

COUNT TO A THOUSAND

Some of the highest cliffs in England are found on the Exmoor coast in North Devon. At Countisbury, a little way to the east of Lynton and Lynmouth, a point of 302m, or virtually 1,000 feet, is reached at Butter Hill. This walk is based on Lynmouth and takes you to Countisbury by a (relatively) pain free route, returning via the South West Coast Path.

Lynton and Lynmouth are situated, one above the other, in some of the most dramatic landscapes in Devon, with deep wooded valleys, or “cleaves”, cutting through the high land of Exmoor to meet the sea at Lynmouth. The two towns are, not surprisingly, the centre of many local walks. They are also situated on the South West Coast Path and on the Tarka Trail, a 180 mile walk following the wanderings of Tarka the Otter in the book of that name.

Also, if you happen to notice walkers being photographed dipping their boots in the sea at Lynmouth, this is because the town is the northern end of Devon’s Coast to Coast walk formed primarily by the Two Moors Way with an additional link to the south coast.

Fact File

The walk starts and finishes at Lynmouth, which is accessible by bus from Barnstaple and, less regularly, from Minehead and Taunton. For timetable details contact Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit www.traveline.org.uk. There are car parks at Lynmouth and also at Lynton, which is connected to Lynmouth by a scenic cliff railway,

Walk Length: 6.5km/4m; one stile; note that as the walk climbs virtually a thousand feet (300m) and then descends the same distance you need to be reasonably fit – however both the climb and descent are long and graded and do not involve any severe gradients.

Facilities: Lynmouth has all facilities; there is a pub at Countisbury.

The Walk

Start the walk by the little harbour in Lynmouth.

The harbour was built in the 18th century for the herring fishing industry, important at the time. Not long afterwards the town was being discovered as an “exotic” location by the romantic poets. Shelley had a cottage here in 1812 and both Southey and Coleridge were enthusiastic in their praise for the town. Note the so called Rhenish Tower, built in imitation of similar towers on the Rhine and used to store water for the indoor baths.

Walk alongside the harbour, keeping it on your left. Pass the footbridge and continue ahead – it is now the river on your left, the Lyn. At the road bridge cross the main road and keep on ahead on the footpath between the river and the car park.

At the bridge is the confluence of the East and West Lyn Rivers. The great flood disaster of August 1952 occurred when torrents of water swept down the two valleys following hours of torrential rain, sweeping away almost everything in the valleys. The flood resulted in the loss of 31 lives.

Just past the end of the car park cross the river on the footbridge and turn right on the far side, continuing next to the river.

This is the East Lyn. It is formed by the combination of two moorland rivers, Oare Water and Badgworthy Water, high on Exmoor. The valley of Badgworthy Water is known in literature as the valley of the Doones in R.D Blackmore’s classic “Lorna Doone”. The erosive power of the river over the ages can be seen from the depth and steepness of the valley, or “cleave”, it has cut ahead.

Keep on alongside the river and when the lane ends at a little parking area continue on the footpath into East Lyn Cleave.

The cleave is a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest, primarily because of its importance as an area of ancient oak woodland, one of the largest remaining areas of semi natural ancient woodland in the South West.

Pass the end of a footbridge and continue alongside the river.

The power and speed of the river can be exhilarating when the path comes close alongside. It is perhaps surprising that the valley once was the site of industry – along this stretch was one of Britain's first hydro-electric power stations until it was destroyed in the 1952 disaster. Also destroyed were the disused works of a mineral water factory. Some remains of these old buildings are still just discernible on the path.

The path then climbs steadily away from the river, though still parallel to it. Look out for a fork in the path. The right hand fork goes downhill back towards the river, but for this walk take the left-hand fork, which continues to rise steadily.

The path climbs through the oak woodland, up the side of the cleave.

After a while the path levels out and there is then another fork. Take the left hand fork, the grassier of the two paths, rising again.

The steady climb continues, the trees now less dense as height is gained. Notice the thick covering of lichen on many of the trunks, a good sign of clean air.

Keep climbing. After a while the path is joined by another path coming in from the left, an alternative route to and from Lynmouth.

This is known as Arnold's Linhay path. A linhay is an animal shelter and Arnold is said to have pastured mules and donkeys in paddocks around here in the 19th century.

