

Stop number: Start

Title: Welcome to Ilfracombe

Location: The Landmark

Topic: In the Thick of it.

Welcome to Ilfracombe, the building you stand in front of is called 'The Landmark' an iconic building in Ilfracombe. In Victorian times another classic building stood here, and it was Ilfracombe's first purpose built luxury hotel. Named unsurprisingly the 'Ilfracombe Hotel', it was built in 1867 on a 5 acre site which included the ownership of the nearby beach. It epitomised why Ilfracombe is known to be one of Devon's best examples of Victorian architecture and welcomed such worthies as the German Crown Prince in 1878, later to become Kaiser Wilhelm of First World War fame. Being one of the first major large scale developments it linked directly to the growing popularity of the town as a glamorous Victorian tourist resort. This was made possible by the introduction of paddle steamers, in the early 19th century and the development of the railway in 1874 bringing visitors from 'up country' more rapidly to the North Devon Coast.

However Ilfracombe's origins stem from a long time before this with more than 2000 years of history. At Hillsborough, visible in the distance, can be seen the remnants of an Iron Age Hillfort, and Ilfracombe's earliest recorded history relates back to the Saxon times. It is first referred to in the Domesday Book of 1086 when it is named 'Alfreinscoma' meaning the 'comb' (wooded valley) where 'Alfred' dwells. Does this refer to a previous king or a local landowner, who is known to have started fitting the harbour out as a port? It remains a mystery but it is important to note that it was Ilfracombe's position along the Bristol Channel and growing importance as a strategic port which was responsible for the growth of other related industries, such as shipbuilding, trading and fishing. These factors played a vital part in laying the foundations for the later Victorian development.

This walk will take you on a journey through the area's rich and diverse past and the legacy that this has left within the area as Ilfracombe grew as a Victorian tourist destination set in some of the most dramatic coastal scenery in the country. Lying within the North Devon Coast Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) the walker can look forward to some extraordinary and uninterrupted coastal views across the water to Wales, westwards to Bull Point and eastwards to Hillsborough.

Directions 1

Turn left out of the landmark theatre and head for the railings overlooking a small beach.

Stop here for a moment

Stop number: 1

Title: A collectors paradise

Location: Wildersmouth Beach

Topic: Collectors and preachers.

Wildersmouth Beach is one of five, easily accessible beaches in Ilfracombe. It owes its name to the river mouth that exits the town into the ocean called the 'Wilder'. Note its dark grey sand, resulting from the weathering of Devon slate present in the area. Before the cutting of

the 4 tunnels for the famous 'Tunnels Beaches' this was the most popular Victorian bathing spot and once formed part of the 5 acres of splendour belonging to the Ilfracombe Hotel.

During the 19th Century along with other accessible beaches it became an extremely important site to Victorian collectors and natural historians, who became fascinated with collecting and documenting marine life. The rock pools at low tide are teeming with marine life, providing the perfect refuge for barnacles, limpets, dog whelks and several types of anemone such as beadlet (red) and snake-lock (green). The huge tidal range and rugged coastline allows access to very rare species at low tide, including rare sea corals.

Ilfracombe and its surrounding coastline has therefore inspired many writers and scientists including writer 'Charles Kingsley' and the famous Victorian naturalist and friend of Charles Darwin, 'Phillip Henry Gosse'. There are many other notable marine collectors who visited the area and the fascination for aquaria, led to a serious loss of marine wildlife during these Victorian times. You can find out more about this "Science at the Seaside" by visiting the Ilfracombe museum, located next to the Landmark Theatre.

If you look along the right hand side of the beach (as you gaze out to sea) where you just came from you will see a rocky outcrop at the foot of Capstone. This has provided a natural stage for performers but most noticeably preachers, hence its name 'Preachers Rock'. It was used by ministers at the height of Ilfracombe's Victorian tourist era to preach to the hundreds of folk promenading and is still used today for the same reasons.

Directions 2

Now turn back towards the Landmark theatre and look for a flight of steps heading up the right hand side of the building. At the top of this flight stop again and look back towards the small coastal hill that is Capstone

As you walk on from this spot keep an eye out for the metal footsteps embedded in the concrete footpath. They represent the South West Coast Path which you are following. First designated in 1961 it opened in 1978, and is now Britain's longest National Trail at 1,014 kilometres (630 miles). It stretches from Minehead in Somerset, via Cornwall to Poole Harbour in Dorset and is way-marked by the distinct acorn that shows it is a National Trail. It is funded through Natural England and maintained along its route by the National Trust and Public Rights of Way (PROW) local highways authorities.

Stop number: 2

Title: Capstone

Location: Above the Landmark

Topic: The history of Capstone

In Victorian and Edwardian times Capstone was a bustling place and it is still possible to enjoy the same uninterrupted paths today due to an initiative through the local Board of Health which bought Capstone in 1867 for £7,500. It was purchased in order that it remained town property and undeveloped, for both conservation and health purposes. Ilfracombe had

suffered a severe Cholera epidemic in 1849. In 1882 The Board also purchased Ropery Meadow, located in front of Capstone (so named as it was where newly made ships ropes were once laid out) for use as a recreation ground and it is still used for this purpose today.

