

BORN TO BE A GARDENER: SYDNEY JAMES BAKER (1874–1950)

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*Sydney James Baker
1945.
Courtesy Pete Purnell*



Broadclyst Vicarage (source: the author)

This article charts the family background and employment of a head gardener in Devon during a time of great change. It exemplifies the career of many head gardeners who worked from the Victorian era until well into the twentieth century and seeks to illustrate the impact of World War I on the role of an individual gardener.

Family Background

Sydney James Baker was part of a gardening dynasty. Both of his great-grandfathers had been gardeners and he was born, on 11 September 1874, at Broadclyst, Devon, where his father and grandfather both held gardening positions. His grandfather, James Baker (1822–1903), was head gardener at Brockhill House in Broadclyst for William Thirlwell Bayne JP.¹ The house possessed a substantial garden situated in ‘one of the warmest and most sheltered situations in the country’ with,

... a fine avenue of splendid old oak trees leading to the moderately-sized mansion ..., the lawn and pleasure grounds were studded with some of the finest ornamental trees and shrubs, with a greenhouse, vinery and a superior walled garden.²

Sydney’s father, William Robert Baker (1851–1924), was gardener to an associate of William Bayne, the Rev Sub-Dean Acland at Broadclyst Vicarage.³ Newspaper reports in the early 1890s show that William won prizes for dianthus and pansy blooms grown in the vicarage gardens.⁴ It seems likely that when the Rev Acland moved from the vicarage around 1897 Sydney’s father went to work in the garden at Knightleys (St David’s, Exeter) for Lady Duckworth. The grounds at Knightleys were extensive; the lawns, terraces and plantations were beautifully planted with flowers and trees. Additionally, there were separate fruit, flower and vegetable

gardens, plus glasshouses extending to a peach house, rose house, camellia house, cucumber house and vinery.⁵ By 1898 he was well-established there. The *Devon and Exeter Gazette* that summer reported that,

... the heaviest potato tuber is on show at Veitch’s seed warehouse grown by Mr W R Baker, gardener to Lady Duckworth, Knightleys, St Davids; he has for many years been a noted and successful exhibitor of vegetables.⁶

His experience in exhibiting vegetables was set out in a paper which he read to the Devon and Exeter Gardeners’ Association on 13 February 1901 on the best twelve vegetables to grow for exhibition, printed in pamphlet form later that year (the vegetables were: carrots, cauliflower, celery, cucumber, leeks, onions, parsnips, peas, potatoes, runner beans, tomatoes and turnips).⁷ He gave other talks to the Association, for instance, in 1900, on the various methods of potting plants in different soils, and served on the committee.⁸ He was evidently a well-respected gardener in the Exeter area: the *Western Times* on 7 November 1903 reported that during the exhibition of the Exeter Chrysanthemum Show ‘one of the judges Mr W R Baker late gardener at Knightleys who has left Exeter for Portsmouth was presented with a solid gold chain and pendant by his professional and other friends’. Possibly his departure from Exeter was prompted by Lady Duckworth’s death in March 1902 and the subsequent sale of Knightleys the following year.⁹



Brockhill House. Reproduced with kind permission of Devon Archives and Local Studies Service



*Sydney Baker's parents: William and Caroline Baker.
Courtesy Pete Purnell*

However, he did not stay away from Exeter long. By 1906 he was head gardener for Mrs Mary Gidley at Hoopern House in Exeter and worked there until at least 1920, even though Mrs Gidley died in 1914.¹⁰ His son (and Sydney's younger brother) Reginald Edwin Baker (1890–1970) served his gardening apprenticeship at Hoopern House alongside his father from 1907 to 1910.¹¹ Hoopern House had fourteen acres of land with 'a plantation of Scots Pine and Elms in which there was an established rockery; lawns were planted with Cedars, Wellingtonia, Berberis, Laurestinus and Rhododendrons'. There were also 'productive kitchen and fruit gardens, two orchards, heated greenhouses and other plant houses'.¹² During this period Sydney's father continued to play his part in the Devon and Exeter Gardeners' Association and acted

as a judge at some of the local Cottage Garden Societies' shows. One of the shows he judged (in November 1914) was an 'exhibition of fruit and flowers under the auspices of the Exmouth Horticultural Society, designed to benefit the Devon Patriotic Fund and the Belgian Refugees Relief Fund'.¹³ The exhibitors sold their produce to raise the funds. William's death was reported in the *Western Morning News* on 23 February 1924; one of the wreaths sent to his funeral was from the Gidley family at Hoopern House with the inscription 'in affectionate and ever grateful memory of our devoted servant and friend of many years'.¹⁴ This message encapsulated the particular relationship which could develop between a head gardener and his employer.



