

The parish of Axmouth

The village and parish of Axmouth lie within the East Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and has within its boundary part of the Dorset & East Devon Coast World Heritage Site. The South West Coast Path also passes through the parish on its way from Seaton to Lyme Regis.

The village stands on the River Axe about 1 mile north of where the river now flows through Axmouth Harbour out into the waters of Lyme Bay.

Above Axmouth is the Iron Age hill fort on Hawkesdown Hill, probably built by the ancient British tribe, the Durotriges.

It is likely the Romans established the site of Axmouth, then known as Alaeni Ostia, They had built the Fosse Way and traces of a road have been found which linked this important highway to the harbour through which many goods passed.

Eventually the area around Axmouth became part of a Royal Manor of the Saxon kings. It is known that Alfred the Great left it to his son King Athelweld.

In the Domesday Book, the village is known as Alsemunda and was held by Edward the Confessor. It remained as a Royal Manor until 1552 when Henry VIII's son Edward sold it to Walter Earle.

During the English Civil War a troop of Royalists laid siege to Stedcombe House, just north of the village and razed it to the ground. The house was rebuilt in the latest William & Mary style in 1697 and can be seen from several points along the Axe valley. It is also reported that Axmouth sent 39 men to fight in the Monmouth Rebellion.

Another part of the manor was Bindon, which joined the estate of Stedcombe in 1552 when one of the heiresses married Walter Earle.

Today Axmouth is a pretty village to visit at any time of the year, with its mixture of old houses, the inns and its church.

St Michael's Church

It is possible that a church existed here in Saxon times. The present church, which is well worth a visit, was originally built around 1150. The south aisle and the Bindon Chantry chapel were added a little later and the tower was rebuilt about 1500. The first known vicar was Vivian Adrian, inducted before 1265. The list of incumbents is long and continuous. Inside there are medieval wall paintings, monuments and the Axmouth Quern, believed by some to have been used to grind corn.

The Inns

The Harbour Inn is reputed to have been a public house since the 12th century. Originally called the New Inn the name was changed about 1860. Entering through the low porch through the ages to the time when Axmouth was a flourishing port. In the warmth of the inn travelers would have heard tales of far off voyages, sea-fights, pirates and terrible storms from the god-fearing mariners who had just reached the safety of land. They still continue the year's old tradition of burning the "Ashen Faggot" every Christmas fire and as each binding burns through and cracks open it is time for another round of drinks.

The Ship Inn stands on the site of another ancient tavern of the same name probably dating back to the 10th century. Disaster struck on Christmas bay 1879. An oil lamp had been knocked over in the cellar, igniting the spirits and eventually burning the inn to the ground. The inn was totally ruined, mainly because the fire engine at Colyton refused to attend as the person sent to summon them could not promise that the inn would pay them.

Axmouth Harbour and Bridge

It is probable that the estuary of the River Axe, which in former times was much wider and deeper, was developed by the Romans as a port to service the southwest. Expanded by the Saxons, by medieval times it was an important port.

As the estuary silted up trade gradually declined but even as late as the 18th c it still had regular visits from trading vessels. In 1809 a large amount of money was spent in an effort to restore the harbour but the coming of the railway to Seaton in 1868 finally killed what was left of the remaining trade. Before 1877 the only way to cross the harbour was by a ferry operated by a boatman who would charge 1d per person.

The Lord of the Manor purchased the Right of Passage and employed a London engineer, Mr Phillip Brannon, to design and build a concrete bridge and toll-house. Opened in 1877, this bridge is now the oldest concrete bridge still standing in Britain.

Originally built as a toll bridge, the Stephens family of Stedcombe in 1907, paid to have the toll abolished and amid great rejoicing of the villagers the toll-gates were burnt.

During the 1980's the decision was made to build a new bridge which was opened in October 1990. The old bridge remains as a footbridge and is now an ancient monument.

Much of the estuary is now a nature reserve and a wonderful place to watch all kinds of water birds.

The Landslip

The importance of this region was recognised some years ago when the whole area stretching from the Exe estuary eastwards to Lyme Regis and beyond was declared an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It is now part of the East Devon & West Dorset World Heritage Site.

Axmouth also lies on the route of the South West Coastal Path. From the bridge it climbs Squire's Lane, reputed to be the steepest tarmaced road in Devon, past the Golf Course, along Barn Close Lane from where it once again heads towards the coast. It then goes through the National Nature Reserve of the Undercliff to Lyme Regis.

Many violent landslips have occurred throughout the centuries along this coast. The most famous of these occurred at Christmas 1839. In the weeks before some earth movement from the area and by the morning fissures were opening up. During Christmas Day it has been estimated that about 8 million tons of earth and rock subsided. A chasm, 100 metres wide, 50 metres deep and 600 metres long had opened up.

Between the chasm and the shore there remained an isolated area of land now known as Goat Island, but the most dramatic was the reef that appeared just off-shore near Culverhole Point. The Rev. Conybeare, an eminent geologist of the time, wrote that this "to be more than a mile in length and rising to more than 40 feet". The area became quite famous, with thousands of people, including Queen Victoria, coming to see the "Wonder of the Age". Before the landslip occurred the land, which became Goat Island, had been planted with corn. A ceremony was held in August 1840 when the corn was scythed by local damsels, dressed as handmaidens to the Goddess Ceres.