had served on HMS Victory at the Battle of Trafalgar, and who married Thomazine Leigh of the prominent Salcombe Regis family.**

The name 'Cotmaton' is ancient, for in 1260 when the Otterton Cartulary was written, Robert de Cotmetton is recorded as holding land at Woolbrook. This probably refers to an area around the small stream which flows down Bickwell Valley and out to the sea at Clifton. For centuries this stream was known as the Woolbrook (Saxon for little stream).

By 1426 the Harlewines were settled on their lands at Ascerton and were to be associated with Sidmouth for more than 200 years. In due time they were to own extensive lands at Cotmaton where, in the early 16th century during the building of Cotmaton Hall, the date 1520 was recorded carved into a stone. During the 17th century the family spread to other parts of Devon and assumed greater prominence, so that by the middle of the century, the Sidmouth properties were in decline and the Ascerton estate was split into several portions; the Cotmaton estate being sold to the Duke family of Otterton.

In 1695, Robert Duke sold his Sidmouth estate to Henry Carslake of Branscombe, who settled at Cotmaton Hall. In the



*Cotmaton Old Hall, from a print after the painting by George Rowe (Sidmouth Museum)*

Sidmouth Parish accounts of 1697, there is an entry: 'M Henry Carslake for 180 rede for ye fort £1.12.0d.' (£1.60). Presumably this was for thatching the roof of an associated building.

Henry Carslake was born in 1642, the second son of Henry Carslake of Sidbury and his wife Grace. In 1696, aged 54, he married Dorothy Leigh and his only son, Henry (the third of the name) was born in 1698, but sadly his wife died following the birth and, just three years later, with the death of Henry (the second), his small son was left an orphan to inherit his father's estates.

At the age of 32, Henry Carslake (the third) married Elizabeth Bampffield, the wedding taking place at Seaton Church in 1730. This young lady was of good pedigree, but she also brought with her an inheritance from her great uncle and that included part of the Ascerton lands; Henry purchasing a further portion. The couple had eight children, but Elizabeth died in 1744.

Their eldest son, another Henry, an officer in the Guards, died, unmarried, of smallpox in Plymouth in January 1760, just two years after inheriting Cotmaton from his father who had died in 1757. William, the second son, now inherited his elder brother's property at Cotmaton. William's wife Elizabeth

inherited her father's property at Bulstone and William, with financial problems besetting him, seems to have gone to live there, allowing the third of the brothers, John Bampffield Carslake (always known in the family as 'Uncle John'), to buy out the Cotmaton property.

Cotmaton Hall was a long thatched house typical of many in Devon dating from Jacobean times, although parts were much older, and one room was always referred to as 'the Justice's Room'. However, on acquiring the estate, he seems to have added a new Georgian section onto the front of the old house. The lands stretched up the slopes of Peak Hill to beyond the present Cotlands and to the south to join the Sea Fields. 'Uncle' John, who was a bachelor, lived at the Hall with his sister, Elizabeth, who was often referred to as the 'Beauty of Devon'. At one time Sir Isaac Heard, the Garter King of Arms, wished to marry her, but she broke off the engagement, and in spite of numerous offers of marriage she remained single. She was

painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds, her portrait hanging on the staircase of Cotmaton Hall was remembered as being particularly handsome, but it was destroyed in about 1870 when the warehouse in Clifton, Bristol, where her great nephew's goods were in store, caught fire.

'Uncle' John Carslake, in 1809, built a new house on the estate at right angles to the old, to which he moved, leaving his sister, Elizabeth, occupying the Old Hall. This new house was known as 'New Cotmaton' and was a plain three-storey building overlooking a broad lawn with a beautiful view of the sea and hills. In 1815, 'Uncle' John Carslake died leaving a complicated Will which, in the first instance, left everything to his sister Elizabeth who was living at Old Cotmaton Hall. On the death of Elizabeth, which came only a year later, further provisions of the Will came into force, whereby his nephew, John Carslake (at the time a prisoner of war in France), became the ultimate possessor of the freehold of the estate but, in the meantime, as well as John, other family members had an interest in the Will and New Cotmaton House was required to be let to provide an income for at least one of them. Thus it would be many years before John was free to do what he pleased with his inheritance.

The terms of this Will are part of the reason why, for many years, John Carslake was always short of money, particularly in the early years of his marriage, and even in later life, money remained a concern. It is also why he and his wife for many years led such a peripatetic life, moving from one house to another to find cheaper accommodation, and from one place to another, as is manifest in the diary his wife kept for much of her married life.

John was born in Colyton in 1785, the sixth child and eldest son of Bampffield Carslake, a surgeon, and his wife Elizabeth Crago, and the fourth of the Carslake brothers. John joined the Navy as a First Class Volunteer aboard the *Royal George*, bearing the flag of Lord Bridport, and by 1800 was a Midshipman. He spent a period in the West Indies on board *Courageux* under Captain John Oakes Hardy, but when hostilities with France resumed in 1803 he joined HMS *Victory* under Lord Nelson. He was involved in extinguishing a serious fire in the ship's cockpit. The *Victory*, after a spell in the Mediterranean, left Gibraltar for the West Indies in pursuit of the combined French and Spanish Fleets.