Hoopern House today. Courtesy Wilkinson Grant and Co

Early Life

Sydney Baker spent his childhood at Sunnyfield Cottage No 6, Broadclyst, opposite the Vicarage where his father worked. There he must have absorbed valuable gardening information and skills through the influence of his father and grandfather.¹⁵ By the age of 16 he had moved to Somerset and was boarding with other gardeners at The Stables, Cricket St Thomas, where he was described in the census as an 'improving gardener'.¹⁶ He worked for Viscount Bridport at Cricket St Thomas House alongside journeyman gardener, Herbert Pike, and foreman gardener, James Lambert, all under the supervision of head gardener, Septimus Lyon (1846–1913).¹⁷ It is possible that Sydney Baker's father or grandfather had come across Lyon for he was a regular judge at the Taunton Deane Horticultural and Floricultural Exhibition from 1891 until 1908.¹⁸

On 22 September 1898 at Littlebredy parish church in Dorset, Sydney James Baker married Fanny Sophia Groves, fourteen years his senior and the daughter of a Littlebredy woodman. The marriage entry notes that he was a gardener living in the parish of Bradford on Avon, Wiltshire; so presumably he had moved on to a better position.



William R Baker in the grounds of Hoopern House. Courtesy Pete Purnell

Back to Devon: Wear House

By 1901, Sydney and Fanny Baker were living in Exeter and residing at the Garden Cottage of Wear [Weir/Weare] House.¹⁹ The cottage, to the south-west of the main house at the back of the walled garden, was brick built with a slated roof and had a sitting room, kitchen and two bedrooms.²⁰ At that time Wear House was owned by Sir Dudley and Lady Duckworth-King. Sydney was to be head gardener there for the next thirteen years. Wear House was described as ‘a plain stone mansion with a fine Doric portico, surrounded by ornamental grounds and gardens, 100 acres in extent’.²¹ There was a two-acre walled fruit and vegetable garden with peach house, vineries and forcing houses.²² The grounds were planted with many ornamental trees including Wellingtonia (one of which was believed to be the largest and oldest in England), Blue Cedar and Cedar of Lebanon. There was a walled terrace on the south front of the house, roseries, herbaceous borders, rhododendrons and woodland walks, tennis lawns, a picturesque thatched summer house and several lakes.²³ During Sydney Baker’s time at Wear House, like his father, he acted as a judge at local horticultural shows.²⁴ He also became a prominent member of the Devon and Exeter Gardeners’ Association, often acting as chairman.²⁵ In 1909 he and his father won awards at the same Devon and Exeter Horticultural Society Show on behalf of their respective employers; Sydney for Lady Duckworth-King and William for Mrs Gidley.²⁶



*Wear House facing west 1920.
Courtesy Exmouth Local History Group*



*Part of the gardens at Wear House 1920.
Courtesy Exmouth Local History Group*

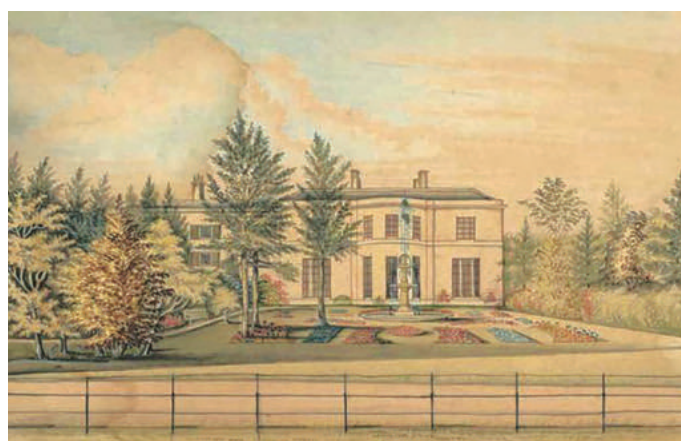
Wartime Bystock

Soon after the declaration of war in 1914, Lady Duckworth-King offered to lend Wear House to the local Refugee Committee.²⁷ This might have meant that Sydney Baker no longer had a role on the estate. However, it might also have been that Mr Frederick Hunter (1864–1942) of Bystock in Exmouth needed extra gardening support on his estate. Fifteen of his employees at Bystock had immediately volunteered for service in response to his appeal for them to do so – which included a bonus for those who did. Whatever the reason, in 1915 Sydney, then aged 40, and his wife moved to a cottage on the Bystock estate where Sydney’s brother, Reginald, had been working as a gardener since at least 1911. Reginald Baker had enlisted on 3 December 1914 and served in the 2nd Devons throughout the War until he was demobbed on 22 May 1919. Whether his brother Sydney replaced him or immediately moved into the position of head gardener at Bystock it is difficult to know but it was not long before he was established at Bystock as head gardener.