Looking to the landward side of the hill, you can see the original location of the Ilfracombe Pavilion. Imitating a mini ‘Crystal Palace’ it was entirely constructed of cast iron and glass, costing £4,000 (around £368,000 today) and measuring 61m (200ft) long by 10m (35ft) wide. It was known locally as the ‘Cucumber Frame’, ‘Shelter’, or ‘Winter Garden’. It is hard to imagine such a sight stood here. Built to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria, it was an excuse for a huge joyous regatta; these were happy times.

The ‘Pavilion’ was regarded as an elegant place to relax and enjoy a beautiful ‘Aquaria’(indoor winter garden) and light musical entertainment when the weather was too fierce to promenade outside. The local authority provided potted plants, including palms and other exotic species. Flower beds lined the inside and fish splashed about in a mini aquarium. The stage was central with a small seating area in front, where, during the height of the season, the house band would play along with other touring bands. It was mostly pulled down in 1926 with the central section being completely ripped out and replaced with a new concrete concert hall. However part of the cast iron structure on both the east and west wings remained as part of the Victorian Pavilion until 1976 when it was wholly removed and replaced with a full concrete structure.

Although the concert hall underwent major repairs, improvements and extensions during its lifetime, the council took the decision in late 1990s to replace it with a new comprehensive entertainment building ‘The Landmark’, where we started our walk.

Once used as the old coastguard look out, Capstone is one of the best spots to overlook the town below. It gives a fantastic perspective of its longstanding and contrasting Edwardian and Victorian architecture and the more recent developments.

The main path that traverses Capstone is known as ‘Capstone Parade’ and was built in the mid 19th Century, paid for by subscriptions from gentry and residents, which reflected this positive movement towards improving pleasure and leisure times with health in mind.

Cut between 1842 and 1843 and costing £220 the construction of it was also intended to alleviate unemployment in a time known as the ‘Hungry Forties’. This was partly due to a European wide potato blight, causing an economic and hunger crisis for some people which caused a knock on effect in smaller communities such as Ilfracombe. Construction workers were paid a loaf of bread and a shilling a day for their efforts, no inconsiderable sum in the 1800’s.

19th Century writer John Lloyd Warden Page in his book ‘The Coasts of Devon’, described Capstone Parade as *“one of the most beautiful sea walks in the kingdom”* and it is still regarded as such by visitors today. It still gives visitors an opportunity to breathe in the sea air

and savour the marine environment surrounding Ilfracombe and was a prime example of forward social planning during Victorian times. The zig-zag paths up the side of Capstone Hill above you, were cut a little later in 1894, which was celebrated by holding a great regatta.

Local legends abound here and in 1797, during the wars with France, a French naval raiding party appeared off Ilfracombe. With the men away at war, a lady called Betsy Gammon raised the womenfolk within the town by banging a drum and getting them to line Capstone dressed in their red shawls. Legend has it that the French thought these women were red-coated English soldiers and promptly fled the scene. The drum and original shawl worn by Betsy Gammon can be found in the Ilfracombe Museum.

As an interesting footnote, the people of Wales tell the same story linking it to the Welsh national costume of red shawl and black hat. In reality the 'invasion party' had landed in South Wales, where they were quickly rounded up by the local militia.

In Ilfracombe there is an organisation known as the "Red Petticoats" who continue to celebrate this local legend.

Directions 3

Continue to follow the path up the hill which merges with 'Runnacleave' or as locals call it, the 'southern slopes'. Continue upwards and exit the gardens through a metal gate on the right hand side. Keep to the right pavement and walk about 250m or when the wall on the right becomes waist height so you can look below. Stop here and look below.

Stop number: 3

Title: Old hotels and posh beaches

Location: The Layby /Back of Torrs park.

Topic: Victorian architecture and recreation

Did you notice the large hotel on the corner? You would also have had a perfect view of it from the top of Capstone, earlier in the walk, as it perches so elegantly on top of the hill. Originally a grand hotel known as the 'Granville' it was built in 1891. Offering 40 bedrooms and a billiards room, it was another fine example of exquisite Victorian, gothic style architecture. Interestingly, it was first used as a "Temperance Hotel", which meant that no alcohol was allowed.

Like so many other hotels it has been converted into flats and holiday apartments due to the decline in catered holidays in England. Much of Ilfracombe's Hotel trade relied on visitors arriving by railway and paddle steamer and both the increase in car ownership, and decline in rail transport led to a reduction in the demand for this sort of holiday. Later on in our walk we will see other examples of this 19th Century suburban development in and around the railway station.

Now look over the wall (opposite a modern looking building) and you can see part of what forms the famous 'Tunnels beaches'. These beaches were made accessible by digging tunnels

through the hillside. These were hand cut by Welsh miners in 1823 and it is thought that originally they started as a natural cave known as 'Crekerne Cave' used by smugglers 100 years before. The Ilfracombe Sea Bathing Company employed the miners to cut through to the coves beyond at a time when bathing and the art of swimming became increasingly popular during the Victorian era.

