

## Walk No. 56 BEER TO THE VICARAGE

On the south eastern coast of Devon lies the village of Beer. This part of the County is characterised by high plateaux cut by steep valleys leading to the sea. Along the shore below the high cliffs are large-scale landslips known as “undercliffs”. These are a result of the unstable geology and have great value as havens for wildlife.

Beer is at the mouth of one of the narrow valleys leading to the coast. This walk climbs up to the plateau west of the village and crosses to the next valley westward, at Branscombe. It returns to Beer along the South West Coast Path over the cliff tops, immediately above one of the undercliffs.

The walk gives a good introduction to the Dorset and East Devon Coast World Heritage Site. Often referred to as the “Jurassic Coast”, this is England’s first natural World Heritage Site, important for displaying 185 million years of earth history in just 95 miles. The coast actually displays not just Jurassic but also older Triassic and newer Cretaceous rocks too. In fact, this walk is actually over Cretaceous geology at Beer and Triassic at Branscombe.

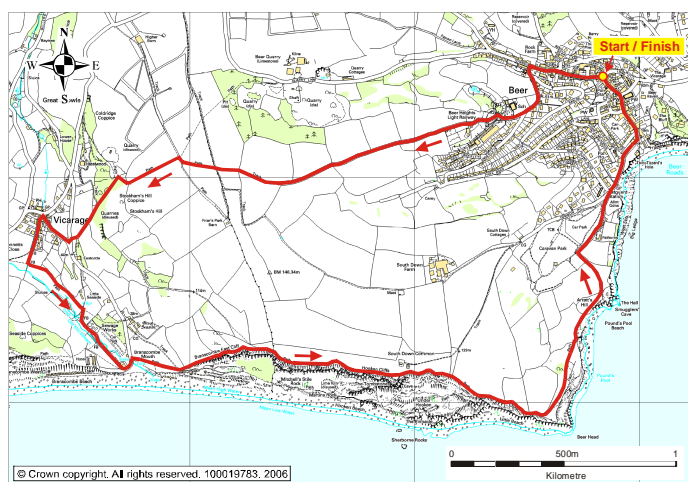
### Fact File

Beer may be reached by bus from Exeter, Seaton, Sidmouth and Lyme Regis. For timetable details contact Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit [www.traveline.org.uk](http://www.traveline.org.uk). There is also a car park in the village centre and a large one on the cliff top.

Walk Length: 8km/5 miles; there are 3 stiles; there are a couple of steep climbs on this walk – one short and sharp of 55m/180 feet and another steep cliff climb of 130m/430 feet.

Facilities: Beer: All facilities;  
Branscombe: Pub;  
Branscombe Mouth: Toilets, café, shop, car park.

### The Walk



The walk starts at The Cross, at the top of Fore Street in Beer. This is where the bus stops. If you have parked in the village car park walk down to the main village street (Fore Street) and turn left, passing the church and the Mariners’ Hall, to arrive at The Cross. From the cliff top car park, return downhill to the village and walk to the top of Fore Street.

Beer has been a fishing centre since Tudor times and fishing remained an important source of income until the 1950s. Indeed, in the early 20th Century it was the third most important fishing port in Devon. This income was in early days supplemented by smuggling. Beer was the home of perhaps Devon’s most famous smuggler, Jack Rattenbury, who later reformed and in 1837 published his memoirs.

Beer was also one of the centres of the East Devon lace-making industry, brought to the area by Flemish immigrants in the 1500s. Part of Queen Victoria’s wedding dress was made of Beer lace and in the mid 19th Century there were 400 registered lace-makers in the area.

**From The Cross walk away from the village centre along Causeway.**

Notice the pump or conduit head sitting over the stream which runs down the village street, dating from the 18th Century. On the right is Starre House, one of the oldest in Beer, dating from the 1500s.

**At the road junction at the end continue ahead.**

Just beyond the junction on the right is a row of almshouses. These attractive buildings date from 1820, when they were built by Lady Rolle of the local estate.

**Continue up the road then turn left at the next road, Mare Lane, and start to climb quite steeply. Walk through a residential area then, as the gradient begins to ease, bear right at the fork, still called Mare Lane, signposted to Pecorama Pleasure Gardens.**

Back to the left the deep cleft in which the village of Beer sits can be seen leading to the coast.

**Climb Mare Lane and then, approaching Pecorama, bear right along the footpath to the coach and car park.**

Beer has never been on the national rail network, but does have its own station, Beer Victoria, passed here on the left. This is part of Pecorama, a centre of model rail layouts, a 7¼" light railway, children's and adults' activity areas and landscaped gardens. It also has a restaurant and refreshments in the Pullman Car at the station.

**At the entrance to the car park bear left along the hedged green lane, still climbing although more gently now.**

This is still Mare Lane, and gives an idea of the original scale of the first part of the lane.

**Continue on the green lane past the overflow car park.**

Beer has now been left behind, and Mare Lane leads into a quiet and attractive countryside. To the left are views over a deep valley to South Down Farm on the skyline. A vantage point near the top of the lane gives a splendid view back to the coast beyond Seaton to the largest of the undercliffs along this coast.

