



North Devon Coast

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

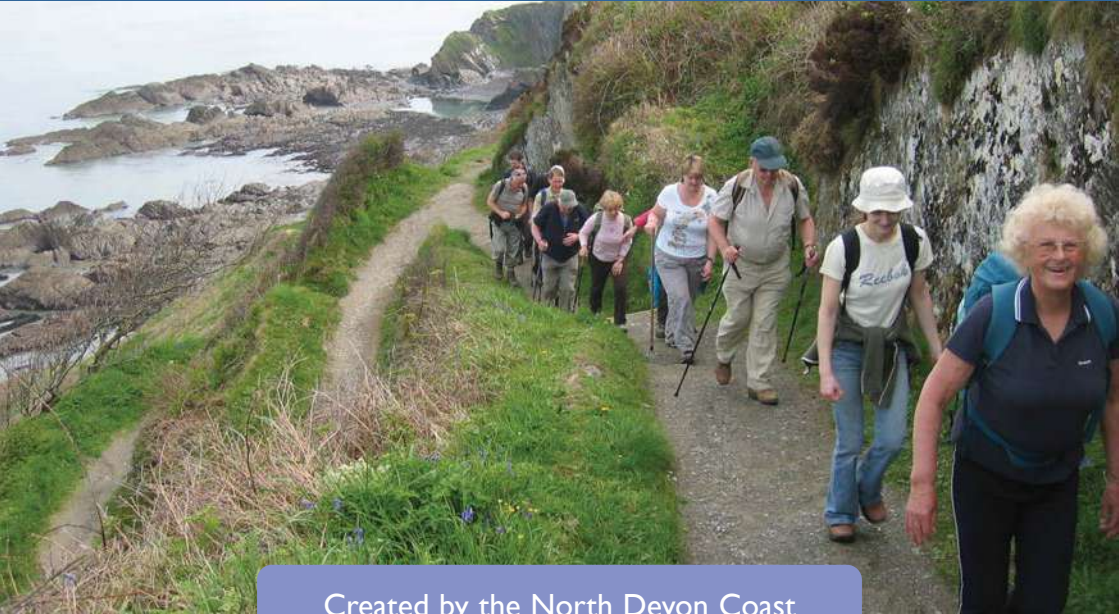
Wreckers, Railways and Rockpools

A self-guided, circular, 8 mile walk around Ilfracombe and Lee Bay



North Devon Coast

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty



Created by the North Devon Coast
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Wreckers, Railways and Rockpools

Special Qualities of an Outstanding Landscape

From the edge of Exmoor to the border of Cornwall, The North Devon Coast is a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) stretching over 171 sq kms. This recognises the very special landscape, habitats, wildlife and heritage of this area and ensures that North Devon will remain as beautiful and special for future generations to enjoy, as it is for us today.

North Devon was designated as an 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' (AONB) in 1960 because it "possessed some of the finest coastal scenery in the country". This is particularly evident in the landscape experienced on this walk which includes dramatic and breath-taking seascapes.

The walk is located in the 'North Devon High Coast' landscape character area, with some stunning views westwards towards Bull Point and Lundy Island, and eastwards towards Exmoor National Park.



The coastline is a mixture of high cliff downland with coastal grasslands and the distinct wooded Borough Valley running down to the coast. The geology is primarily of Ilfracombe and Morteohoe slates, which is reflected in the architecture of the distinct field boundaries and the older buildings in the village of Lee.

The coastline is steeped in history and known for Smuggling and wrecking between the port of Ilfracombe and the coastal settlement of Lee. The railway line is a unique feature and a major feat of engineering. A significant route in its heyday, it once formed part of the mainline which ran all the way to Waterloo station in London. The line helped establish Ilfracombe as one of the premier seaside resorts in the South West.

This walk follows the South West Coast Path from Ilfracombe to the coastal village of Lee. It returns via Borough Valley and then down the old railway line / cycleway back to Ilfracombe.

Practical Information

Location: Ilfracombe, North Devon, UK

Start and Finish Point: Landmark Theatre, Wilder Road, Ilfracombe EX39 4BZ

Grid reference SS 5183, 4782. OS Map Explorer 139

Walk Distance: 8 miles (14 km)

Grade: Moderate on old railway line/cycleway, coast path, public rights of way and quiet lanes. Steep up the Torrs and out of Borough Valley.