The growth in popularity of sea bathing developed from the perceived health benefits of mineral springs, such as Spa in Belgium and Bath in England. In 1753 Dr Charles Russel published 'The Uses of Sea Water' which recommended the use of sea water for healing various diseases, and William Buchan wrote his 1769 book 'Domestic Medicine' advocating the practice.

Buchan's book was in print until 1846 and was translated into many languages. With his recommendations people flocked to the coast. Thus by the end of the eighteenth century sea bathing had become highly fashionable and many seaside resorts sprang up along the English coast such as Brighton and Bournemouth. The proliferation of rail travel in the mid-nineteenth century made it possible for large numbers of people to visit the coast. Seaside towns and resorts promoted the purported health benefits of sea water and resort towns such as Ilfracombe grew enormously.

In the late 1700s Ilfracombe became a fashionable spa and sea-bathing destination for wealthy

Georgians and a number of hotels, guest houses and public rooms were established. Bathing was originally centred round Raparree Cove to the East of the harbour and in 1803 the town's status as a resort was confirmed by its inclusion in the national 'Guide to all the Watering and Sea Bathing Places'.

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. According to local legend a bugler sat between the two pools and if a man dared to creep around, an alarm would be sounded and the man promptly arrested. It was not until 1905 that mixed bathing was permitted. However it was still very common to use a 'bathing machine' whereby the person would climb in the horse-drawn cabin on wheels, change into their bathing suit to then be pulled down to the sea and slip into the water without being seen. At more developed resorts they used wooden rails and cables propelled by a steam engine. Interestingly, less common was the use of manpower, but this was the preferred method at The Tunnels.

Although only one pool exists today, it is still enjoyed by many people wanting 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).

Directions 4

Continue to walk along the road for 50m then bear right. Follow the unsurfaced road which is signposted 'Coast Path to Lee'. Follow road for another 180 m until it forks again and then turn right, and then left by the gate that says 'White Pebbles' apartments. The path forks

again after 25m take the right fork sign-posted 'Torrs Walk/Lee. Follow the zig-zag path until you see the first bench which is sited at a perfect viewing spot. Take a seat.

Stop number: 4

Title: A perfect rest spot

Location: The Bench

Topic: Torrs Walk

Take a minute to immerse yourself in your surroundings, this is a truly outstanding 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 to the west. The beauty stretches as far as the eye can see and it is not a surprise that this area has been designated an AONB since 1960, but what does this mean? The primary purpose of the designation is 'to conserve and enhance the natural beauty' of an area, which includes its landscape, wildlife and heritage. This provides protection under planning laws although, unlike National Parks, AONBs do not undertake a statutory planning function.

Look directly across the water to Wales, one of the more distinct headlands is the Gower Peninsular also famous for its breath-taking scenery, also an AONB and the first to be designated in 1956.

Lundy Island, whilst not part of the AONB, is still defined as a Heritage Coast and why it was designated a statutory Marine Nature Reserve and Marine Conservation Zone, with a 'No Take Zone', the first in England. This was due to its unique marine flora and fauna. In the summer season there are regular trips to Lundy Island from both Ilfracombe and Bideford. To find more information about visiting, please see the tourism office at the Landmark.

These designations are all quite recent but the Torrs was appreciated a long time before this, and 'Torrs Walk' which you are on now, has been recognised for well over a 100 years. The original pathways were probably cut in the late 19th Century and visitors used to pay a penny toll for the privilege of enjoying the walk that you are now doing. The path was constructed on the seaward side of the seven peaked hills known as the 'Seven Sisters'. These can be clearly seen from high points on the opposite side of the town such as Hillsborough that was mentioned earlier, when we reach the Toposcope later, you will be sitting upon one of the Seven Sisters.

The Torrs was purchased by the National Trust in 1967 and it is they who now help to ensure that much of our valuable coastline is protected and managed appropriately. In fact the National Trust is a significant landowner along the North Devon Coast, owning over a third, including a virtually uninterrupted stretch from here, all the way to Croyde Bay.

From this vantage point, you get a better view of the Tunnels beach. The coastline and landscape remains virtually unchanged since its Victorian heyday. Tunnels Beach is still Ilfracombe's most popular tourist attraction and it is the main "Blue Flag" beach lying within the designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It is also designated as a Voluntary Marine Conservation Area (since 1996) due to its wildlife value and was another beach that naturalist Phillip Henry Gosse frequented, where he claimed to have discovered several new species.

Directions 5

Continue to follow the zig-zag path until you meet a hairpin bend and signpost saying 'National Trust'. Follow the left turn and continue walking for about 50m. Keep an eye out for an unusual stone structure on the right covered in greenery. Stop here

Stop number: 5

Title: Useful rocks

Location: The lime kiln

Topic: The importance of lime.

Here are the remains of a well preserved lime kiln, one of many to be found along the North Devon coastline. In most cases, limestone was imported via the sea from Caldy Island in South Wales. Therefore lime kilns were usually located on or near the coast where boats could easily get in. However, this kiln is in an unusual location high above the sea, due to the fact that there is a rare outcrop of limestone here and at Combe Martin.