Bystock c1833 engraving by J Henshall. Reproduced with kind permission of Devon Archives and Local Studies Service

Frederick Coleman Hunter had bought the 400-acre Bystock estate in February 1906. It was at that time described as ‘one of the most charming estates in south Devon’ with ‘pleasure grounds probably unsurpassed in their attractiveness in this part of England’.²⁸ Just after he moved into Bystock the gardens were described in an article in the *Gardeners’ Chronicle*:



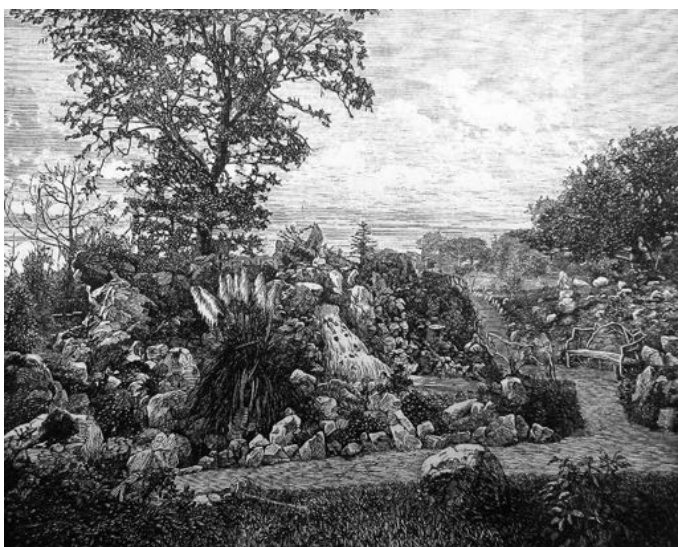
West view of Bystock c1830 watercolour by unknown artist. Reproduced with kind permission of Devon Archives and Local Studies Service

which detailed the rockery (designed by F W Meyer); the summer house built of cork in the form of a huge tree trunk; a rustic bridge covered with clematis; the curved pergola 300 ft long covered entirely with healthy young hornbeams; another pergola-covered walk leading to the house covered with different varieties of climbing roses; ornamental ponds with bulrushes and water lilies; *Richardia Africana* and *Vitis Inconstans* (*Ampelopsis Veitchii*) extending the entire length of the terraced flower garden.²⁹ Ten years prior to this, an article about the Bystock gardens noted,

... smoothly shaven and sloping lawns on which were planted many choice trees and shrubs; plenty of old camellia *Alba Plena* laden with flower buds; several old Holly Oaks 40ft high and branched to the ground; two large *Pinus Insignis*; the very best specimen of *Quercus Suber* 40 ft high; trained over the masonry of the mansion was a large specimen of *Gloire de Dijon* rose; trim specimens of Golden Yews skirted the side of one of the main walls; elsewhere in the grounds healthy young specimens of *Sequoia Gigantica* and *Araucaria Imbricata*.³⁰



*A view of the gardens at Bystock.
Courtesy Exmouth Local History Group*



Engraving of the lower waterfall at Bystock – part of F W Meyer's design. Courtesy RHS Lindley Library

These were gardens worthy of any experienced head gardener's talents.