Conditions: Exposure on hilltops and coastline, sheltered in the valley and cycleway, steep gradients on the Torrs and out of Borough valley to Windcutter Hill. Obstacles: stiles and gates

Suitable for: Seasoned walkers and those with a reasonable degree of fitness

Countryside Code: Please respect, protect and enjoy the countryside. Please also note that all dogs must be on a short lead between 1st March and 31st July.

Public Toilets: Ilfracombe Harbour (not on route) and Lee Village during the summer months

Getting there

Car: Ilfracombe can be accessed via the main road. From Barnstaple either via the A361 via Braunton (15 miles) or the B 3230 from Barnstaple (12 miles). Accessed from South Molton and the A361 Link Road via Combe Martin using the A399.

Parking: Ilfracombe has car parks at strategic points throughout the town. Further information is displayed in each car park regarding charges. 4 day and 7 day car parking permits are available from the TIC which are valid throughout Ilfracombe and the North Devon area.

Short term: Jubilee Gardens, Pier, Wilder Road and the Cove.

Long term: Brookdale, Oxford Grove, Larkstone Lane and Hillsborough.

Train: Nearest train station is at Barnstaple

Bus: Good regular bus links from Barnstaple and Braunton to Ilfracombe. For timetable details call traveline 08706082608 or visit www.traveline.co.uk

21 and 21A Barnstaple to Ilfracombe (Stagecoach)

301 Combe Martin to Barnstaple via Ilfracombe (Filers Buses)

31 Woolacombe and Morteohoe to Ilfracombe (Filers Buses)

Bicycle: Ilfracombe can be accessed by National Cycle Route 27 'Coast to Coast' Route which involves former railway line between Barnstaple and Braunton (3 miles) and Willingcott to Ilfracombe (4 miles) with the remaining 10 miles on County roads and bridleway

Places to visit and further information:

Ilfracombe Museum (on route) www.ilfracombemuseum.co.uk

Ilfracombe TIC in the Landmark Theatre (start of walk) www.visitilfracombe.co.uk

Ilfracombe Aquarium in Ilfracombe harbour www.ilfracombeaquarium.co.uk

Lee Bay information and walks www.leebay.co.uk



The Walk

Directions - Start to finish of circular loop

Turn left out of the Landmark Theatre and head towards the railings which overlook Wildersmouth Beach beyond (1)

Turn back towards the Landmark Theatre, taking the flight of steps heading up the right hand side of the building. At the top enjoy the view back towards Capstone Hill. (2)

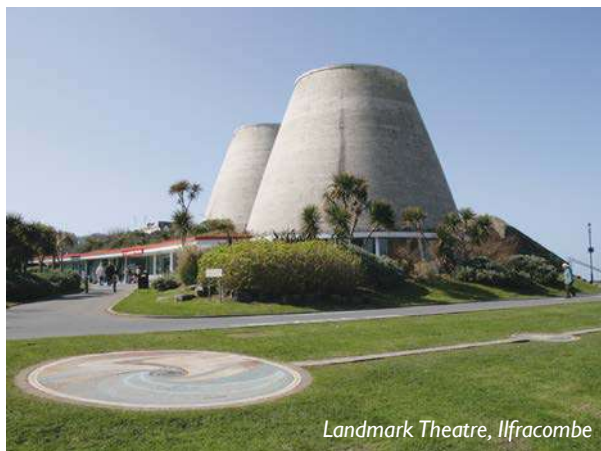
Follow the path uphill which merges with 'Runnacleave' Gardens and exit through metal gate on the right hand side. Keep to the right pavement for 250 m and the wall on the right becomes waist high, so you can look below. (3)

Continue along the road for 50 m then bear right. Follow the unsurfaced road, signposted 'Coast Path to Lee'. Follow road for another 180 m until it forks again and turn right, and then left by the gate to 'White pebbles' apartments. The path forks again after 25m take the right sign-posted

'Torr's walk/Lee'. Follow the Zig zag path until you see the first bench which is perched in a perfect viewing spot. Take a seat. (4)

Continue to follow the path until the hair pin bend and National Trust signpost. Follow the left turn and continue for about 50m. Keep an eye out for an unusual stone structure on the right covered in greenery. Stop here (5)

Now retrace your steps to re-join the main footpath and continue to follow the path upwards. Once you get to a wooden gate at the top, turn right at the signposted 'Viewpoint', and up the embankment to the top to the stone cairn. (6)