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 used to make our acidic soils suitable for growing, and also used for construction to make cements, mortar and white-wash for walls.

Mixed layers of crushed limestone and coal/charcoal were placed in the kiln and slowly burnt, the remaining ash was raked out at the bottom and this was the finished product.

It was a dangerous job which produced carbon monoxide fumes and often the smoke from the kilns would form a thick fog which lingered in the valleys below. Fortunately, with the advent of modern fertilisers and more widespread availability of building materials, the practice, most common in the late 18th and 19th century, had ceased by the time tourism took off and by the 1880's the Ordnance Survey Map already refers to this as being a disused kiln. The practice would not have sat well with the popular, grand and growing Victorian resort, famous for its dramatic coastline and fresh ocean air.

Directions 6

Now retrace your steps to re-join the main footpath and continue to follow the path upwards, it gets slightly steeper and there are welcome benches scattered along the way. Once you get to a wooden gate at the top, turn right signposted 'Viewpoint', and walk up the embankment to the top, where you will find a stone cairn.

Stop number: 6

Title: A view from above

Location: At the Toposcope

Topic: Old Torrs Pavilion/Cairn Nature Reserve /old train station/overview.

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. You

would most certainly need it if you were continuing your hike to Lee Bay, which is a delightful and easy walk 4.8km (3 miles) from here.

As you admire the view look at the Toposcope recently installed by the National Trust, this helps you to 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 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 modern buildings, such as 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 the 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 upon, and to provide quiet and informal recreation for both locals and visitors alike. Most of the pathways were cut in the late 1800's and today Hillsborough is a Local Nature Reserve owned and managed by North Devon District Council.

Another example of this sort of conservation can be seen at the Cairn, which we will pass later in our walk. Look for the large factory site lying inland. This was the site of the old Ilfracombe station and behind it is a wooded hill known as the Cairn. This was laid out by the local council as a woodland in the early 20th century and is another example of early conservation management. In fact Ilfracombe is particularly blessed with such examples (including the Torrs that we are standing on now). Ilfracombe was certainly at the forefront of landscape conservation at a time when there were no National Parks, Country Parks, Nature Reserves and AONBs, and the National Trust had only just been formed.

Directions 7

Exit the view point directly behind the Toposcope onto a small path to the right of the steps. Continue down over the hill and 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, so follow the well-defined path, which closely follows the coast. As you round a small headland pause for a moment.

Stop number: 7

Title: In days of old

Location: Brandy Cove

Topic: Smuggling along the North Devon Coast

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 importation of luxury items from abroad. This was because during this period in our history, 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. Furthermore, 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, using the secluded coastline adjacent to ports. As nearby Ilfracombe was an important port, it was not unsurprising that the adjacent coastline was used by smugglers to transfer their illicit cargo from trading ships to smaller boats and thence to the coast. Interestingly, as many lime kilns were located along the coast, these were also linked to smuggling.

Many local people were involved in ‘the trade’ and it has been 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 remain with us today. Firstly, the Coastguard was formed in 1809, not for the primary purpose of saving lives, but to help 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.

Directions 8.

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. Now walk along the well-defined track over the downland towards Lee.

Stop number: 8

Title: The Old Coast Road

Location: Flat Point

Topic: Roads and Downland

As you walked up the hill did you notice that in places the rock on the surface of the track had been cut with a series of grooves? These were created to help horses to grip the slippery surface as they proceeded up the hill. This 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 in this area, before it was enclosed. In earlier times this whole area would have

been part of an open downland/moorland, which in the main has been enclosed and improved by agriculture since the early 1800s.

As you continue along, you will eventually reach a fine viewpoint, which offers superb views of the Lee and Morte Point area. The furthest headland that you see is Bull Point, where a lighthouse was built in 1879.

Directions 9.

Continue along this well-defined track for about 1.5km the track eventually ending at a gate. Proceed through the gate and continue down a surfaced road leading towards Lee.

As you descend this track, look through gateways on your left, where you can get fine views of the special wooded valley known as Borough Woods. The commercial woodland on the hillside above is known as Windutter Hill.

Continue down the road for another kilometre, ignoring any turnings on your left. You will eventually reach a T junction, turn left here and proceed down to the seafront of Lee Village.

Stop number: 9

Title: By the sea

Location: Lee Seafront

Topic: Coastal trade, Smuggling and Wrecking

Lee Bay is a small secluded cove, with limited access for boats. Its likely that initially there would have been a small fishing trade here, but most of Lee Village grew up in the late 1800's as we shall see.

However, some buildings on the coast here are quite old and reveal some of the story of the Lee Village. To the right of the seafront, is a very smart looking holiday home which was once the old corn mill. The mill operated between the 1500's 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 Old 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 road above the village. These 'Customs Men' were considered unpopular by locals and frequently had to build their cottages on the edge of villages.

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 Copping. 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.

