

TARKA WITH A PRIESTLY CONNECTION

The Tarka Trail is a long-distance footpath route following a figure-of-eight course throughout northern Devon some 180 miles/290km in length. It traces the route taken by Tarka the Otter in the famous 1920s book by Henry Williamson. Over substantial lengths, the Trail follows former railway lines and is therefore promoted as a cycle route as well as a walking route, and these lengths are therefore also suitable for the less mobile, those pushing buggies, wheelchair use and the like.

A good centre as a base for using the Tarka Trail, and especially these more accessible lengths, is the town of Torrington, some 12 miles/20km inland of Bideford. Indeed, since in the book Tarka was born and dies near Torrington, in some senses it is the beginning and end of the Trail.

This walk forms a circular based on Torrington Station, which is about a mile/1.5km out of the town. It follows a level, former railway element of the Tarka Trail at the beginning and end of the walk, joining the two with a slightly more taxing cross-country section through a series of locations with historic religious connections. Those who do not wish to follow the cross-country route can still sample some superb Tarka country landscape by following the Tarka Trail in either direction, or both, from the station for many miles.

Fact File

Torrington has good bus links to Bideford, Barnstaple, Okehampton, Plymouth and Exeter, as well as smaller towns and villages in northern Devon. Most of these pass the station. For timetable details call Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit www.traveline.org.

Walk Length: 7.5 miles/12km; 4 stiles; two climbs - one long and steady of 200ft/60m and one shorter of 80ft/25m - neither are really steep. The stiles and climbs are both on the cross country section.

Facilities: Torrington has all facilities; Torrington station has a pub, ice-creams, bike hire and car parking; Frithelstock has a pub; Monkleigh has a pub and post office. There are car parks at Watergate Halt and at the bottom of the lane from Monkleigh.

The Walk

Start on the old railway line next to the platform at Torrington Station. Follow the Trail under the road bridge at one end of the station, heading south.

The railway from Bideford to Torrington was built in 1872 as an extension of the line into North Devon from Exeter, and for many years Torrington was the terminus with a direct link to London. The length beyond, which our walk is now following, was originally built as a narrow gauge line to carry out clay from the pits further inland, but was replaced in 1925 by a standard gauge line which was also used for passenger traffic. The whole length beyond Bideford closed to passengers in 1965, although clay continued to be carried until 1982. When that traffic also went, the line was acquired by Devon County Council for use as a cycle and walkway.

The Trail soon emerges onto a viaduct which crosses a road and then the River Torridge.

The earlier narrow gauge line used a smaller trestle viaduct here. The present splendid structure was built in 1925 when the line became standard gauge.

The road over which the viaduct passes marks the line of a former canal. This, the Rolle Canal, was built for the local landowner Lord Rolle between 1820 and 1824 and stretched for 7.5 miles/12 km between the tidal Torridge and a little upstream of Torrington. It was

abandoned with the coming of the railway in the 1870s, some of its course being used for the railway.

The viaduct gives a splendid view of the river. Upstream can be seen the road bridge built in 1928, and beyond the medieval Rothern Bridge dating from the 1400s.

Follow the Trail on the old railway as it enters a narrow wooded valley.

This is the valley of Langtree Lake, a tributary of the Torridge. Note that the name does not imply the presence of a large body of water. In Devon, the name "lake" is often used for a stream or watercourse, being a descendant of the Saxon word of that meaning, "lacu".

This is a splendidly scenic valley. Continue for about 1.5 miles/2.5km until the Trail crosses Langtree Lake and then arrives at the platform of the former Watergate Halt. Go through the gate to the road and turn right. About 30 yards/m. along the road turn right up a track signed as a public footpath.

Our walk now leaves the Tarka Trail to embark on the cross-country section. It now follows a length of the Torridge Ramblers Millennium Path (TRAMP), which is generally well waymarked. This is a 20 mile/32km circular route around Torrington, set up by the local ramblers for the millennium.

Follow the path as it climbs steadily through trees to arrive at a gap in a hedge ahead at the bottom corner of a field. Go through the gap and continue ahead, hedge on the left, then bear slightly right to go through another gap with a gate. Continue ahead, hedge on the left again. Go through the gate at the end of this field and turn left.

This is the farm of Priestacott, the first of the locations on the route with historic religious connections. Its name seems to indicate it was founded by, or at least was inhabited by, a clergyman in early days. It may well have been associated with the old priory at Frithelstock, to be passed later on the walk.

The spot also gives superb views back over the wooded valley of Langtree Lake, now 200ft/60m below.