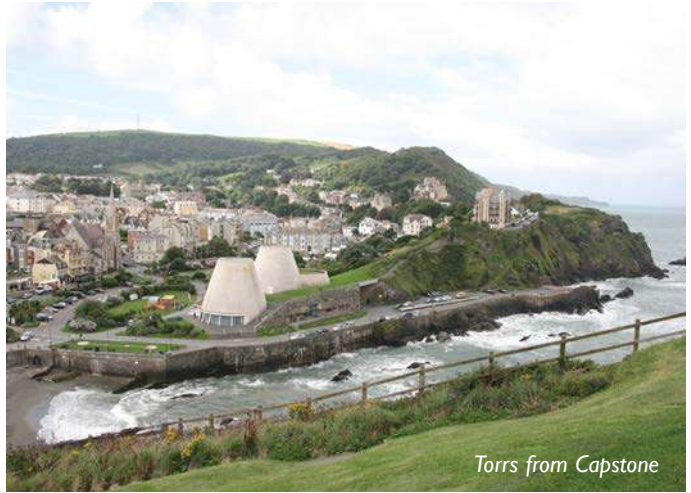


Landmark Theatre, Ilfracombe



Old Coast Road

Exit the viewpoint directly behind the Toposcope onto a small path to the right of the steps. Continue down over the hill, once clear of the gorse, turn right and exit the field via a small stile in the field boundary. You have now re-joined the coast path, which closely follows the coast. As you round a small headland pause for a moment. (7)



Torrises from Capstone

Continue around the headland and follow the coast path over a stile and then head towards a well-defined track leading across the downland. On reaching the track turn right and continue up the hill, over the downland towards Lee. (8)

Continue along this well-defined track for about 1.5 km when the track ends at a gate. Proceed through the gate and continue down a surfaced road, towards Lee. As you descend this track, there are fine views of Borough Woods through gateways on your left. Continue down the road for another kilometre, until you reach a T junction, turn left here and proceed down to the seafront of Lee Village. (9)

Continue along the seafront for another 25 metres then turn inland towards a small car park. Keep the Car park on your left, follow the track past the toilets and property called 'Gwythers', originally



Old Lime Kiln Torrises

a farm and home of infamous smuggler Hannibal Richards.

Continue along the track past Gwythers for 150 m until public footpath sign, crossing field on your right. (10)

At the end of this field go through the gate and turn left and follow the path through Borough Woods which follows a small stream for about a kilometre. (11)

Having passed through another kissing gate the footpath now divides. Take the left hand fork, signed to Windcutter and follow the path over a stream and walk up the hill the other side. After reaching a forest track continue into the coniferous plantations above you and take a look around. (12)

Continue through the woodland, crossing another forest track as you do which exits into a field. Aim for the top of the field near the corner of field boundary marked with public footpath yellow waymarker. Follow the path, keeping the field boundary on your right until footpath junction, near the entrance to Shaftsborough Farm. Turn right here and proceed through the farmyard to join a surfaced road, near the main farm buildings. Continue walking up the lane for about a kilometre until you reach a road 'T' junction. Just before this junction, turn right down a narrow path which joins surfaced cycleway, next to the road bridge. (13)

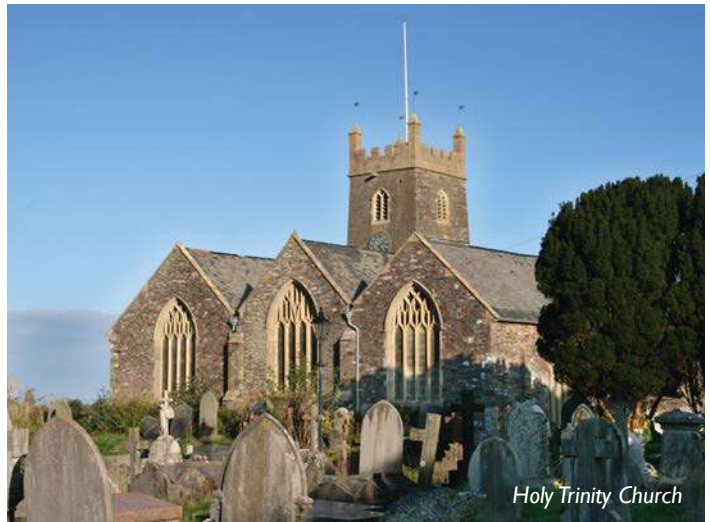
Proceed down the cycleway for approx. 1.5 kms, passing under Bickenbridge and by the old workman's hut. On your left, through the trees you can see a reservoir dam. Further along, at opening on your left, take steps to grassland beside the water. (14)