The small cove traded in importing coal and limestone and there was a limekiln on the seafront. On the left side of the beach, known as ‘Black Pit’ coal was unloaded, ready for collection at low tide.

Before moving on, we must also make mention of that other illicit trade that many coastal communities engaged in, the business of ‘wrecking’. Ancient wrecking laws stated that if a ship was wrecked on the coast and there was no soul left on board, the locals could claim the ancient right of salvage. As a result there are numerous examples of ships that were deliberately lured onto the treacherous rocks of the North Devon coast as they made their way to ports like Ilfracombe. If survivors were found, there are recorded incidents of them being killed by the waiting locals.

There are tales of lanterns being tied to donkey tails and walking them along the coast, making it look as if they were ships riding at anchor in harbour. There are numerous recorded wrecks in and around Lee and it’s likely that many mariners in times of distress mistook Lee (and Hele Bay to the east of Ilfracombe) for the main port of Ilfracombe.

Such were the problems of ships coming to grief near here, the result was the erection of a lighthouse on the headland at Bull Point in the 1870’s by Trinity House.

As with the smuggling operation, initially the coastguards were employed to help secure wrecks from the local population, by guarding them and their crews until they could be salvaged. It was only later in 1923 that the Coastguard was re-established as a coastal safety and rescue service.

Directions 10

Continue along the seafront for another 25m then turn inland towards a small car park. Keeping the car park on your left follow the track past the toilets and then past a property called Gwythers. This was originally a farm and was the home of Hannibal Richards.

Continue along the track past Gwythers for 150m until you reach a public footpath sign, which crosses a field on your right.

Stop number: 10

Title: Lee Village

Location: Lee

Topic: Lee Village

Before heading across the field and into the wooded valley it would be worth exploring the village of Lee. Although, there are a few old buildings in Lee, the main village did not develop until 1871 when the local landowner Robert Smith began building. Lee is not a Parish in its own right, it being a part of the Parishes of Ilfracombe and Mortehoe. Many of the unique architectural and special features of the village were developed at this time. 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’.

Lee is a great place to explore and is well worth a visit. It also has a pub, The Grampus, which is one of the original farmhouses, and the small village church called St Matthews which was built in 1835.

You can find out more about this fascinating village by visiting the Lee Bay website, which also has a series of self-guided walks which allow you to explore the village and the surrounding countryside. <http://www.leebay.co.uk/walks.htm>

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.

Directions 11

At the end of this field go through the gate, turn left and follow the path through Borough Woods which follows a small stream for about 1km.

Stop number: 11

Title: Coastal Woodlands

Location: Borough Woods

Topic: Woodlands and their management

Borough Woods through which you are travelling is one of the most important coastal woodlands in the northern part of the AONB. The land on this side of the stream has probably been woodland since medieval times.

It probably survived here because the steep sided, rocky slopes were considered difficult to clear for agriculture. Even so, at 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, some of them introduced. The areas of woodland that were not cleared, especially towards the coast and higher up the valley tend to retain predominantly oak and hazel woodland. This middle section has a range of trees including beech, sycamore, sweet and horse chestnut which have clearly been introduced into this area. Although a native of Britain, the beech was predominately used as a hedging plant in the area around Exmoor during the enclosure of moorland and downland that took place in the 1800's. Some of the beech within the woods looks as if they have originated on old field boundaries.

Whilst walking through these woods, you will notice the variety of life on the woodland floor. This is in complete contrast to the coniferous woodland of Windcutter Hill. Looking at this woodland, with a mix of trees varying in age and height, it is easy to see why they form such important habitats for wildlife.

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 and similarly oak which was strong and hard was ideal for construction, ship building, barrel making and tanning for leather. Oak was also used in the Combe Martin area to help fire the many inland lime kilns, instead of coal which was expensive. Ash served for making heavy duty tool handles and cart shafts, hazel was used for hurdles, thatching spars and baskets. As a result woodlands were

sustainably managed to ensure a constant supply of timber and woodland products. However, with the advent of plastic and metal the demand for woodland products has declined, making them uneconomic to work.

This sustainable management and the continual cutting produced a variety of different aged woodland and it is this variety which is great for wildlife. Unfortunately, the majority of woodland are now left unmanaged, and are not as ecologically rich as they once were.

Directions 12

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 on the other side.

After reaching a forest track continue into the coniferous plantations above you and take a look around.

Stop number: 12

Title: Coniferous Woodlands

Location: Windcutter Hill

Topic: Alternative woodland management

Have you noticed a difference between the two woodlands? As you can see, there is very little plantlife on 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. They were planted by the Forestry Commission, who owned these woods until the mid 1980's when they were sold off. Old Ordnance Survey maps show very little woodland on this side of the valley until it was planted by the Forestry Commission.

Coniferous plantations were very popular in the 20th Century as they are much faster growing species than our native broadleaved trees. It was hoped that an economic return could be more quickly realised. In a commercial forestry situation, the forester plants close together in order to maximise production. When conifers are cut down, the tree is killed and through selective thinning and clear felling, the forester ensures a very even crop of trees. This means very little light reaching the forest floor and very little grows there. In addition, most conifers are not native to Britain and do not support our native plants and insects and, taken together with the lack of light, this results in a woodland that has poor wildlife value.

