

A Trail of Two Bridges

Barnstaple is an historic and attractive town as well as the centre of population in North Devon. One of Devon's ancient Saxon settlements, which even had its own mint the 10th century, it was listed in the Domesday Book of 1086 as one of the four boroughs of Devon.

The town was established at the lowest crossing point of the River Taw, and a bridge was established here in early times. The current town bridge originated in the early 13th century but very recently this has been augmented by a new bridge downstream. For the first time since it was built some 800 years ago Barnstaple's ancient bridge is no longer the lowest bridging point over the river.

This walk is based on Barnstaple and uses both old bridge and new to form a circuit. The two bridges are linked by using the line of the South West Coast Path on either side of the river; this path has traditionally come upriver to Barnstaple to use the crossing. This part of the Coast Path is also used by the Tarka Trail, a 180 mile figure of eight route throughout northern Devon with Barnstaple at its hub which follows the wanderings of Tarka the Otter in the book of that name.

This part of the Tarka Trail is also used as part of the National Cycle Network. Consequently it is well surfaced and gradients are gentle, so this walk is also usable by wheelchairs, buggies or pushchairs.

Fact File

Barnstaple is the centre for public transport in North Devon, with bus services from all over the area as well as Exeter and Plymouth.

For timetable details contact Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit www.traveline.org.uk. In addition, Barnstaple is at the end of the Tarka Line branch railway from Exeter. For train times contact National Rail Enquiries on 08457 484950.

Walk Length: 2 miles/3.5km; no stiles; one short and gentle gradient.
Facilities: Barnstaple has all facilities.

The Walk

Start the walk outside the Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon.

The Museum is in The Square, at the town end of the old Barnstaple Bridge. In the middle of The Square is the Albert Memorial Clock, erected to commemorate the life of Queen Victoria's consort in 1862.

Walk down the path between the museum and the bridge to the riverside walkway and turn right, through the archway. Continue along the riverside path, along what is known as the Strand promenade.

This area on the right was originally a natural inlet and then became Barnstaple's Quay area. It was from here that five ships sailed to join Drake's fleet to fight the Spanish Armada in 1588. Barnstaple remained an important port until the early 19th century, when the increasing size of ships and silting of the river combined to end its trade. The Quay area was then filled in.

A little way on pass the imposing façade of Queen Anne's Walk.

This was built as an Exchange, facing the Quay in those days, in the early 1700s. It now serves as Barnstaple's Heritage Centre. The statue on the top is of Queen Anne, the monarch at the time.

Beyond Queen Anne's Walk continue along the riverside and then bear right to an old railway signal box. Turn left in front of this and walk past buildings designed in the style of a railway station.

This is the site of the old Barnstaple Town railway station. It served the line of the Atlantic Coast Express to Ilfracombe and was also the terminus of the Lynton and Barnstaple Railway. This was a narrow gauge line which operated between 1898 and 1935. A thriving Society exists to promote the history and knowledge of this railway and has reopened a short stretch of the old line, together with the historic station, at Woody Bay near Lynton.

Go through an arch at the end of the station then on past the Civic Centre to a swing bridge.

There are actually three bridges to be crossed on this walk, this being the smallest of the three. Shaped like a boat, it spans the end of the River Yeo, a tributary of the Taw which comes down from the edge of Exmoor. A swing bridge is needed in case river traffic needs to reach Rolle Quay, a little way up the Yeo.

Keep ahead over the swing bridge and continue under the new by-pass bridge.

The Coast Path and Tarka Trail here is on the line of the old railway to Ilfracombe. Built in 1874 it became an important tourist line, carrying the Ilfracombe portion of the Atlantic Coast Express from Waterloo. It was closed in 1970.

Shortly after passing under the by-pass bridge leave the old railway and turn right along a tarmac path. At the top of the slope turn right onto the new bridge.

The bridge was opened in May 2007 to link the main A39 road to the road to Braunton and Ilfracombe, avoiding the town centre of Barnstaple. Sometimes referred to as the Western Bypass it has been designed to reduce, as far as possible, any damage to the environment.

The Taw Estuary is a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest and the protection of the estuary during and after construction has therefore been important. The impact of noise and disturbance on the estuary's wildlife and habitats has been minimised and a variety of measures taken to protect otters and badgers and preserve and enhance habitats for bats and barn owls. New habitats are also being created, including grassland, hedgerows and wetlands.

Cross the bridge, keeping to the walkway and cycleway on the right hand side. On the far side turn right along the tarmac path, curving round to go under the underpass.

The bridge offers an excellent viewpoint for looking down the river, the marshes framing the estuary as it curves down towards the mouth. Unless the tide is high, the effect of silting which spelled the end of Barnstaple as a port will be seen in the numerous sandbanks.

The bridge may now be used as a short cut across the river by walkers on the South West Coast Path and walkers or cyclists on the Tarka Trail. It is an exciting experience, probably unique on the whole 630 miles of the Coast Path, although it does mean missing the facilities Barnstaple has to offer unless a diversion into the town is made.

The walk now follows the slightly diverted route of the old Coast Path and Tarka Trail back into Barnstaple. After the underpass keep ahead. Continue on next to a road, bearing left at the end to reach the original Barnstaple Bridge.

This bridge was originally built in the 13th century. It underwent improvements in the 1430s and the 1580s and was last widened in the 1960s. It has 16 stone arches, 13 of them medieval and the other three, at the town end, replaced in 1589.

Cross the bridge to return to Barnstaple, opposite the starting point at the Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon.

Further Information

A range of information is available on the South West Coast Path; especially useful is the guide book and accommodation list produced by the South West Coast Path Association, price £7.50 and available locally. Alternatively, it may be obtained from the Discover Devon Information Service, Westacott Road, Barnstaple, EX32 8AW, telephone 0870 608 5531 - make cheques payable to Devon County Council and quote reference DTY/DP33.

Information on the Tarka Trail includes a free introductory leaflet and an information pack, price £2 and both available locally. Both may also be obtained from the address above - for the free leaflet quote reference DTY/DP101 and for the pack (£3.50 including post and packing) quote reference DTY/DP102.

Further local information is available from the Barnstaple Tourist Information Centre which is located in the Museum at the start and finish of the walk, including a number of publications on local walks.

For information on the wider network of walking routes 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 walks information.

OS maps for this walk:

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

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