Prior to Sydney's arrival at Bystock in 1915, Hunter had established himself as a prominent member of East Devon society and a notable benefactor. He was a Devon Magistrate; an Exmouth Urban District Councillor (elected chairman in 1918); Vice-president of the member of Exmouth District Nursing Association. Hunter's active participation in organisations which supported the war effort from 1914 onwards must have had an impact on Sydney Baker's role when he joined the staff at Bystock; he would have been responsible for the practicalities related to his employer's commitments. Hunter was already a member of the Exmouth Patriotic Committee and in time was voted on to the committee at the inauguration of the Motor Volunteer Corps for Devon.³¹ He donated funds to the Exeter Hospitality Fund (as did Baker) and to the Devonshire Voluntary Aid Organisation. In 1915 Bystock became a second line hospital and continued until the end of the war, by which time it had treated 183 wounded soldiers.³² Baker would have been in charge of the production of food on the estate, some of which was presumably needed for the hospital. Additionally, his employer volunteered regular fruit and vegetable donations to the Headquarters of Grouped Auxiliary Hospitals in Exeter.³³ The practical responsibility for this would probably have rested on Baker. During the war, a few of the regular horticultural shows were staged and Baker continued as a judge; the proceeds (money, fruit, vegetables) were then donated to organisations like the Red Cross.³⁴ There are few details recorded of Sydney Baker's involvement in the Food Production Campaign. As an RHS Advisor he must have spent some time passing on valuable information about the cultivation of fruit and vegetables to local residents who were newcomers to growing their own food. Specifically, a report in the *Western Times* (10 December 1917) noted:

Continuing the series organised by the Exeter Branch of the Workers' Educational Association for allotment and smallholders Mr S J Baker head gardener at Bystock dealt on Friday, in the most lucid way, with the culture of root vegetables usually grown.

As the war progressed, Hunter's support of the war effort through financial donations reflected the changing state of affairs; from the end of 1916 he donated to Devon Wounded Soldiers' Fund, to the Devon Prisoners of War Fund and to the Exeter and Exmouth Farmers' Red Cross appeal. A very practical contribution was made by him in August 1918 when he presented Exmouth UDC with 'a long black breeding sow', presumably a contribution to the newly formed Pig Club which had been started for the Hamilton Road allotment holders.³⁵ The focus of his public service changed to agriculture and horticulture because of increasing food shortages; he was elected to serve as Exmouth Council's representative on the St Thomas and District Agricultural Committee which probably, in practical terms, also involved Sydney Baker.³⁶

Post-war Bystock

When the end of the war came, Hunter was instrumental in the decision to erect a memorial to the 250 Exmouth men who had lost their lives in the war.³⁷ He presided over the

Exmouth War Memorial Committee and put much effort into helping different factions in Exmouth to come to an agreement as to what form it should take.³⁸ He unveiled the War Memorial in the Strand Gardens on 10 August 1921.³⁹ Meanwhile Baker's brother Reginald arrived home from the war. He had served in the Far East as senior instructor at the Brigade School of Signals, Poona, and later went with his unit to Mesopotamia where he was in charge of regimental signallers for more than three years. On his return he did not resume gardening at Bystock but went to be head gardener for Sir L Mackinnon on the Downes estate, Crediton. However, another of Sydney's brothers (Harold Edgar), nineteen years his junior and also a gardener, joined the gardening team at Bystock.⁴⁰ Not only were the Baker brothers living on the Bystock estate and working together but they were involved in some of the social activities in which Hunter encouraged his employees to participate, particularly cricket. One reported example of this is when the brothers were part of the Bystock cribbage team which played against the Withycombe Recreation team at Bystock House in 1923.⁴¹ Unfortunately the Baker brothers' gardening partnership at Bystock came to an end when Harold died, aged 29, at the end of March 1924.⁴²

Not long after the end of the war, the cycle of annual horticultural shows resumed and Sydney Baker was a regular judge during the next ten years.⁴³ As head gardener at Bystock he was also responsible for public flower arrangements; for instance, when special services were held at St John in the Wilderness church, Exmouth. One such was held in October 1922 to celebrate the restoration of the font where 'in the decoration of the building for the festival Mr S J Baker head gardener at Bystock exercised much skill; the colours, fruit, vegetables, flowers and corn blending in a most artistic manner'.⁴⁴ When Hunter loaned a large number of plants for the decoration of the Masonic Hall in Exmouth the 'arrangement was carried out by the head gardener at Bystock, Mr S Baker'.⁴⁵ A notable occasion when Baker was called upon to exercise his floristry skills was at the funeral of Minnie Lillian Hunter (F C Hunter's wife) in 1924. The 'coffin was taken on a farm wagon, adorned with heather and ferns by the head gardener Mr S J Baker, to the churchyard [St John in the Wilderness] ... the brick vault was also beautifully lined by him'.⁴⁶