The AONB encourages, wherever possible, the planting and restocking of woodlands with native broadleaved trees to improve the biodiversity value of our woods.

Directions 13

Continue through the woodland, crossing another forest track as you do. You eventually exit into a field. Aim for the top of the field near the corner of a field boundary and look for a public footpath yellow way-marker. Follow the path, keeping the field boundary on your right until you reach a 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.

You need to continue walking up the lane for about 1km until you reach a road ‘T’ Junction. Just before this junction, turn right down a narrow path that brings you out to a surfaced cycleway, next to the road bridge.

Stop number: 13

Title: The Old Railway

Location: Lee Bridge

Topic: The Railway

You are now standing on what was once the railway line from Barnstaple to Ilfracombe. In its heyday, it was a busy line linked to the main line which ran all the way to Waterloo Station in London. Constructed and opened by the London and South Western Railway in 1874, this very important line was responsible for the town of Ilfracombe developing as a popular seaside resort.

As you descend the 1:36 gradient, notice the depth of cuttings engineers had to build to lessen the gradient along this line. The line took two years to build. The 11 miles from Barnstaple to Lee Bridge taking the same time as the remaining 3 miles to Ilfracombe! This gradient, or ‘bank’ as it was known was one of the steepest inclines in the country for conventional railway engines.

Trains often required assistance to get up ‘Slade Bank’ 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, an additional engine was required on the other end to prevent a runaway if a coupling was broken on the train. Combinations of two and three steam locomotives were not uncommon on this line.

Directions 14

Proceed down the cycleway for about 1.5km passing under the Bickenbridge and the old platelayers (workmans) hut on the way. You will notice an expanse of water on your left through the trees, and when you reach an opening on your left, walk down the steps and onto an area of grassland beside the water.

Stop number: 14

Title: Slade Reservoirs

Location: Upper Dam

Topic: Reservoirs and Wildlife

You are now standing on the Upper Slade reservoir dam. Further down the valley you can see the Lower Slade reservoir. These two reservoirs were constructed in the late 1850’s (before the railway was built) as a direct response to the cholera outbreak in Ilfracombe in 1949 and the need for clean drinking water. They remained in operation until the late 20th Century and today they are still owned by South West Water, although they are used as recreational fishing lakes.

These open expanses of water are great for wildlife and at night, Daubenton’s bats can be seen feeding on insects. Returning to the railway, you may have noticed that a lot of vegetation has grown up here. When the railway operated, the embankments would have been kept tightly cut back to reduce the fire hazard.

Since its closure in 1970, the banks have been left uncut and have developed into an interesting mix of woodland. In 1980, North Devon District Council purchased from British Rail, two sections of line, Barnstaple to Braunton and Lee Bridge to Ilfracombe to create a series of public footpaths and a nature reserve. The Cairn and Railway Nature Reserve was originally managed by Devon Wildlife Trust, however today it is managed by the Council themselves. Over the next twenty years these paths have been upgraded by Devon County Council to form a cycleway. As previously mentioned, sections of the former railway now form part of the Devon Coast to Coast cycle route (Plymouth to Ilfracombe), taking in the Tarka Trail cycleway and forming part of the National Cycle Network.

Directions 15

Continue another 750m down the cycleway until you arrive at another structure that is a legacy of the railway days. This is the Slade tunnels, a twin bore masonry tunnel of 63m (69 yards) in length.

Stop number: 15

Title: A busy Railway

Location: Slade Tunnels

Topic: The Railway

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. One of the origins for this was the fact that whilst built by the London and South Western Railway (LSWR), from 1887 onwards operation of the line was shared with Great Western Railway (GWR). During the 1800’s there had been fierce competition between different railway companies the LSWR and GWR vying for lines in the South West. Both had routes into Barnstaple, the GWR running from Taunton to Barnstaple and the LSWR running along the surviving “Tarka Line” from Exeter to Barnstaple. Originally the GWR had proposed their own route to Ilfracombe but this had been rejected. As a result an agreement was reached in 1887 to link the two rival stations in Barnstaple and for both companies to share passenger services along the Ilfracombe line. It meant travellers could catch a GWR train from Paddington station in London and arrive in Barnstaple via a completely different route to those on the Waterloo line. (Trains from the Midlands were usually operated by the GWR)

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 and bringing 10,000 people to the resort every Saturday during the summer months.

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. In the end the line fell victim to the so called 'Beeching Cuts' and was forced to close in 1970, much to the detriment of Ilfracombe town.

The tunnel is of interest as it was the most challenging part of the ascent out of Ilfracombe, in winter months the dampness in the tunnel meant the rails were slippery. Hauling a large passenger train up a 1:36 bank was difficult, and more so in the tunnel. If the wheels turned too fast the wheels would slip and the train would lose momentum. Too slow a turn and the train may also lose momentum. It was always a source of embarrassment for train drivers if they had to back down to the station and try again!