Continue 750m down the cycleway until you arrive at a twin bore masonry Slade tunnels, 69 yards in length, a legacy of the railway days. (15)

Continue through the tunnel and follow original terminus of the line. After 1km the path breaks to the right circles a large factory complex. (16)



Follow path around the factory until you reach Station Road. Proceed down the road for 250m then turn left up Richmond road. At the next crossroads turn right and walk down Belmont Road. After 250 you will be standing outside the Lych Gate of Ilfracombe Holy Trinity Church, well worth a visit. (17)



Holy Trinity Church

Leave the church and turn left around the building, at the lower end of the church look for a path which leaves the churchyard passing a stone building on your right. At the road turn left then immediately right down Church Lane. At the bottom of the hill turn right (Brookdale Avenue) and then join Wilder Road running towards the seafront, keeping supermarket on your left until traffic lights. Then turn left into Runnacleave Road, and stop outside the Bath House (white building in front of you). (18)

Continue along Runnacleave road passing the Carlton Hotel on your left, after about 80 m the road bears to the right, next to the Catholic Church. It then exits out onto Wilder Road (the main road to the harbour) on entering Wilder Road, turn left, down a narrow road towards the Landmark Theatre. After 100 metres you enter a car park and arrive outside the Ilfracombe Museum (19)

Proceed up the ramp and go back to the front of the Landmark Theatre, Runnacleave Gardens, the original lawns and tennis courts of the Ilfracombe Hotel (20)



Bath House

Points of interest

1. Wildersmouth Beach is one of five easily accessible beaches in Ilfracombe. In the 19th Century it became an extremely important site to Victorian collectors and natural historians, fascinated with documenting marine life around this time. The rock pools at low tide are teeming with life, providing



the perfect refuge for barnacles, limpets, dog whelks and several types of anemone such as beadlet (red) and snakelock (green). The huge tidal range and rugged coastline allows access to very rare species on low tides, including rare sea corals. This beach once formed part of the stunning 5 acres belonging to the Ilfracombe Hotel. From the beach, looking back, you will see 'Preachers Rock' at the foot of Capstone, a natural stage for performers and ministers in

Victorian times. Ilfracombe and its surrounding coastline has inspired many writers and scientists including author, 'Charles Kingsley' and famous Victorian naturalist and friend of Charles Darwin, 'Phillip Henry Gosse'. There is more information about this at Ilfracombe Museum, located behind the Landmark Theatre.

2. The metal footsteps embedded in the concrete path signal where you join the South West Coast Path, marked with its iconic acorn, Britain's longest National Trail at 630 miles (1,000 kilometres) long. It stretches from Minehead in Somerset to Poole Harbour in Dorset.

You can still enjoy the same paths today as enjoyed in Victorian and Edwardian times, as the local Board of Health bought Capstone in 1867 to ensure no further development. This was for both conservation and especially health purposes, a need fuelled by a severe Cholera epidemic in 1849.



Ilfracombe Pavilion in 1930s
© Ilfracombe Museum

On the landward side of the hill at the base was the original site of Ilfracombe Pavilion, a mini 'crystal palace' built to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria. It was entirely constructed of cast iron and glass, known to locals as the 'Cucumber frame', 'Shelter', or 'Winter garden'. It was an elegant place, built to enjoy music and enjoy an 'Aquaria', an indoor winter garden with potted plants, palms and other exotic species. Flower beds lined the inside and fish splashed about in a mini aquarium with a stage in the centre with a small seating area.



It started to be pulled down in 1926 when the central section was replaced by a new theatre with the final demolition in 1996 when it was replaced with a concrete structure built in the late 1990s now called 'The Landmark' where the walk started.

Capstone is one of the best spots to overlook the town below, hence previously a coastguard lookout, with a fantastic perspective of its longstanding and contrasting Edwardian and Victorian architecture and subsequent modern developments nearby.