Great Duryard

For the four years following his wife's death Hunter lived on at Bystock and Sydney Baker continued as head gardener there. However, in spring 1929 the Bystock estate was sold to Major Cecil Pellew Bradshaw. Hunter moved to Great Duryard in Exeter (now known as Thomas Hall).⁴⁷ Evidently the working relationship between Sydney Baker and his boss was good because he moved with Hunter to be his head gardener at Great Duryard. In 1807, there were pleasure grounds, orchards, shrubberies and a walled garden; by 1849 there was also a cider orchard. By 1887 the pleasure grounds had been enlarged with a serpentine walk through them and the garden immediately to the west of the house was arranged as a wide terrace with a formal planting of trees; additionally, there was an octagonal brick-built summerhouse with verandah. Tennis courts and a croquet lawn had been added by 1903 but it is difficult to know precisely the layout of the gardens when Sydney Baker arrived there in 1929.⁴⁸



Great Duryard 1903. Reproduced with kind permission of Devon Archives and Local Studies Service.

He clearly had managerial responsibilities for the estate. An advertisement placed in the *Western Morning News* (11 July 1930) requested that tenders for 'cutting up and removing, including blowing up the roots of about 12 Elm trees and 6 Fir trees' be sent direct to him at Great Duryard. His commitment to judging at horticultural shows was as strong as ever during this period; every year he was at the Taunton Deane Horticultural and Floricultural Society show in August and the Autumn Horticultural Show in Exeter, as well as various district Gardeners' Associations across Devon.

However in October 1934 much of the furniture and furnishings at Great Duryard were up for sale, along with garden equipment plus 'an Atco mower and plants including a large number of chrysanthemums, carnations etc'. Baker's employer of nearly twenty years had decided to move nearer to London, possibly so that he was closer to medical care. He had already undergone medical treatment in a London nursing home in 1931, and after that was evidently not in the best of health, as he was then to be admitted to hospital for an operation.⁴⁹



Part of the gardens Great Duryard 1903. Reproduced with kind permission of Devon Archives and Local Studies Service

Later Life

It was not long before Baker found a suitable position. An advertisement in the *Western Morning News* (6 Dec 1934) read:

Situations vacant: Can any gentleman recommend an experienced head gardener for the Dowager Lady Shelley Oakland Park Dawlish, age 40-50. Please write to Sir John Shelley Bart Shobrooke Park Crediton. Only employers' letters of recommendation considered.

Clearly Baker's credentials sufficed and he and his wife moved to The Garden Cottage, Oakland Park. The Dowager Lady Shelley had bought the Park in 1931 after the death of her husband; she lived there for ten years and then sold it when she went to live with her younger daughter at Newton House, Newton St Cyres. The grounds at Oakland Park were described, many years earlier, as '2.5 acres of pleasure ground, garden and orchard, together with about 25 acres of plantation'.⁵⁰ Over the years descriptions noted a walled garden, an orangery, ornamental ponds, 'walks in luxuriant woods, umbrageous plantations'.⁵¹ In about 1900 two driveways were laid out to the Teignmouth Road, one of which was marked by alternate lime and chestnut trees which are still standing.⁵² During her occupancy of Oakland Park Lady Shelley regularly opened her garden to the public under the National Gardens Scheme, and also in aid of the Devonshire Nursing Association.⁵³ It was then described as 'a charming old world garden with fine rhododendrons and azaleas'.⁵⁴ So in addition to his regular responsibilities as head gardener, Baker would have set time aside to deal with managing the preparations for opening the garden during the spring and summer. Notwithstanding these obligations, he still continued judging at horticultural shows, particularly the Railway Horticultural shows in Exeter and the Taunton Deane Horticultural and Floricultural shows.⁵⁵



*Oakland Park, Dawlish, now Oakland Park School.
Courtesy Robin Stott*

On 23 May 1938, Sydney Baker's wife of 40 years, Fanny Sophia aged 78, died at their home on the estate; Sydney was with her when she died.⁵⁶ Within a year he had moved to work as a gardener for the Hon Lady Mary Cook on the Porthallow estate, Talland Bay, Looe, Cornwall, so joining his brother Reginald (the gardener at Bystock before the war). Reginald had been head gardener on the Porthallow estate probably since 1930 but certainly since 1935.⁵⁷ The estate comprised 190 acres with 'enchanted gardens overlooking the sea'.⁵⁸ Not long before Sydney Baker's arrival *Gardens and Gardening: The Studio Garden Annual* had featured 'the



*Porthallow House by Sir Francis Maurice Cook
(c.1907–1978). Courtesy of the Jersey Heritage
Collections*

herbaceous border in Lady Cook's garden at Porthallow near Looe Cornwall arranged by Lady Cook's head gardener Mr R Baker.⁵⁹ So not only was the garden at Porthallow notable but Sydney's younger brother was also a well-regarded gardener.

