

## Walk No. 19 Tarka, the Taw and a Town Trail

A walk along the Taw Estuary using the Tarka Trail, finishing with a look at some of Barnstaple's more interesting locations.

This is a one-way walk along the old railway line which flanks the south side of the Taw Estuary in North Devon. It is based on Barnstaple, from where it is suggested you catch a bus to the start of the walk. The walk is completely flat and well surfaced, making it ideal for those who wish to take a push-chair. The good surface also makes it a good walk to do in the winter, with the opportunity to spot the birds on the estuary adding to the interest. Having returned to Barnstaple, there is an optional extra loop around the town to take in some of the more interesting locations in the town centre.

### Fact File

Barnstaple is the hub of public transport provision in North Devon, with bus services from all over the area. It is also the end of the Tarka Line branch railway from Exeter, an extremely scenic cross-country trip which itself passes through much of the country featured in the Tarka story. For train times contact National Rail Enquiries on 08457 484950; for bus timetable details contact Traveline on 0870 608 2 608.

**Walk Length:** basic route 6km/3.75 miles; with town loop 7km/4.5 miles; no stiles, no climbs.

**Facilities:** Barnstaple: all facilities  
Fremington: shops, pub  
Fremington Quay: cafe, toilets, information centre, bike hire.

Most of the walk uses part of the former railway line between Barnstaple and Bideford. This is also used for the South West Coast Path, the long-distance route which circles the entire South West Peninsula from Minehead to Poole. In addition, it is also used by the Tarka Trail, a 180 mile figure of eight route throughout northern Devon which follows the wanderings of Tarka the Otter in the book of that name. This part of the Tarka Trail also forms part of the National Cycle Network.

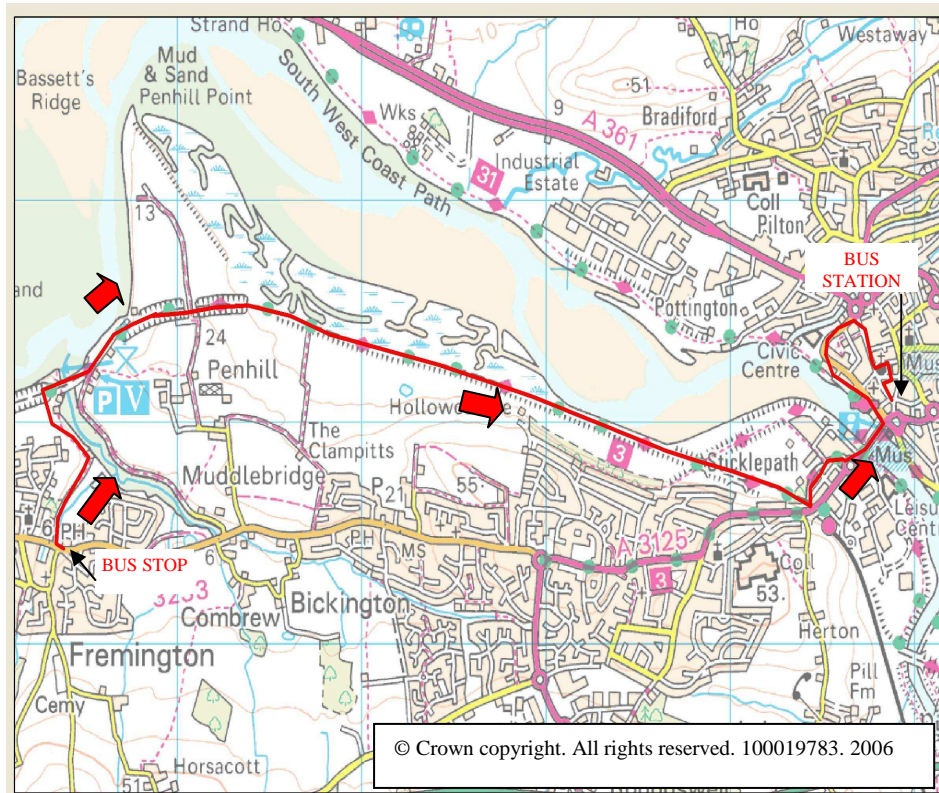
### The Walk

The walk begins at The Square, at the town end of Barnstaple Bridge, distinguished by its Albert Memorial Clock Tower of 1862.