'Capstone Parade' is the main path that traverses Capstone, paid for by gentry and residents in recognition of the public health benefits of pleasure and leisure. It has and is sometimes referred to as "one of the most beautiful sea walks in the kingdom". Created between 1842 and 1843, it provided much needed local employment on the back of difficult economic times throughout Europe.

Local legends abound here, not least one from 1797 which claims that a French naval raiding party appeared off the coast of Ilfracombe and was thwarted by the local women. Notoriously, as the menfolk were away fighting, the women lined Capstone, dressed in their red shawls to the sound of banging drums. Evidently the French mistook them for red-coated English soldiers and promptly fled.

3. From the top of Capstone you would have a perfect view of the old 'Granville Hotel', a fine example of Victorian gothic style architecture perched elegantly on top of the hill. The hotel has since been converted into flats and holiday apartments. In previous times, much of Ilfracombe Hotel's trade relied on visitors from railway and paddle steamers which declined over the years.



Over the wall are part of what forms the famous 'Tunnels beaches'. These beaches became accessible by digging tunnels through the hillside, hand cut by Welsh miners in 1823. Although believed to have originally started as a natural cave known as 'Crekerne Cave' 100 years before, it was known and used only by smugglers. Sea bathing became very popular with the promotion of perceived health benefits from sea minerals by the end of the eighteenth century resulting in many fashionable seaside resorts springing up. Ilfracombe by the late 1700s had become a fashionable spa and sea-bathing destination for wealthy Georgians, originally centred around Raparree Cove. The proliferation of rail travel in the mid-nineteenth century and the attraction of resort towns meant that visitors flocked to Ilfracombe.

Three pools were initially created at "The

Tunnels", one for gentlemen (to the right) and two for ladies (to the left), there was no mixed bathing in those days and according to local legend a bugler sat between the two pools. If any man dared to creep around, an alarm would be sounded and the man promptly arrested. It was not until 1905 that mixed bathing was allowed. It was also quite common to see the 'Bathing machines' which allowed a person to be delivered directly into the water; without being seen! Although only one pool exists today it is still enjoyed by many, especially families who like to make the most of the superb rock pooling and the safe sea pool at low tide which protects bathers from the crashing waves. (The Tunnels has been voted the 3rd Best area for rock-pooling in England by a BBC wildlife magazine). It is also designated as a Marine Conservation Area due to its wildlife value and was another beach that naturalist Phillip Henry Gosse frequented, claiming to have discovered several new species there.

4. This is a spectacular piece of coastline stretching west to Bull Point and Morteheo and eastwards towards Exmoor. On a clear day you can see right across the Bristol Channel to Wales and to Lundy Island in the West. Across the water to Wales you can spot the Gower Peninsula, the first Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty to be designated by the government in 1956.

'Torrs walk' you are on now has been in existence for well over a 100 years, when visitors used to pay a penny toll for the privilege of enjoying this walk. The path was constructed on the seaward side of the seven peaked hills known as the 'seven sisters'.

The Torrs was purchased by the National Trust in 1967, who manage over a third of the length of the North Devon coast now, including from here almost all the way to Croyde Bay.

5. Here are the remains of a well preserved lime kiln, one of many to be found along the North Devon coastline. This one is in an unusual location, as most lime kilns were usually located on or near the coast where boats could get in. Here we are high above the sea as there was a rare outcrop of limestone here. Coal, also usually imported from South Wales, was needed to fuel the kiln, although some kilns were fired by local coal or culm (near Westward Ho!) or more often by charcoal sourced from local woodland. These kilns produced 'quicklime' which was needed primarily to make our acidic soils suitable for growing, but it was also used for construction to make cements, mortar and white-wash for walls.

6. The flat embankment that you have just passed was the site of the Old 'Torrs Pavilion' where you would have been able to get light refreshments after a strenuous walk up the hill. As you admire the view, look at the Toposcope recently installed by the National Trust, to help you orientate yourself and understand the stunning landscapes that surround you. This spot provides a great view of Ilfracombe and the surrounding land as far as the Exmoor National Park. It really brings Ilfracombe together from a focal point as you can see down the valley into town and out to sea. The expansion of the town over time becomes clear, starting with the oldest houses around the



harbour and working away from the harbour you can see the changing architecture and layout. From Edwardian, Victorian and the present day you can see dramatic changes and some quite striking abnormalities, like the Landmark, or the large square blue building on top of the hill which is the Secondary School and College. The hill guarding the entrance to Ilfracombe harbour is known as Hillsborough. It was here that an Iron Age promontory hillfort was constructed about 2,000 years ago. If you look closely, you can still make out two distinct banks that formed a part of the earthworks. Hillsborough is another example of early countryside conservation, for like Capstone that we saw earlier, it was purchased by the Ilfracombe Urban District Council in 1896 to prevent it from being built on and to provide quiet and informal recreation for both locals and visitors alike.