**Eventually, Mare Lane loses its southern hedge and becomes a field edge path.**

The walk has now arrived on the plateau west of Beer. Over to the right, beyond the visible hedgerow on the far side of the field, are Beer Quarry Caves. These are not accessible from here, but must be reached from the minor road between Beer and Branscombe. They date back to Roman times and were last used in the 1920s. Use of Beer stone was widespread in medieval times and almost every East Devon church, and many beyond, used Beer stone. Most notably it was used in Exeter and Winchester cathedrals. All the stone was cut by hand and the roofs of the caves are supported by uncut rock. The caves are open to the public during the summer.

**Follow the field edge path to the end of the field, then the obvious path ahead on the left-hand side of the next field. At the end of this field go through a kissing gate and cross diagonally to another gate.**

From here, looking back to the right can be seen more modern quarries associated with the caves. These were opened in the 1880s to produce lime for burning as fertiliser.

**Go through the next kissing gate, turn right then immediately left, alongside the hedge. At the end of the field climb the stile on the right and follow the path down through the wood.**

The next valley cutting into the plateau has now been reached, that of Branscombe.

**The path descends through the trees to a junction at a stile. Do not cross but bear left downhill, alongside the fence. Further down pass another stile; again, do not cross but continue ahead downhill.**

Part of Branscombe and its valley are now visible down to the right. The valley is very picturesque, and the village is scattered along it in a series of separate little hamlets. Below is part of the hamlet of Vicarage.

**Keep next to the fence and cross a stile to descend towards the valley bottom. The path goes down quite steeply to arrive at a narrow lane. Turn left here to another lane. At this lane turn right – be careful on this lane as it can be quite busy in summer.**

**The lane leads down to the Branscombe hamlet of Vicarage, passing the building which presumably gave it its name. At the bottom is the village square and, just beyond, the Masons Arms pub, hotel and restaurant.**

The Masons Arms is a pub renowned locally and, indeed, further afield, for its cuisine. As a public hostelry it can trace its origins back to the 17th Century.

**Arriving at the square turn sharp left and back, past the “no through road” sign. The road becomes a track, then a footpath. Pass through a kissing gate and over a footbridge and then fork left at a path junction. Then go left again over another footbridge.**

The walk has now reached the bottom of the Branscombe valley. Up to the right is another of the village's hamlets, that with the church, school and village hall.

**Follow the path along the valley floor away from the village. Keep to the main path to arrive at the sea at Branscombe Mouth, with its café, shop and toilets.**

This is a good spot to recharge the batteries, while contemplating the climb back up the cliff to the plateau top to return to Beer.

**Pass in front of the shop and café, cross the stream and go through the kissing gate.**

The first part of the climb up the edge of the field follows the South West Coast Path, but at the top of the first field the Coast Path forks right to pass through a caravan site and then the Hooken Undercliff, one of the cliff falls along this length of coast.

**Our walk keeps to the field edge up the cliff, through a gate. The next steep field leads to a long flight of steps which emerge on the cliff top.**

Looking back from the top can be seen the hamlet of Vicarage, with the Branscombe valley climbing up to the church. Note how the valley actually trends parallel to the coast rather than at right angles to it.

**Continue along the cliff top to the old coastguard lookout.**

Down the cliff to the right is the jumble of broken ground of the Hooken Undercliff. This was formed one night in March 1790 when ten acres of cliff land dropped 60-80m/200-250 feet vertically and also slumped 200m/220 yards seawards. Notable are some stacks of chalk still standing which withstood the cliff movement.

**After passing the old coastguard lookout, keep alongside the cliff-top fence and head for the prominent white outcrop of Beer Head.**

Just before Beer Head will be seen the line of the South West Coast Path climbing steeply out of the undercliff to join the cliff top path. Our walk now follows the Coast Path back to Beer.

Beer Head and its surroundings form the most westerly chalk outcrop in England. Associated with the chalk is flint, also the most westerly occurrence in England, and the source of prehistoric flint tools found throughout the south west. Possibly associated with this, remains of a prehistoric field system have also been found here.

As the path rounds Beer Head, there are superb views ahead over Seaton Bay. Beyond Seaton is a good view of another, even larger, undercliff. This, the Axmouth-Lyme Regis Undercliff, resulted from a large cliff collapse in 1839.

**Follow the Coast Path to arrive at a surfaced green lane which passes a caravan site and then Beer's cliff top car park. At the end of the green lane continue down the hill ahead (Common Lane) into Beer. To return to the start, turn inland at the Anchor Inn into Fore Street. For the village car park, turn left at the Dolphin and for the bus stop continue past the church to The Cross.**

#### 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 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 DP33.

For information on the wider network of walking routes in Devon, obtain the free leaflet "Discover Devon – Walking" from local Tourist Information Centres or from the above address. Alternatively, visit the website [www.discoverdevon.com](http://www.discoverdevon.com) which has all the walks information and an order form.

For information on Pecorama telephone 01297 21542 or visit the website [www.peco-uk.com](http://www.peco-uk.com). Information on Beer Quarry Caves is obtained from 01297 680282.

OS Maps for this walk:-

Landranger (1:50,000 scale) No. 192 Exeter and Sidmouth  
Explorer (1:25,000 scale) No. 116 Lyme Regis and Bridport (most of the walk)  
No. 115 Exmouth and Sidmouth (Branscombe)