John Carslake's meritorious conduct aboard HMS *Victory* at Trafalgar resulted in his being mentioned to Lord Collingwood, who promoted him the following day to a Lieutenantancy in the *Bellisle*, and in this ship he returned to England. In December 1805, he rejoined the *St George* attached to the Channel Fleet



Commander John Carslake  
in middle age

where he distinguished himself by jumping overboard in choppy seas to save a seaman and the First Lieutenant, Mr Caulfield. He had been aboard the *St George* for over 18 months but, before she sailed again and in consequence of his heroic actions, he was sent to Chatham to join HMS *Proserpine* as First Lieutenant.

*Proserpine* was still fitting out and

Captain Charles Otter had not yet arrived to take up his command. Their first orders were to proceed to Gothenburg to bring home Lord Leveson Gower, Ambassador to St Petersburg. Thence, to keep watch on the port of Toulon where, on 28 February 1809, *Proserpine* was attacked by two much larger French frigates and after sustained resistance was forced to surrender and her officers and crew taken prisoner.

John Carslake was transferred to V'leascut Prison, Verdun, where the recurring problem of sending and receiving mail became one of his major preoccupations. The letters give some idea of conditions at Verdun, where there was even a certain amount of freedom and a marked improvement 'since the arrival of Mr Otter, time certainly flies more agreeably'. Later he and his fellow prisoner, Bingham, were paroled and allowed to live in two tiny cottages and, although he never tried to escape, John Carslake was always willing to assist others to do so and would give them small amounts of money saved from his meagre candle allowance, which he achieved by going to bed very early, thus saving on candles.

The conditions of imprisonment of Captain Otter were of a very different order and commensurate with his rank, and John told his sister Betty in a letter dated October 21st:

To have two select friends, one of which is my old acquaintance Bingham who accompanies me twice a week on a visit in the country where the Captain resides. We leave town soon enough to join him at breakfast after which we employ ourselves in fishing till nearly dinner time, which generally occasions a pretty sharp appetite. In this agreeable manner the times passes so swiftly that we sometimes forget that we have nearly three miles to walk before the closing of the gates and so much have we overrated our walking abilities that twice we have been shut out. The Gens d'Armes who are posted there are generally very civil and we escape punishment on condition of future punctuality.

Their captivity was to last nearly six years but, after the Battle of Paris and Napoleon's enforced retirement to Elba, release finally came and in May 1814 John Carslake returned to England.

In early June he called on the Leighs of Slade House, Weston (between Salcombe Regis and Branscombe and now part of the Donkey Sanctuary), who were visiting London and met Thomasine, a distant cousin and youngest of the three Leigh sisters. (The spelling of the name Thomasine/Tomazine has



varied in source documents; several spellings are used in this book). She noted in her diary 'he had tea with us: I like him'. Thereafter he went often to see them, breakfasting with them and going on outings. On 12th June, the Leighs left London for Devon and thereafter there are frequent mentions in Thomasine's diary of John Carslake visiting Slade but she also had two other admirers, both students at Oxford and friends of the poet John Keats, one of whom, Bailey, was in love with her, but was rebuffed.

John Carslake was unable to propose to Thomasine, even if he wished to, for his finances, after so long in captivity, were in a parlous state and, therefore, after a year's leave he returned to sea and remained so until the November following, when the ship paid off and, although he did not know it at the time, he was never to go to sea again. It had been the custom in the Navy to grant promotion on release to all those captured honourably, but for a small minority released at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, this automatic promotion was denied. This was John's fate, and he felt the slight keenly and campaigned for most of his life to rectify it, writing even to Admiral Hardy, under whom he had at one time served, as well as others of influence, but it was not until 1852, then aged 65, that he was officially retired Commander.

About the time *Tartarus* paid off, 'Uncle' John Carslake died leaving his nephew John the ultimate freehold of all his property at Cotmaton. Shortly afterwards 'Aunt Elizabeth' also died but, under the terms of Uncle John's Will, John could only derive an income from the lands as both houses had to be let. In April 1817, Thomasine was engaged to him and the wedding took place on 30th September at Salcombe Regis Church. It was a simple service and, as was the custom of the time, the principal bridesmaid, who was the bride's sister, Mary Leigh, accompanied the couple on the wedding tour, after which they settled down to live at 'an unspecified house in Salcombe' where their first child was born. He was named John Hawkey Bingham and christened at the Old Meeting. Hawkey and Bingham were the names of two of John's companions during his long imprisonment at Verdun.

Towards the end of 1819, the couple moved to a house overlooking the beach at Sidmouth – 3 Marine Terrace – to be near a doctor and here their second son was born. In December, she saw the Duchess of Kent and the baby Victoria, and a few weeks later witnessed the Duke of Kent's funeral procession. In June 1821, John attended a Grand Coronation Dinner at the London Hotel.