Directions 16

Continue through the tunnel and follow down to the original terminus of the line. After about 1km the path breaks to the right and goes around a large factory complex. As you walk around pause for a moment.

Stop number: 16

Title: The end of the line

Location: Pall Ilfracombe site

Topic: Ilfracombe Station

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 68m(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 an engine shed. A 21m (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.

When the station closed in 1970, it was quickly converted into a factory by Pall Europe who remain in business today selling filtration systems. The factory is one of the largest employers in Ilfracombe.

The wooded hill behind, is the Cairn Local Nature Reserve. A hundred years ago it was a rough grass and gorse covered hill. In 1911 the local Council planted the whole 19 acres with a mixture of deciduous and conifer trees including some very rare lime trees and converted the area into a country park and nature reserve with numerous pathways running over the hillside.

Today the area is a haven for wildlife and is managed as a nature reserve, through which the public are at liberty to wander.

From Cairn Top there are magnificent views of Ilfracombe, the surrounding sea and parts of the North Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty including the ‘Seven Sister’ hills which make up the Torrs, over which you walked earlier.

Directions 17

Continue following the path around the factory site until you reach the road (Station Road). Proceed down the road for 250m then turn left and walk up Richmond road. At the next crossroads turn right and walk down Belmont Road. After 250m you will be standing outside the lych gate of Ilfracombe Holy Trinity Church. Carefully cross the road and proceed to the entrance to the church.

The church is well worth a visit and is open to visitors every day except Sunday when it closes after the services.

Stop number: 17

Title: Grandest Church

Location: Holy Trinity church

Topic: The Parish Church

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, being 34m (113 feet) long. It is notable for the decorated ceiling in the central aisle, complete with carved corbels surmounted by medieval angels and fine ceiling bosses. It boasts the largest collection of Victorian stained glass in Devon and 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 being one for Captain Richard Bowen who was one of Nelsons trusted ship’s commanders. Killed in Teneriffe in 1797 in the same action in which Nelson lost his arm, he also inspired the famous Captain Hornblower novels by C S Forrester.

In 1895 Victorian historian JLW Page wrote in his book the Coasts of Devon:

“You can live as long as you like in comb, but you must go somewhere else to die’ such is the local proverb, and the tombstones certainly show that. If the people of Ilfracombe are not immortal, many of them live to an age far beyond that usually allotted to man. Witness the list of centenarians at the eastern end of the church, some of them 100, one is 107. Therefore Ilfracombe should be a very, healthy place, for where the houses along the front face northward and westward, the air is fresh and bracing, whilst in Torrs park the climate is mild due to its southern aspect”

Directions 18

Leave the main church building and turn left and proceed around the building, at the lower end of the church look for a path which leaves the churchyard passing a stone building to your right. On reaching 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. Then keeping the supermarket on your left, continue until you reach the traffic lights then turn left into Runnacleave road, then stop outside the Bathhouse (white building in front of you).

Stop number: 18

Title: The healthiest of all watering places

Location: Bath house entrance

Topic: Taking the Waters

Due to the rising Victorian interest in ‘taking the waters’ local people recognised the need for provision of indoor bathing. In 1836 the Ilfracombe Sea Bathing Company erected an elegant new bath-house with a labyrinth of both hot and cold sea water baths which were available for health and hygiene.

Sea water 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.

Ilfracombe and its baths were said to be *“ideal for invalids, waifs and strays from the heat of India, worn-out clergymen... and to people, whether young or old, whose ailments arise mainly from want of stamina and general lack of tone”*

The entrance to the Tunnels beaches is located just to the right of the Bath House and as previously described, they were created in 1823 by a local entrepreneur using Welsh miners as labourers. Today you can still visit these impressive tunnels and beaches, now as in Victorian times, by paying a small toll to enter.

Directions 19

Continue along Runnacleave Road passing the Carlton Hotel on your left. After about 80m, 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 and proceed down a narrow road towards the Landmark Theatre. After 100 metres you will enter a car park and arrive outside the Ilfracombe Museum

Stop number: 19

Title: Nearly there

Location: The Ilfracombe Museum

Topic: Ilfracombe Museum

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, this historic building houses unimaginable finds - from a shrunken head to a collection of pickled bats! First opened in August 1932, the original curator was Mervyn G Palmer. He was a keen

naturalist, who started it following his explorations in South America collecting butterflies for the British Museum.

The museum is one of the most popular in Devon and in 1993 won the prestigious Blue Peter Museum of the Year Award.

It houses many collections that celebrate Ilfracombe heritage and has exhibitions on the Victorian Marine Collectors (The Science of the Seaside), the old railway line, and Lundy Island. It is home to a large collection of stuffed birds, something of a rarity in modern times and it also has a Brass Rubbing Centre. In addition, it has an immense archive of rare documents and photographs, some dating back to Victorian times.

On the outside of the building, there are a couple of artefacts which stand as testament to the heritage of Ilfracombe and its importance as a seaside resort. The level gradient marker for the stretch of line that is 1:36 is a good example of Victorian engineering and the old Southern Railways station board which stood on the main platform at Ilfracombe station.