The ties with Devon were not completely severed; before World War II Sydney Baker judged one or two horticultural shows there and his brother exhibited produce at the Devon and Exeter Horticultural Show on behalf of Lady Cook.⁶⁰ Evidently the Baker brothers worked well together and both lived on the estate. Alongside his gardening duties, Reginald commanded the Home Guard Unit at Talland Bay and Polperro and also passed the Officers' Battle Course at Redruth Army Training School.⁶¹ Half way through the war, on 24 November 1941, at Talland church, Sydney married Ethel Morgan who was also living on the Porthallow estate; he was a 67-year old widower, she was a spinster aged 37, presumably the couple set up home together on the estate.⁶²

In February the following year Sydney Baker and his new wife travelled to Exmouth to attend the funeral of F C Hunter at St John in the Wilderness church.⁶³ Another funeral followed the next year; this time it was that of their current employer, Lady Mary Cook who died on 28 November 1943.⁶⁴ The estate was inherited by her son, the artist Sir Francis Ferdinand Maurice Cook, who eventually sold Porthallow in 1947.⁶⁵

This prompted the departure of Sydney Baker and his brother Reginald who retired with their families to Hampshire. They had almost ninety years of gardening service between them, perpetuating the expertise of their forefathers with distinction. Sidney died, aged 75, on 27 May 1950 at Barnaby Cottage, Montserrat Road, Lee on Solent.⁶⁶ His gardening career went full circle; his first employer had been the 2nd Viscount Bridport at Cricket St Thomas and the Viscount's daughter Lady Mary Cook was his last.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Clare Greener and Pete Purnell for their help.

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- DEG*, 27.03.1903.
- Mr George Dodd had been the gardener at Hoopern House for 28 years when he died at the end of 1905 see *WT*, 12.12.1905. A report in *DEDG*, 15.11.1906 of the Crediton Chrysanthemum and Fruit Society Show notes that Mr W R Baker, gardener at Hoopern House, was one of the judges: *DEG*, 13.08.1920; *WT*, 29.09.1914 reported Mr and Mrs Baker attended Mrs Gidley's funeral. Her daughters took over running the house after her death.
- Letter of recommendation from Mrs Gidley dated 27 August 1910 (source: grandson Pete Purnell).
- DHC 547/b/p2269, Sale catalogue 1923, also included 'double tennis lawn, small tea lawn, rustic summer house and lily pond'.
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- Exmouth Journal (EJ)*, 23.02.1924 '... the grave was lined with ivy, mimosa and hyacinths by members of the outdoor staff of Bystock House where the deceased's eldest son [ie Sydney James] is head gardener ...'.
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- David Parker, *The People of Devon in the First World War* (Stroud, The History Press, 2013), p. 128; *WT*, 11.02.1919.
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- For example, Devon and Exeter Horticultural Society's show (*WT*, 02.11.1915) and Exmouth Horticultural Society's show (*WT*, 06.09.1917).
- WT*, 09.08.1918: *EJ*, 30.03.1918.
- EJ*, 8.06.1918.
- DEG*, 6.12.1918; *DEDG*, 8.05.1919.
- DEG*, 03.06.1919.
- DEG*, 12.08.1921.
- In 1918 Harold Edgar Baker and Alice Hartwell Baker were on the electoral register at Bystock.
- EJ*, 17.02.1923.
- EJ*, 05.04.1924 and *DEG*, 04.04.1924.
- Examples: *WT*, 13.08.1920; *DEG*, 02.08.1921, 21.08.1925, 06.08.1926, 24.08.1928; *WT*, 18.08.1922; 11.05.1923; *Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser*, 15.08.1923; *DEDG*, 16.08.1923, 26.07.1928; *WMN* 14.08.1926.
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- Ibid*.
- NGS records show that from 1933 to 1940 the gardens were open from 2 to 7pm in May and/or August every year during that period. Also see *GC*, (1934), p. 335; *Torbay Express and South Devon Echo*, 29.04.1939.
- DEG*, 17.05.1935.
- WT*, 23.08.1935; *North Devon Journal*, 20.08.1936: *Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser*, 13.08.1938; 12.08.1939.
- Copy of death certificate ref DYE065055.
- A testimonial was written by Miss Gidley in April 1930 recommending Reginald Baker, presumably at the time when he was applying for the new position (source: grandson Pete Purnell). Also *WMN*, 18.07.1935.
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