From The Square follow signposts to the bus station. These take you into Boutport Street. Just after the pedestrianised High Street goes off to the left, turn right down the narrow Wells Street and follow this until you arrive at the bus station in Silver Street.

From the bus station in Barnstaple, take a bus to Fremington. There is a regular service, generally four buses an hour Monday - Saturday. Sunday services are less frequent, but are still at least hourly.

**Alight at Fremington village centre, near the New Inn. Cross the road and walk ahead past the Village Green. Immediately after the Green the road crosses a stream and immediately beyond that a public footpath leaves to the right, next to the stream. Follow this.**



Over the wall on the left of the path can be seen Fremington House. Now Fremington Manor Nursing Home, this imposing building was re-modelled in the 1880's for the local Yeo family. It is based on a previously existing 18th century house.

After a while the path passes between abutments, rises and then bears left to follow the edge of a substantial creek.

This is Fremington Pill, a tributary of the River Taw. In early times it was Fremington's main means of access and communication.

The footpath and parallel tracks indicate the lines of early links between the village and the Taw.

Follow the path as it descends to the former railway line at the end of the viaduct over the mouth of Fremington Pill.

An early railway was constructed to take cargo from Fremington to Barnstaple. This was in the 1840's, and originally the wagons were horse drawn. Its importance arose from the fact that the Taw had become difficult to navigate all the way to Barnstaple because of silting.

A little later a broad gauge line was laid the whole way from Barnstaple to Bideford, but it became standard gauge when it fell under the control of the London and South Western Railway in the 1860's. Later, it was extended to Torrington and later still to

Halwill, primarily to deal with clay traffic from the Marland and Petrockstowe quarries. Although passenger services stopped in the 1970's, the line continued to carry clay until the 1980's. After closure it was purchased by Devon County Council and reconstructed as a cycle and walkway.

**Follow the path across the viaduct.**

The viaduct is a vantage point for views up Fremington Pill and over the Taw Estuary. The building on the opposite bank of the Taw is Heanton Court, an 18th century rebuild of a much older building, the home of the Bassett family. On the hillside to the left can be seen the tower of Heanton Punchardon church.

**The path leads to Fremington Quay.**

As mentioned earlier, by the 19th century the silting of the Taw had made it difficult for larger boats to get to Barnstaple, and the importance of Fremington as a port increased substantially. The Quay was developed to handle this increased trade. Imports included coal for fuel and limestone for fertiliser (look for the 19th century limekiln on the left of Fremington Pill), while the main export was ball clay, brought first by road then by rail. In the mid 20th century Fremington was the biggest port in tonnage handled between Bristol and Land's End.

The old station here has now been developed into a cafe, bike hire and visitor centre, including a superb look-out over the estuary. Views encompass Heanton, Chivenor airfield and the extensive dune system of Braunton Burrows.

**At the end of the Quay keep to the right fork, through the gate. Follow the old railway through a cutting and under a stone bridge.**

The bridge carries a bridleway back to the Barnstaple - Fremington road in one direction, or to a vantage point on the estuary shore the other way. This latter is a cul-de-sac, so if you go to this point you will have to return to here.

**Keep to the trail as it emerges from the cutting to cross marshland alongside the Taw Estuary, Barnstaple now visible ahead.**

This marshland is a formally designated Site of Special Scientific Interest, of major importance for its over-wintering and migratory populations of wading birds. The total number of waders on the estuary in winter can reach more than 20,000. The marshland is also important for its range of estuarine plants, including some rarities, and for invertebrates in the mud banks.

**Just after passing a shelter made of old railway equipment the path again arrives alongside the Taw.**

Barnstaple is obvious from here, but to its left can be seen Pilton, its church tower especially prominent. Pilton is now a suburb of Barnstaple, but was once a town in

its own right, traditionally said to be older than its neighbour. It is said to be the site of one of Devon's original four Anglo-Saxon boroughs.