For most of their married life John and Thomasine never settled in one house for long and, having returned to their house at Salcombe, they went to 'Hills' on Sid Road. It was there, later in 1821, that the Customs men arrived and hunted the house for concealed spirits (it was known that the house was sometimes used for this purpose), but nothing was found. The next year, a daughter was born and named Tomazine after her mother. There had been a constant round of social events, but in July 1823 Thomasine recorded in the diary she kept throughout her life: 'Nothing but parties out and at home. Ah this was not happiness.'

There was yet another move in October 1823 to 'Cotlands'. Thomasine had laid the foundation stone of the house which John intended as a spacious family home. It stood on a slight eminence and had a beautiful view over the valley to Salcombe Hill and the sea. The Carslake family were to live there intermittently for short periods before they went back to 'Hills' and finally to 'Asherton'. Asherton was a small house which was built by his Uncle John on the Cotmaton property, and since the old name of Asherton was gradually being forgotten it was bestowed on this new house.

Disasters and accidents also find a place in Thomasine's diary and in 1824 she recorded: 'Dreadful storms all night. Walked to Sidmouth to see the wreckage. Beach all gone. Chit Rock and the cottages all washed away'. (This was the great gale of 22 November 1824). In July 1829, there were three wrecks with five drowned. There were several instances of John being hurt by falls from his horse. He had already damaged his back in his naval days when he fell from the rigging of his ship and it would cause him increasing pain as he grew older, until he was in constant pain.

John Carslake's finances were always a worry to him and of the four houses on the Cotmaton Estate at least three were always let. Cotmaton Hall was then occupied by Henry Stewart to whom it had been let. This gentleman made some improvements, the most obvious and notable being the addition of two large ground floor bow windows to the plain Georgian front, which had been 'tacked' on to the old thatched house, probably in about 1790.

The Carslakes left Sidmouth and spent some time living in Exeter and in Somerset, but returned in 1844 to live at Cotmaton Old Hall which was unoccupied. Asherton was let to Dr Jeffery, the man who took part with Dr Hodge, in the attempted body snatching of a young boy very recently interred in Salcombe Regis Churchyard, but foiled by a posse of

armed villagers. The two doctors and their accomplices fled without the body, but peppered with shot, leaving behind their tools. One of these found its way to the village blacksmith and was fashioned into a new bolt for the Lych Gate at the entrance to the churchyard.

There were further house moves, and the marriages of their eldest son and daughter are recorded, as is the launching of the first steam ship built in Sidmouth. Towards the end of his life, John Carslake lived more and more at Cotmaton Hall, making many improvements during the 1850s, which Thomasine noted in the diary she still kept. Even the death of their old cat is recorded – its body was sent to be stuffed.

John Carslake had served for many years as a JP and, on one occasion, John Rattenbury of Beer, the most renowned smuggler in East Devon, came to see him at Cotmaton, to beg that he might intervene to obtain the release of young Rattenbury whom his father declared had been wrongfully 'taken up' for smuggling.

In early September 1846, a notice of a Public Meeting appeared stating:

A meeting of the inhabitants and those interested in the prosperity of Sidmouth will be held in the Town Hall on Wednesday, next, for the purpose of proposing Plans for the general improvement of the Place and the greater accommodation of visitors, also for securing to the Public the existing walks on the Cliffs and Salcombe Hill with the paths leading thereto – the Chair will be taken at 2 o'clock – Sidmouth, 9 September 1846.

This was the first meeting of what became known as the Sidmouth Improvement Committee, the forerunner of the present day Sid Vale Association. At that initial meeting, John Carslake was elected to the Chair. Discussions centred around the issue of footpaths and the attempts of the various landowners to enclose, thus blocking old rights of way.

John Carslake died at Clifton, Bristol, at the home of his son



*The house and its lovely gardens when the Carslakes lived there  
(Sidmouth Museum)*

in August 1865, just short of his 79th birthday, and was buried in the Churchyard of Sidmouth Parish Church. Thomasine died in 1883, aged 86, at her daughter's home in London.

The houses at Cotmaton were sold in due course. Cotmaton House (New Cotmaton) became the home of Mr Tindall who was both an author and artist. He came to Sidmouth in the mid 1890s and in 1907 published *Sketching Notes*, which drew on his skill as a water-colourist. In the 1914-18 War, he became quite a celebrity when, at nearly 70, he joined the Volunteers in the Town Guard. This was a very sad time for him as is recorded on the War Memorial tablets in Sidmouth Church – he lost both a son and a daughter. Between 1922 and 1931, almost every day, he walked down to the beach and recorded 'careful observations of the foreshore'. These were subsequently typed and bound in volumes which are archived in Sidmouth Museum. He was an active member of the Devonshire Association and was highly regarded by all who knew him and much mourned when he died aged 87 in 1933. The house had a spell as a guest house and is now an Abbeyfield house, whilst Cotmaton Hall, after being the home of General Elton for many years was destroyed by fire in 1935.

*Julia Creeke*