7. As you look along the coast you can see the raggedness of the cliffs and can only assume that the secret bays below would have proved perfect for smuggling. Smuggling became a part of everyday life on the coast during the 17th, 18th and 19th Centuries. It involved the illegal import of luxury items from abroad. During this period Britain was almost in continual conflict with countries in mainland

Europe. In order to raise revenue to finance these wars, taxes in the form of Custom and Excise Duty were levied on many imported goods such as spirits, tobacco and fine silks. Many of these items came from countries that Britain was at war with, in particular France and Holland. As a result certain “Free Traders” organised a system of smuggling contraband into the area, frequently using secluded coastlines adjacent to ports. As nearby Ilfracombe was an important port, it was not surprising that the area was used by Smugglers to transfer illicit cargo from trading ships to smaller boats and thence to the coast. Interestingly, as many lime kilns were located along the coast there were smuggling links to these as well. Many local people were involved in the trade and it was considered by many as an important part of the rural economy.

The government spent a lot of time trying to combat this practice and employed Revenue and Riding Officers to patrol the coast. In addition, a fast sailing boat (Revenue Cutter) was based in Ilfracombe to intercept this illegal trade. By the mid 1800s most smuggling had died out, but a legacy of these times still remains with us today. Firstly, the Coastguard was formed in 1809, not for the primary purpose of saving lives, but to combat smuggling and until the 20th Century the coastguards were a part of the Board of Trade. Secondly, many of the original Public Rights of Way established in the mid 1950's, which now form a part of the South West Coast Path, were originally so called “Coastguard tracks” used by the coastguard in their anti-smuggling role. A final legacy can be found in the names to be found along the coast here. Near here is Brandy Cove and below us lies Breakneck Point, so named as a Riding Officer was reputed to have fallen to his death whilst chasing a local smuggler:

8. As you walk up the hill, on the track surface you will notice a series of grooves cut into the rock. These were created to help horses to grip the slippery surface as they proceeded up the hill. This





Bull Point from the Old Coast Road

well-defined track is in fact an old public road, which for many years was the main road from Ilfracombe to the village of Lee.

The track crosses an area of coastal downland which illustrates what the land may have looked like before it was enclosed. In earlier times this whole area would have been part of an open downland/moorland, which in the main has since been enclosed with banks and hedges, and improved for agriculture since the early 1800s. Further along this route is a fine viewpoint, offering a superb views of the North Devon coast and Lundy Island, with Bull Point at the furthest headland point where a lighthouse was built in 1879.

9. Lee Bay is a small secluded cove, with limited access for fishing or leisure boats. Some of the buildings are quite old and reveal the village's story. To the right of the seafront is a very smart looking holiday home, which was once the old corn mill which operated between the 1500s and the early 1900's. The mill wheel was located on the sea facing wall and the mill ponds were located in the grounds of the former Lee Bay Hotel.

On the left hand side of the seafront are a couple of old buildings, one known as Smugglers Cottage, which bears the date 1627. As previously mentioned being located close to Ilfracombe, Lee was an ideal place for smuggling activity. So much so that in 1801 a Riding Officer was based here and a coastguard cottage was established on the coast road above the village. Not surprisingly, these "Customs Men" were unpopular with locals and had to build their cottages on the edge of villages, as can still be seen today.

Lee is also associated with a character called Hannibal Richards, a notorious Smuggler who was originally part of a Smuggling Gang near Morwenstowe in North Cornwall whose leader was known as 'Cruel Coppinger'. Richards arrived in Lee around 1789 and had several brushes with the Revenue Men. He and other members of his family are supposed to be buried in the churchyard in Ilfracombe.

10. Before heading across the field and into the wooded valley it would be worth exploring the village of Lee. Apart from a few isolated older buildings, the main village did not develop until 1871 when the local landowner Robert Smith created some unique architectural and special features. These included the use of local slate and quartz blocks to form distinct buildings and walls as well as the planting of many fuchsias, which led to the place being called "Fuchsia Valley". As we walk across the field the imposing building above you is called Southcliffe Hall. This was built in the 1740's and was bought in 1860 by the Reverend George Tugwell the first vicar of Lee, he was a keen naturalist and expert on marine life.