Eventually the path stops climbing and emerges from the trees. Far below, to the right and back, can be seen and heard the East Lyn River. The sinuous shapes of the wooded cleaves cutting deeply into the surrounding high land can also be seen from here. Immediately below the path on the right is a side valley of the East Lyn, known as Chiselcombe. Scree can be seen in this valley, probably the southern-most example in England of material deposited by glaciers in the last Ice Age. The scree gives the valley its name, "Chisel" being a Saxon word for gravel, or rocky ground.

Continue ahead along the path towards the now visible hamlet of Countisbury. Near the top of the combe is a junction of paths by a seat. Go right here, signed to Watersmeet, and then left by the pond, through the gate, then alongside the fence to a stile to the road next to the National Trust outdoor centre and the Exmoor Sandpiper Inn.

The Inn dates to the early or mid 1600s, and may possibly incorporate an even earlier core. It has been partially rebuilt and extended many times in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. It has always occupied an important location as a staging post at the top of the extremely steep Countisbury Hill out of Lynmouth.

Carefully cross the road here, and then turn down the "no through road" signed to Countisbury Church, immediately after the pub car park. Bear left at the top, into the churchyard.

The small and atmospheric parish church of Countisbury is well worth paying a visit. Probably of medieval origin, the current church is largely the result of 18th and 19th century rebuilding. It occupies a splendid location on the cliffs.

Emerging from the church, follow the path round to the right to a gate leading onto open land (if not visiting the church, take the path that goes around it to the left). Pass through the gate then follow the grassy path ahead and slightly right towards the high point. This leads to a superb viewpoint.

The seat here is at the highest point on the walk, 270m or 890 feet above sea level. The view down the coast to Lynton and Lynmouth is absolutely wonderful, and well worth the climb. The high point just above the seat, Butter Hill, at 302m or 997 feet is the highest point on the South West Coast Path and among the highest cliffs in England.

From here the Coast Path is followed back to Lynmouth – signs and acorn waymarks help show the way.

Retrace steps towards the church then bear right along the grassy path parallel to the coast, towards Lynmouth. Follow the path as it continues along a stone wall, then on steadily downhill.

Countisbury is the site of prehistoric hill forts, both east and west of the church and pub, and is also said to be the site of a defeat of the invading Danes by the Saxons in 878. The relationship of Lynton and Lynmouth, the former sitting on its hill above the latter, is easily seen from here and the gash in the cliff face of the cliff railway is also obvious. There are also superb views of the cliffs, both ahead and back towards Countisbury.

The path descends past a World War 2 lookout point, with its hut and searchlight bases and, after a brief climb, continues to descend. Towards the bottom of the hill the path arrives at the A39 road. Because there is no room on the cliff face, the path uses the lay-by then a verge next to the road. After a while the path leaves the road and descends through woodland via a couple of zig-zags to emerge behind the beach on the east side of Lynmouth.

It is well worth looking up the cliff from the beach to see just how high the walk reached and how much you have descended.

Follow the path to the left towards the harbour.

This is a good location to appreciate the cliff railway. Opened in 1890, it was originally intended to carry freight brought in by sea to Lynmouth harbour. It was financed by Sir George Newnes, a famous publisher who lived locally. It rises 131m, or 430 feet, at a gradient of 1 in 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ and is powered by the weight of 700 gallons of water in a tank beneath the descending car, which is discharged when it reaches the bottom. When the other car reaches the top, its own tank is filled, a simple but effective system.

Cross the footbridge over the Lyn and turn right to return to the harbour.

Further Information

A range of information is available on the South West Coast Path. Especially useful is the guidebook 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. Quote reference DP33 and make cheques payable to Devon County Council. There is also a free introductory leaflet on the Coast Path, available from the same address – quote reference DP86.

There is also a National Trust leaflet “Walks at Watersmeet and Countisbury”, available from National Trust outlets price £0.75.

For information on the wider network of walking routes in Devon, including the Two Moors Way/Coast to Coast Walk and the Tarka Trail, both of which reach Lynmouth, obtain the free

leaflet "Discover Devon – Walking" from local Tourist Information Centres or the above address. Alternatively, there are details on the website www.discoverdevon.com.

OS maps for this walk:

Explorer (1:25,000 scale)
Landranger (:50,000 scale)

no OL9 Exmoor
no 180 Barnstaple and Ilfracombe.