

A North Devon Peninsula

Appledore, Northam and the Burrows

North of Bideford a peninsula of land juts out between the sea and the estuary of the River Torridge. Being something of a cul-de-sac, the area has a real character of its own. In addition, being almost surrounded by water, half of the peninsula is edged by the South West Coast Path. Within this relatively small area are two historic towns, Appledore and Northam, and the vast expanse of open sandy land known as Northam Burrows.

This walk uses the Coast Path to explore the edge of the Torridge estuary from Appledore upstream, then crosses the inland neck of the peninsula through Northam and across the Burrows to the seaward edge. It then follows the Coast Path back to Appledore. It is a walk of changing vistas, including estuary views and wide open seaward panoramas, as well as features of historic interest.

Fact File

Appledore is served by a regular and frequent bus service from Barnstaple and Bideford. For timetable details contact Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit www.traveline.org.uk. There is also a car park in the town centre.

Walk length: 6½ miles/10.4 km; there are 3 stiles and a couple of short flights of steps. The walk is almost completely flat, there being just one gentle climb of 40m/130 feet.

Facilities: Appledore: all facilities
Northam: shops, pub, buses
Northam Burrows: toilets

The Walk

Start at the main car park at Appledore.

As well as the car park, the buses also stop here and there are toilets.

Walk along the Quay, heading for the estuary.

Appledore was established as a town in the Middle Ages, being first mentioned in the 1300s. From those early times it was an important fishing and trading centre. At one time it became one of England's biggest importers of tobacco.

The Quay itself was built in the mid 1800s to replace a series of individual jetties serving the separate houses. Most of the current houses along the Quay date from the 1840s.

On the opposite side of the estuary can be seen the village of Instow. Beyond the church tower at the left hand end can be seen the stump of an old windmill on the hill.

As the road bends to the right the old shipbuilding quays can be seen on the left. Shipbuilding was a significant industry in Appledore in the 18th and 19th centuries, arising from the North American trade, and continues to this day. The main yard visible is Richmond Yard, which included a dry dock capable of taking four schooners at a time. Beyond was the Newquay or Top Yard.

Follow the road as it goes inland, then take the first on the left, signed as the Coast Path (Newquay Street).

This narrow road passes the back of Richmond and Newquay Yards.

Continue along the road (now called Hubbastone Road); this rises slightly and passes the modern shipyard.

The shipbuilding tradition continues at Appledore with what is known as the Bidna Yard. When built in 1969, this was one of Europe's largest covered yards, and is still quite impressive. It is now operated by DML of Plymouth.

A little way beyond the main entrance to the modern shipyard, leave the road for the footpath on the left at the gate and stile. This is the Coast Path. The path climbs to another gate and stile. Turn left down the track for a short length, then turn right through a gap in the wall. This path leads down to the edge of the estuary. Note that at high tide you will need to take the signed diversion near the bottom, but at most states of the tide the estuary side path is usable.

Upstream can be seen Bideford beyond the new high level bridge. The Torridge estuary is very attractive. The river itself follows a strange semi-circular course, since it rises near the north coast near the Cornish border then flows south and east before turning back north to flow into the sea here.

A little way after crossing the bank alongside the estuary the path meets the high tide route going to the right. Leave the main estuary-side Coast Path here, to follow the inland diversion. This leads to a track alongside the marshes. Continue on up the track when it meets the high tide Coast Path.

(If you had to use the high tide path, on reaching the surfaced track turn right uphill).

Follow the track up to the top, where it arrives at the main road into Appledore.

This location is popularly known as Bloody Corner, and is thought to be the site of a great battle in the early Middle Ages. It is usually associated with the defeat of a Viking invader, Hubba the Dane, by Alfred the Great in 892AD. Note the commemorative stone at the top of the footpath. However, some historians have deduced that the battle was in 1069, involving some of the sons of Harold after the defeat at Hastings.

Carefully cross the road then turn left on the footway alongside the road. Take the first fork bearing right (North Street) and continue ahead along this road.

There are good views over the expanse of Northam Burrows from here.

Bear right at the end and continue along the narrow street which leads into the centre of Northam.