**Continue on the path ahead as the river swings away to the left. At a junction of paths by an information board bear left and ahead and then, at another junction by the railway bridge go left (signposted to Town Centre).**

This curving path follows the route of a railway loop which carried the line on towards Ilfracombe, crossing the Taw next to the road bridge.

**(Note: those who arrived in Barnstaple by train and wish to return direct to the station can do so by following the path under the bridge.)**

**At the end of the curving path continue ahead to the main road, then bear left and cross Barnstaple Bridge.**

The bridge here was probably originally built in the 13th century. Improved in the 1430's and again in the 1580's it has 16 stone arches, 13 of them medieval. It was last widened in the 1960's.

**This returns you to The Square. You can finish here or, alternatively, continue on an urban addition.**

**To follow this extra circuit go left, down the steps, at the far end of the bridge; at the riverside walk turn right.**

This area is the site of Barnstaple's medieval quay. On the right is the imposing facade of Queen Anne's Walk. Now Barnstaple's Heritage Centre, it was built as an Exchange on the Quay in the early 1700's.

**Continue along the quay then bear right at the Riverside Walk sign to the site of the old Barnstaple Town railway station.**

This station served the line to Ilfracombe. It was also the terminus of the Lynton and Barnstaple Railway, a narrow gauge line which operated between 1898 and 1935. A thriving Society exists to promote the history and knowledge of this railway and to attempt to re-open lengths of what was a fascinating and scenic route.

**The Coast Path and Tarka Trail continue under the arch ahead. For our circuit, turn right just after the station building, cross the road and enter the car park.**

The mound ahead is the site of Barnstaple's medieval castle. This existed by the early 12th century, an artificial mound surmounted by a stone tower with walls 10feet/3m thick, all surrounded by an outer wall. It appears to have been in some disrepair as early as the 1300's.

**Take the path to the left of the mound.**

Look at the information boards here for a detailed history of the area, which includes being tidal waste ground, a park, an ornamental lake, railway land, a car park and now a park again.

**Keep bearing right, behind the library, then go left next to the library and along Gammon Walk to the High Street.**

The High Street is of Saxon origin and bisects the area of the medieval town.

**Turn right along the High Street.**

Look out for the Guildhall on the left, dating from 1826, with the pannier market behind. In the next street on the left is Butchers Row, a purpose-built terrace of shops. These features date to wholesale street improvements undertaken in the 1850's.

**Continue along the High Street and a little further on go left through the gates to the parish church.**

The church is very attractively located. Note especially the twisted spire, dating from 1389. Take your time to look round the church and study the guide.

Just beyond the church is St. Anne's Chapel, an early 14th century building used more recently as a museum. Opposite, Church House, built as a Sunday School, is much more recent, dating from the 1890's.

**Turn right along the narrow Church Lane, just before the Chapel and Church House.**

The lane leads past Paige's Almshouses (no's 1-2), dating from 1656 and then past Horwood's Almshouses (1674) and Horwood's School. The latter, now a café, was built and established as a girls' school in 1659.

**Turn right here to return to the High Street. Now turn left, then right at the end, to return to The Square.**

### 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 Discover Devon Information Service, Westacott Rd, Barnstaple, EX32 8YR, telephone 0870 6085531, price £7.50 including p and p (cheques payable to Devon County Council). Quote reference DP 33.

Information on the Tarka Trail is available from the same address - an introductory leaflet is free (quote reference DP 101), while the comprehensive Walkers' Guide pack is £3.50, also including p and p.

Further local information is available from the Tourist Information Centre, The Square, telephone 01271 375000. Especially useful is the Barnstaple Heritage Trail Booklet (£1) and the books "Exploring Barnstaple" (£2.40) and "Devon Town Trails - North Devon" (£3.95).

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.

OS maps for this walk: Landranger (1:50,000 scale) no. 180 Barnstaple and Ilfracombe; Explorer (1:25,000 scale) no. 139 Bideford, Ilfracombe and Barnstaple.