

Walk No.33 Ilfracombe and the Torrs

Ilfracombe has been a holiday town since Georgian times, although its origins go back much further. Surrounded by magnificent cliff scenery, it makes a good walking centre to enjoy some stunning views, even if the price to pay is a steep climb.

The long-distance South West Coast Path traverses these cliffs and passes through Ilfracombe. This part of the coast is also followed by the Tarka Trail, the long walk which traces the wanderings of Tarka the Otter in Henry Williamson's evocative 1927 book.

The walk described here is based on Ilfracombe and passes over the Torrs, the hills and cliffs immediately to the west of the town, before returning along the Coast Path and Tarka Trail. While not especially long, it does include a couple of short sharp climbs so should not be approached too lightly.

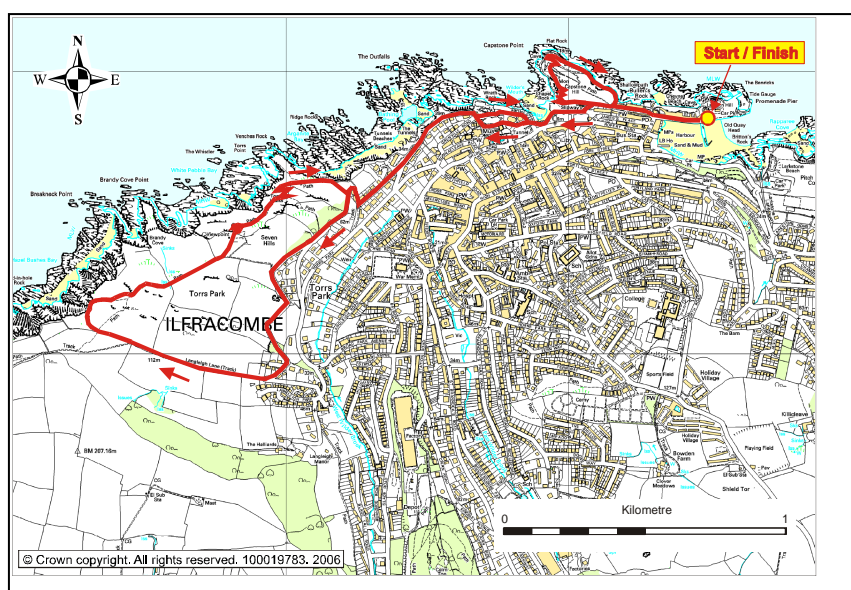
Fact File

Ilfracombe has a good and regular bus service from Barnstaple. For timetable details call Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit www.traveline.org.uk. There are numerous car parks signposted from the edge of the town.

Walk Length: 4.5miles/7km : 2 stiles; 3 very short but sharp climbs, one longer climb of 230ft/70m.

Facilities: Ilfracombe has all facilities; there are none on the walk outside the town.

The Walk



Start the walk at the Quay and pier, next to the harbour.

Although now North Devon's largest holiday town, Ilfracombe has its origins in Saxon times and is mentioned in the Domesday Book. During the medieval period it had two centres, around the church and here around the harbour. It was important as a fishing harbour and commercial port and there was a quay here in the Middle Ages.

The Quay was rebuilt and enlarged in 1760 and rebuilt in the 1820s. The jetty and promenade pier was added in the 1870s, the concrete improvements dating from the 1950s.

Above the Quay is the distinctive shape of St Nicholas Chapel on Lantern Hill. This is a seamen's chapel dating from the 14th century. It is known to have been used as a lighthouse at the time of Henry VIII and the present lantern tower was added around 1800. In its time it has also been a dwelling house, reading room and laundry. The chapel can be reached by a footpath just past the 17th century Harbourmaster's Office and gives magnificent views.

From the pier entrance walk back along the Quay towards the town past the Royal Britannia Hotel.

This splendid Regency building dates from the beginning of Ilfracombe's days as a resort town.

Past the hotel bear right then immediately left along Capstone Road.

Henry Williamson, author of *Tarka the Otter*, lived in a cottage on the left-hand side of this road towards the end of his life, from the mid 1950s until 1976. He used the Royal Britannia as his local.

At the end of the road continue ahead along the tarmac path then bear left down to the broad esplanade at the foot of the hill. Continue along the top of the beach to the distinctive "cotton reel" shapes of the Landmark pavilion and theatre.

The water which is probably pouring over the beach here is the "mouth" of the Wilder Brook, which on its way to the sea has cut the valleys which formed the original centre of Ilfracombe. Note how grey the sand is, the result of the weathering of the Devonian slates of the area.

Pass the front of the Landmark (which includes pavilion, theatre, cafe and Tourist Information Centre). Bear right after the Landmark then immediately left along the tarmac path behind the Museum. Keep going through the ornamental gardens, turning right up some steps then up a very steep path for a short climb. Head for the large building called the Granville - the path here reaches a metal gate onto a road. Bear right here and continue up the road parallel to the sea.