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 25m away.

Directions 20

Proceed up the ramp and return to the front of the Landmark Theatre. On your way there, you may wish to spend some time in the Runnacleave Gardens, which replaced the original lawns and tennis courts of the Ilfracombe Hotel

Stop number: 20

Title: The Grandest of them all

Location: Top end of the steps

Topic: The Ilfracombe Hotel.

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 Old 'Victorian pavilion' on nearby Capstone, providing a theatre, café, function room and Tourist Information Centre, managed by The North Devon Theatres' Trust - a registered charity promoting the arts in North Devon. It hosts performances and events in this stunning seaside location. The architectural design of the building was a widely debated topic within the community when it was built, which questioned its ability to mould in with the surrounding Victorian era buildings.

What do you think, now you have observed the area from a variety of angles?

The old Ilfracombe Hotel originally stood here, which was once a grand representative landmark to the town's Victorian architecture. Centrally located with excellent views, the hotel for some time was one of the most palatial in North Devon. It had 210 rooms including some especially designed for those with physical impairments. The area also included a magnificent ballroom, five tennis courts, a heated swimming pool, putting greens and a croquet lawn. Four years after it was built in 1871 a west wing was built adding some more rooms. Royalty known to have visited are the 19 year old Crown Prince 'Frederic William of Prussia' in 1878. He checked in under a pseudonym of Count Von Valingen and spent a week

exploring the area, his favourite haunt being 'Raperee Cove', which lies opposite the harbour at the base of Hillsborough.

Local legend has it that one day not content with swimming, the Prince thought up a little game involving the unused changing rooms, numbers and rocks, whereby he aimed and threw stones on his chosen target. Apparently, this did not go down well with the owner's son 'Alfred Price', who wasn't amused by his father's property being abused in such a manner and politely asked him to stop. When the Prince replied with 'Do you know who I am'? Alfred did not care who he was and told him so and with that they came to blows. They fought for twenty minutes while Alfred's father and brother-in-law observed, secretly cheering him on. They were eventually spilt up by one of the Princes tutors who happened to be passing by, but not before young Alfred had given the Prince a 'bloody nose'. According to legend, the Prince left shortly after this ordeal thoroughly disgusted about how he had been treated and promised to return for revenge. The story became popular and a poem was printed entitled "Tapping the War Lords Claret" in order to raise funds during the World War 1 to aid the soldiers at the Front. By this time Frederic William had become Kaiser Wilhelm, Emperor of Germany. This is just one of many of the folklore stories that make up the rich history of Ilfracombe and one that can truly be celebrated in verse as 'Kaiser Bill' did declare war on England.

If you look over the wall on the seaward side, where a car park now exists, you will see the site where the hotel swimming baths used to be. The Town Council took over the baths when the owners of the hotel began to struggle with the upkeep. They also took over the tennis courts, part of the promenade and refurbished part of the building as council offices. During the Second World War, the hotel became the residence of the Royal Army Corps and later a brewery, but due to its diminishing state the tough decision was made to have it demolished in 1976. The only remaining building is the old laundry, which has been the town's museum since 1932. Finally, the old swimming baths were closed in the late 1970's to be replaced with a new pool on the lower slopes of Hillsborough.

Stop number: End

Title: Journey's End

Location: The Landmark Theatre

Topic: Ilfracombe's Fall and Rise

On the walk we have experienced much of how Ilfracombe developed in the 19th Century. Some of this development has been lost, but the town still retains much of its Victorian heritage.

We have talked about the rise of Ilfracombe as a Victorian seaside resort and the legacy that this has left on the landscape. Not just in terms of the buildings, but the areas of green space such as Hillsborough, Capstone and the Torrs that were deliberately managed for the purposes of health, exercise, enjoyment and conservation. An idea quite advanced at the time, it would be another 50 years before legislation was produced to protect special landscapes such as AONBs and National Parks.

Ilfracombe, like many traditional seaside resorts all over Britain, has suffered with the advent of the motor car and the ease and cost of overseas travel and the fortunes of this once famous resort began to decline after the war. There was a brief period of affluence during the 1950's following the austerity of the War years and was perhaps the swansong in terms of its popularity.

The closure of the railway in 1970 struck at the very heart of the town, whose tourist accommodation was based on grand hotels and guest houses rather than self-catering apartments and caravans seen today. In addition, the golden sandy beaches of the North Devon Coast at Woolacombe and Croyde now capture the holiday maker in the way that Ilfracombe's tiny but rocky beaches used to do. Ilfracombe has never had the miles of golden sands found elsewhere along the coast and as a result loses out when tourists flock to North Devon in the summer.

However, Ilfracombe still remains popular with many visitors, utilising the natural harbour for boat trips and seaside activities. New buildings and artworks, such as Damien Hirst's 'Verity' statue are beginning to appear. There are signs that Ilfracombe is slowly returning to those former days and although it is changing it is still proud of its heritage celebrated during Victorian Week every year in June.

For a shorter, summarised account of this walk please download the 'Short Version'