Northam is the earliest settlement in this area. The church tower is a notable landmark, and indeed was historically important as a guide for shipping. The distinctive building in the Square is the former school. It looks old, but only dates from the 1800s, being built in an antique style, though it does in fact incorporate some genuine medieval work.

At the junction in the Square turn right then bear left into Sandymere Road.

Directly ahead now is the outline of the island of Lundy, in the middle of the Bristol Channel. A long, narrow island, its long length is being seen from this direction.

Follow the road as it descends then keep on or alongside it as it continues out onto the Burrows.

The Burrows was traditionally an area of common land where parishioners had grazing rights. It is now operated jointly as a Country Park by Torridge District Council and as a golf course, said to be the oldest links course in England. The area consists of sand and alluvial deposits, with scattered pools. It provides a wide range of coastal habitats, especially for rare plants and migratory birds. As a result it is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

After crossing the Burrows the track arrives at the coast at a high pebble ridge.

This is another noteworthy natural feature, said to be formed by erosion over the ages of coastal rocks to the west, washed up here by the tides and flung up the shore to form the ridge. The ridge is absolutely vital for the survival of the Burrows.

From the top of the ridge there is a superb view of the whole of Bideford (or Barnstaple) Bay, from Hartland Point on the left to Baggy Point on the right. The expanse of sand, sea and surf makes an exhilarating sight.

The walk has now re-joined the Coast Path, this time on the west side of Appledore. The formal route is followed by turning right and following behind the ridge, keeping it just to your left. However, at most states of the tide the beach is walkable and this makes a superb length of the walk as it continues towards the mouth of the estuary, the outline of Saunton Down ahead on the far side of the mouth.

As the beach and pebble ridge bear to the right, leave the beach and climb the pebble ridge to the edge of the Burrows. This picks up the official Coast Path route behind the ridge - if in doubt where to leave the beach look out for a sign at the top of the ridge. Continue ahead parallel to the ridge, now following Coast Path waymarks.

The path is now passing alongside the edge of the joint estuary of the Taw and Torridge rivers. On the opposite side of the estuary will be seen the dunes of Braunton Burrows, one of the largest areas of sand dunes in England. The area was designated as a Biosphere Reserve in 2002 by UNESCO for its environmental and scientific importance. It is Britain's first Biosphere Reserve, a designation which gives it world status.

Continuing along the edge of the Burrows, the two arms of the estuary can now be seen, the Taw on its way from Barnstaple and, ultimately, Dartmoor ahead and left while the Torridge passes between Instow and Appledore ahead and right.

As the ridge heads towards Appledore look out for a waymark post pointing to the right. This avoids a cul-de-sac ahead. Head towards an area of car parking on the right then continue alongside the access track, besides the tidal marsh known as the Skern.

Follow the road out of the Country Park over the bridge, then at the entrance kiosk follow the Coast Path high tide or low tide waymark. At most states of the tide the low tide path is walkable. This crosses a grassy area then the foreshore and just beyond the old boatyard slipway take the steps up to another grassy area.

(At high tide follow the road then turn left at the junction; leave this road just beyond the old boatyard to meet the low tide route).

The path passes the Appledore Lifeboat Station, the Old Custom House and on into Irsha Street.

This area once comprised a separate settlement in its own right. It was then joined to Appledore by the many seamen's houses built along Irsha Street. While many are 19th century in origin, some date back much farther, as far as the 1500s. They also vary considerably in size, from the grander sea captain's houses to the small cottages of local fishermen. It all makes for a fascinating townscape.

Continue along the length of the street to arrive at the main car park in Appledore.

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 £6.00 and available locally. Alternatively, it may be obtained from the Discover Devon Information Service, Westacott Road, Barnstaple, EX32 8AW, telephone 0870 608 5531, price £7.50 including postage and packing. Make cheques payable to Devon County Council and quote reference DTY/DP33.

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

OS Maps for this walk:

Landranger (1:50,000 scale) 180 Barnstaple and Ilfracombe

Explorer (1:25,000 scale) 139 Bideford, Ilfracombe and Barnstaple