Turning left from the gate, follow the track past the old farm buildings, through another gate and round to the right to arrive at a surfaced line. Turn right here. When the lane swings to the right leave it and go through the gate on the left on a signed public footpath. Follow the left hand side of this field.

On the private lane is another farm, Pryston, its name indicating yet another priestly habitation in bygone days.

Keep on round the edge of the field, passing one gate, to a stile and gate where a track starts. Cross the stile, or go through the gate, on the left, descend slightly to a gate by a stream then cross the field ahead on the line of a grassy track. At the end follow the hedge ahead then round to the right at the corner of the field.

This high and airy length gives wide views over the countryside, including a view over Torrington ahead in the distance, its church spire quite prominent.

Just before the end of the field look out for a stile on the left and cross this into the next field. Head diagonally right across this field, cross the brow of the hill and descend to a gate next to a cottage. Go through to the road and turn right.

Take some care on this road, as it does carry a certain amount of local traffic.

The route leaves the road along the footpath on the left just after the farm buildings beyond the Frithelstock village sign. However, it is worth continuing for the couple of hundred yards along the road into Frithelstock village to see the important historic remains of Frithelstock

Priory. Another priestly connection on the walk, this was founded by the Augustinians in 1229, as a subsidiary of Hartland Abbey. Dissolved by Henry VIII in 1536 it has been slowly crumbling away ever since.

If in need of refreshment, Frithelstock can also offer help in the form of a pub, the Clinton Arms.

Return along the road and turn down the track next to the farm buildings at the end of the village, cross the stile and follow the hedge ahead. Go through the next gate and follow the hedge downhill.

The village of Monkleigh, its church tower prominent, now dominates the view ahead.

Cross the stile in the bottom corner of the field, cross the footbridge, then climb to two gates, passing through the left hand of the two. Climb alongside the hedge to the gate at the top corner. Pass through onto the road and turn left; 200 metres/220 yards up the road go through the gate on the right at a public footpath sign and cross the field.

With Monkleigh now close ahead, this area gives wide views over the countryside, Torrington being again especially prominent.

Go through the gate on the opposite side of the field then bear half right to a stile on the hedge corner. Cross this and go along the edge of the field, hedge to your left. Follow the field edge round to the right, then almost immediately bear off left, through a gate and across a field to arrive at Monkleigh next to the village hall. Turn left to a road junction.

Monkleigh was originally simply called "Leigh". In the 1100s it was granted to the monks of Montacute Abbey in Somerset and the name was lengthened to avoid confusion with other places called "Leigh". Another priestly connection on the walk, but no actual connection with Frithelstock or the priests' houses passed earlier.

The church, a little way to the right, is very old, although its modern form is based on a rebuilding in the 1400s, still old enough. Its high position makes it a landmark for miles around.

If you bear left at the little road junction you will reach another pub, the Bell Inn, in the centre of the old part of the village. On the way note the date of 1627 on Holly Cottage.

At the minor road junction in the village turn right (coming from the Frithelstock direction) - signposted to Weare Giffard. Pass the village school and fork right. The road then descends into the Torridge valley, gently at first then a little more steeply, until it arrives at a small car park next to the A386 Torrington-Bideford road. Go through the underpass and climb the steps onto the old railway line of the Tarka Trail. Turn right along the Trail.

The Tarka Trail proceeds along the beautiful Torridge valley, our walk going southward and crossing the river on a number of former railway bridges as the Torridge meanders along its valley. From the first of these railway bridges can be seen, on the right, Canal Bridge, also known as Beam Aqueduct. This, as the name implies, carried the Rolle Canal over the river and was built by the well-known engineer, James Green in 1824. In the Tarka story, it was in the shadow of this aqueduct that he was born.

Continue along this superb length of former railway, crossing the Torridge twice more, to arrive back at Torrington Station.

Further Information

An information pack on the Tarka Trail is available from local Tourist Information Centres price £2. It may also be obtained from the Discover Devon Information Service, Westacott

Road, Barnstaple, EX32 8AW, telephone 0870 608 5531, price £3.50 including post and packing (quote reference DTY/DP102 and make cheques payable to Devon County Council.) There is also a free introductory leaflet available locally or the address above (quote reference DTY/DP101). A free leaflet on the Torridge Ramblers' Millennium Path (TRAMP) is also available locally.

For the wider network of walking routes in Devon obtain the free brochure "Discover Devon - Walking" from local Tourist Information Centres or the address above. Alternatively, visit the website www.discoverdevon.com which has all the relevant information.

OS maps for this walk:

Landranger (1:50,000 scale) no. 180 Barnstaple and Ilfracombe
Explorer (1:25,000 scale) no. 126 Clovelly and Hartland.