11. Borough Woods is one of the most important coastal woodlands in the northern part of the AONB. The woodland on this side of the stream has probably been in existence since mediaeval times. It has probably survived here because the steep sided rocky slopes on which the woods grow were considered impossible to clear for agricultural land. Even so, sometime around the First World War there is evidence that much of the wood was felled and then replanted with a mixture of broadleaved trees. The areas of woodland that were not cleared, especially towards the coast and higher up the valley tend to retain native oak and hazel trees. This middle section has a wider range of trees including beech, sycamore, sweet and horse chestnut which have been introduced into this area.

Whilst walking through these woods, look at the variety of life on the woodland floor; something that we will find is in complete contrast to the coniferous woodland of Windcutter Hill. Looking at this woodland it is easy to see why woodlands form such important homes for wildlife as they are three



Borough Woods © Neville Stanikk

dimensional habitats, frequently with a mix of trees varying in age and height.

Until the Second World War, woodlands formed an important community resource in terms of providing material and food for local people. Species such as elm, being exceptionally tough were used for everything from floorboards to coffins. Oak which is strong and hard, was ideal for construction, ship building, barrel making and tanning for leather. Ash served for making heavy duty tool handles and cart shafts, hazel was used for hurdles, thatching spars and baskets. As a result the woodland were sustainably managed to ensure a constant supply of timber and woodland products.

This sustainable management ensured that the woodland was good for wildlife as the continual cutting provided a variety of different aged woodland, and this variety is great for wildlife.

12. Windcutter Hill shows the dramatic difference between the two types of forest, especially when you look at the forest floor. These woodlands were probably planted in the 1950's when there was a big drive to replace our depleted native woodlands, with quick growing, commercially produced, coniferous trees. The combination of non-native conifers and little light to the forest floor has meant that there is little support for our native plants and insects, resulting in a limited variety of wildlife and habitats compared to the native woodlands of deciduous trees.

13. You are now standing on what was the railway line from Barnstaple to Ilfracombe, which in its heyday was a busy line linked to the main line up to Waterloo station in London. The railway line was constructed and opened by the London and South Western Railway in 1874, and was responsible for the town of Ilfracombe developing as a popular seaside resort. As you descend the 1:36 gradient, the depth of cuttings will illustrate that this was a fair achievement of Victorian engineering to build a railway here. The steepness of the hills surrounding Ilfracombe meant that in order to beat the gradient, engineers had to build deep cuttings along this line. The line took two years to build with the 11 miles from Barnstaple to Lee Bridge taking the same time as the remaining 3 miles to Ilfracombe! As it was, this gradient, or 'bank' as it was known was one of the steepest inclines in the country for conventional railway engines.

Trains of over a few carriages in length required assistance to get up the "Slade Bank" and required so called 'banking' engines, to help them up the slope. In the days of steam it was not uncommon to see a train hauled by two powerful steam engines and if the train was longer than 6 carriages in length, an additional engine was required on the other end of the train, to prevent a runaway if a coupling broke on the journey. So combinations of two and three steam locomotives were not uncommon on this line.

14. Upper and Lower Slade reservoir dams were constructed in the late 1850's (before the railway was built) as a direct response to the cholera outbreak in Ilfracombe in 1849 with a demand for clean drinking water. They remained in operation until the late 20th Century and today they are still owned by South West Water, and used as recreational fishing lakes. These open expanses of water are great



for wildlife and at night, Daubenton bats can be seen feeding from insects flying just above the lakes. Alongside the old railway track there is an interesting array of woodland, which has latterly sprung up since the railway closure in 1970. Since that time, these paths have been upgraded by Devon County

Council to form cycleways with sections of the former railway forming part of the Devon Coast to Coast cycle route (Plymouth to Ilfracombe) and Tarka Trail cycle way which is all part of the National Cycle Network.

15. If you look closely at this structure, you will notice two arches, the outside one bricked up. When the railway was constructed in the early 1870's the inner arch was cut through a section of friable rock. The left hand arch was an addition and when taken out of use was bricked up to provide an artificial habitat for bats.