A little way along the road look out over the low stone wall to see the Tunnels beaches down to the right. The tunnels to the beaches were cut by Welsh miners in the 1820s when sea bathing was regarded as rather

outlandish. Immediately below is the gentlemen's beach with the ladies beach to the right by the still existing tidal pool.

When the road dips down to the left, continue ahead along the rougher lane (Torrs Walk Avenue).

This area, Torrs Park, was laid out in the 1880s with cliff walks and large detached villas for gentlefolk by a Barnstaple builder as Ilfracombe grew as a holiday centre. Many are now hotels or holiday apartments.

At the top where the lane turns left, leave the lane and follow the concrete path on the right (signed Coast Path). At the end of the concrete follow the path round to the left to a National Trust sign saying Torrs Walk. Continue ahead up the path here, ignoring the Coast Path to the right. The path climbs along the edge of woodland, giving good views over Ilfracombe, before arriving at a surfaced lane. Continue ahead and at the junction fork right into Upper Torrs, still climbing. Ignore the various paths leading up to the Torrs and keep to this lane.

Soon views inland open out up the Slade Valley. The long, low building in the centre of the view is on the site of Ilfracombe's old railway station and the line of the railway, now a footpath and cycleway, can be seen going up the valley at the foot of the woodland on the far side.

Although Ilfracombe began to develop as a holiday resort in the early 1800s, it was the coming of the railway in the 1870s which really marked the beginning of the town's large-scale expansion, as a result of which it is now one of Devon's best examples of a town dominated by Victorian architecture.

After descending slightly, the lane then climbs again, rougher again now, past a sign indicating it is unsuitable for vehicles. This lane is something of a long pull, but it eventually ends at a gate and a National Trust sign for the Llongleigh Valley. Go through the gate and then, rather than following the obvious track to the left, keep next to the wall on the right. On reaching a stile, cross it and follow ahead on the Coast Path,

This is a superb length of coast, open and spacious, high above the sea. The path soon arrives at an area of hills - these are the Torrs, also known as the Seven Hills.

The area is criss-crossed with paths, but keep to the most obvious one which follows generally parallel to the coast. On reaching another stile cross this then follow the path which climbs steeply to the top of the hill ahead.

The top of the hill forms a superb viewpoint, Lundy and the coast towards Bull Point behind and ahead to Ilfracombe and its harbour with St Nicholas Chapel also visible.

Descend from the hilltop towards Ilfracombe and turn left through a gate. The Coast Path now descends the cliff face on a series of zig zags, and soon the tidal bathing pool and some of the Torrs villas come into view. The Coast Path then turns inland at some steps and rejoins the outward route at a National Trust sign.

Now retrace your outward steps for a while; turn left at the National Trust sign to the concrete path and follow this to the right to the lane. Turn left here (Torrs Walk Avenue). Continue ahead into Granville Road and at the hair-pin bend by the Granville Hotel go through the metal gate into the gardens. In the gardens follow the path to the left; this descends behind the Landmark and down steps to the head of Wilders Mouth Beach.

Follow along the wide esplanade away from the beach, then climb the path up to the left which rises behind the shelter. Take the path which doubles back towards the Landmark then rises steeply, zig-zagging to the top of the prominent hill, Capstone Hill.

There are superb views from the top along the coast, but this is also a superb location to look over Ilfracombe. As noted earlier, much of the town dates from Victorian times, when it grew rapidly as a holiday resort, but some of the prominent sea-facing terraces are earlier, from the 1830s, when it began to develop as a select resort. Prior to that it was an important fishing and market centre.

Cross the top of Capstone Hill then descend on the path which zig-zags down the seaward side to the sea-side promenade known as Capstone Parade.

Capstone Parade dates from the 1840s, when it was built to provide the new tourists to the town with the opportunity to savour its marine environment. It can still give a suprisingly remote coastal experience.

On reaching the Parade continue along the path heading towards the outline of St Nicholas Chapel. At the end of the Parade turn left along Capstone Road to return to the harbour.

Further Information

For details of the South West Coast Path, an annual guide including an accommodation list is published by the South West Coast Path Association, price £6. It may also be obtained from the Discover Devon Holiday line, Westacott Road, Barnstaple, Devon EX32 8AW, telephone 0870 608 5531, price £7.50 including post and packing (quote reference DP33; make cheques payable to Devon County Council).

Information on the Tarka Trail is available from the same address - an introductory leaflet is free while a detailed Walkers' Guide costs £3.50 including post and packing - quote reference DP101 for the introductory leaflet and DP102 for the Guide.

For further local information, there is a National Trust Leaflet on walks between Ilfracombe and Croyde, available from normal Trust outlets including the Ilfracombe Tourist Information Centre, price £0.75. The Centre also has leaflets describing Ilfracombe Town Trails and half day walks from the town.

For information on the wider network of walking trails in Devon obtain the free leaflet "Discover Devon - Walking" from local Tourist Information Centres or the address above. Alternatively, visit the website www.discoverdevon.com which has all the information and an order form.

OS maps for this walk:

Landrager (1:50,000 scale) no 180 Barnstaple and Ilfracombe

Explorer (1:25,000 scale) no 139 Bideford, Ilfracombe and Barnstaple