In 1890, such was the success of the railway that the line was doubled between Barnstaple and Ilfracombe and the second archway was cut. As a result the use of the line increased dramatically and just before the 2nd World War at the height of rail travel, there were 22 passenger trains visiting Ilfracombe each day bringing thousands of people to the resort in the summer months, from London and elsewhere.

However, by the end of the 1950's the fortunes of the railway had declined and by the mid 1960's the line was 'singled' as an economy measure. The line fell victim to the so called "Beeching Cuts" and was forced to close in 1970, much to the detriment of Ilfracombe town.

16. You are now standing on the edge of the old Ilfracombe Station site, which was a large terminus. In 1925 it acquired mainline status, which meant that express trains ran direct from London to Ilfracombe.

The station stood on a small plateau of excavated material, some 225 feet above sea level. Given the severe gradients, this was the closest the train could get to the centre of the town. The station boasted two platforms, numerous sidings, a goods yard and engine shed. A 70 foot turntable stood roughly where the path now goes, it was the largest in North Devon and was used to turn the larger engines including the big West Country Class 'pacific' steam engines. On summer Saturdays 10,000 people a day would arrive at the station and all this activity, was controlled by a 50 lever signal box located at the station approach.

The wooded hill behind, is the Cairn Local Nature Reserve a haven for wildlife, to which there is public access. The top of the Cairn offers magnificent views over Ilfracombe and the surrounding coastal area, including the 'seven sister hills', which make up the Torrs.

17. Holy Trinity is the ancient parish church of Ilfracombe and is the biggest and grandest church within the town. Its origins lie in Saxon times, when there was a lookout tower here, although much Norman architecture remains. It was considerably enlarged in the early 14th Century and now possesses three aisles of equal length, and is described as being 113 feet long by 61 feet in length. It is notable for the decorated ceiling in the central aisle complete with carved corbels surmounted by medieval angels and fine ceiling bosses. The stained glass, the largest collection of Victorian stained glass in Devon, includes a number of windows by Charles Eamer Kempe (1837-1907) a renowned stain glass producer/designer who supplied many windows to churches and famous cathedrals such as Wells, Lichfield and York.

There are also many important monuments, most interesting is one for Captain Richard Bowen one of Nelsons trusted ship's commanders who was killed at Tenerife in 1797 (the same action in which Nelson lost his arm), and who inspired the famous Captain Hornblower novels by C S Forrester.



18. Heightened Victorian

interest in “taking the waters” resulted in local people also recognising the need for indoor bathing. In 1836 the Ilfracombe Sea Bathing Company erected an elegant new bath-house where a labyrinth of both hot and cold sea water baths were available for health and hygiene. The sea water for this was fed from the Tunnels Beaches on the other side of the hill via a wood fuelled steam boiler that in turn powered a pump. The site of the pump house can still be seen through the tunnels.

19. Built in 1885 and formerly the laundry room of the magnificent Ilfracombe Hotel, the Museum is an ‘Aladdin’s Cave’ of artefacts, overflowing with curiosities and memorabilia reflecting the rich history of the town and surrounds. This historic building houses unimaginable finds - from a shrunken head to a collection of pickled bats! If you look behind you, you will notice a small tunnel which used to link the laundry room to the main Ilfracombe Hotel, which would have been located some 25 metres away.

20. The abstract conical building that stands in front of you is the ‘Landmark Theatre’, the front of which was where we started our walk. It was built at the end of the 20th Century, to replace the demolished ‘Victorian Pavilion’ on nearby Capstone, providing a theatre, café, function room and Tourist Information Centre. The modern architectural design of the new build was a widely debated topic within the community given its contrast to the surrounding Victorian era buildings. This is the site of the original ‘Ilfracombe Hotel’, a grand representation of the town’s Victorian architecture. Centrally located with excellent views, the hotel was one of the most palatial in North Devon including a magnificent ballroom, five tennis courts, a heated swimming pool, putting greens and a croquet lawn. Members of royalty are known to have visited, most famous being the arrival of 19 year old Crown Prince ‘Frederic William of Prussia’ in 1878. The building was demolished in 1976.

This walk through the North Devon Coast Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty is a circular route taking you through the rich social, agricultural and maritime history of Ilfracombe and Lee Bay. You will encounter evidence in the landscape of smuggling and wrecking, railways and cuttings, rocky beaches and woodland glades, dramatic views and breath-taking seascapes.



North Devon Coast

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty

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