

Walk No 40 A Common Experience With A Touch Of Glass

The town of Torrington occupies a superb position on a hilltop overlooking the River Torridge some 12 miles inland of Bideford. Indeed, Great Torrington, to give the town its formal name to distinguish it from the nearby village of Little Torrington, has been quoted as Devon's finest sited town, and the bracken-covered slopes on which it sits have led to it being referred to as "the English Jerusalem".

Torrington also has the distinction of being surrounded by large areas of commons. The commons cover some 365 acres/148 ha. They include over 20 miles of public rights of way and the public has a right to walk over the open commons.

Torrington is strategically positioned on the Tarka Trail. This long-distance footpath route forms a figure-of-eight route through northern Devon of some 180 miles, following the route taken by Tarka the Otter in the book of that name. Tarka was born and died near Torrington, so in one sense this is the beginning and end of the Trail. In addition, an off-road route suitable for cyclists and the less mobile follows a substantial length of the Tarka Trail, including the part near Torrington.

This walk forms a circular route based on the town, crossing various parts of the Torrington Commons and using a length of the Tarka Trail. While the whole circuit is only suitable for walkers, parts of the route may be used by cyclists, pushchairs or wheelchairs.

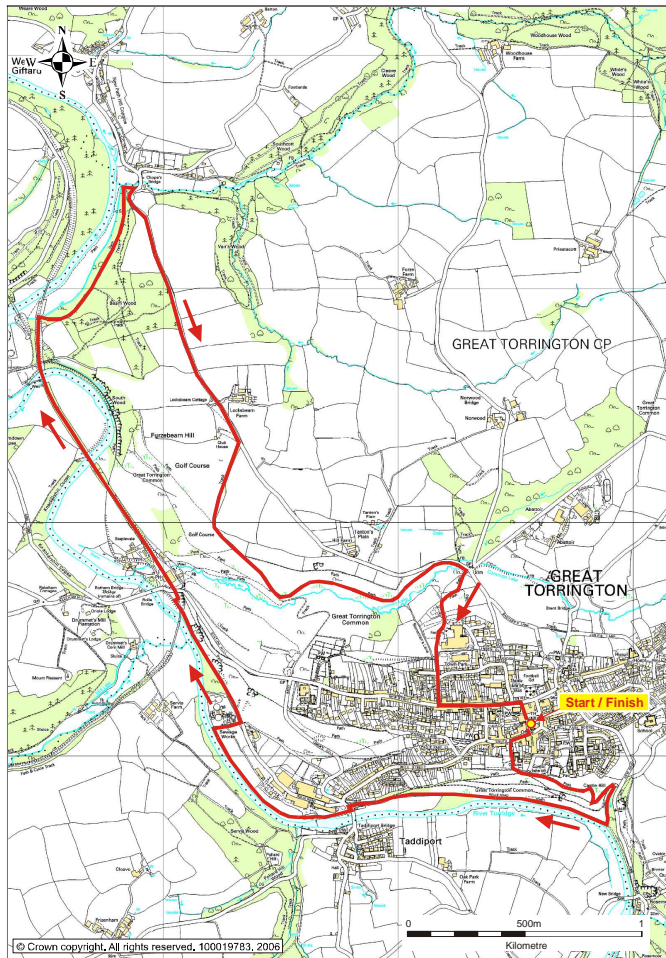
Fact File

Torrington has good bus links to Bideford, Barnstaple, Okehampton, Plymouth and Exeter, as well as smaller towns and villages in northern Devon. For timetable details call Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit www.traveline.org.uk. There are plentiful car parks.

Walk Length: 6 miles/9.5 km; 5 stiles; one long steady climb of 230ft/70m, a shorter steady climb of 130 ft/40m.

Facilities: Torrington has all facilities; there is a pub at Taddipport; at Torrington Station are cycle hire facilities, refreshments, car park and pub.

The Walk



The walk starts in the High Street, the short, broad street in the town centre. Start outside the Town Hall, the building with the colonnades.

The Town Hall was built in 1861 on the site of a previous one, in a Georgian style to go with the rest of the street. It contains the original Shambles yard, once the meat market for the town.

While most of the street is 18th century in age and style, there are some older buildings. Notable is the Black Horse Inn, almost opposite the Town Hall.

This has a date of 1681 on a fireplace and is said to have originated even earlier, perhaps in the 14th century. It is reportedly the oldest pub in north Devon.

Walk down to the memorial clock and fountain at the road junction and turn right.

The fountain was presented to the town by the Hon. Mark Rolle in 1870.

The Rolles were the main landowners in the area for many centuries and have had quite an impact on Torrington and its surroundings. Opposite is the Victorian Pannier Market, dating from 1842.

Pass the West of England Inn then turn left into the South Street Car Park.

On the left is Torrington's Tourist Information Centre and Torrington 1646, a re-enactment of the town's 17th century history.

Go through the car park to the far end for a superb view over the Torridge Valley.

Look at the board giving information about Taddiport and its leper fields, far below on the valley floor and to be passed later in the walk.

Walk to the far left hand corner of the car park and go through the arch. Turn left along this path.

The walk has now reached part of the Torrington Commons. They are said to have been established in 1185 by Baron William FitzRobert of Torrington to be used for the benefit of the poor. As well as being a recreational amenity, they are also an invaluable habitat for wildlife.

The wall on the left surrounds the site of Torrington Castle. First documented in 1139, it was destroyed in 1228 but rebuilt, although it later fell into disuse. The walls and mock battlements were added in the mid-19th century by Lord Rolle as an added attraction for the town.

Follow the path and keep ahead at the junction, past the seats.

Down in the valley can be seen the bridge over the Torridge on the road towards Okehampton. This was built for Lord Rolle in 1843. Just beyond is Town Mill, a former grist mill using water power for grinding corn. The castellated appearance was also at the instigation of Lord Rolle in the mid 19th century, to create a romantic riverside feature as seen from the town.

Keep going ahead on George's Path.

Most of the paths on the Torrington Commons are named, and many have their name engraved on granite blocks, as here on the left.

Keep following the main surfaced path downhill to arrive at an obelisk.

This is a memorial to the soldiers who died at the Battle of Waterloo. Presented by the ladies of Torrington, it was erected three years after the battle, in 1818, and asks for "peace for the souls of the Heroes !!!"

Arriving at the obelisk turn left on the surfaced path, still going downhill. When the path approaches a road turn right, down the steps, and follow the track alongside the stream ("Lady Wash"). At the junction of paths at the bottom turn right.

The walk has now reached the bottom of the Torridge Valley, the river just on the left. This track is called Rolle Road, and follows the line of the former Rolle Canal. This was built for Lord Rolle between 1820 and 1824 and stretched for 7.5 miles/12 km between the tidal Torridge and Heasland Moor, a little upstream from Torrington. It was abandoned with the coming of the railway in the 1870s, some of its course being used for the railway, but here it was filled in and used as a road.

This length of Rolle Road is suitable for cyclists, pushchairs and wheelchairs, although it is a little rough in places. It may be accessed from Taddiport or Town Mills.

Follow the old canal to a road next to the Torridge Inn. Turn left here to Taddiport Bridge over the Torridge.

Taddiport was seen from above at the start of the walk. The bridge is said to be medieval (13th century), but has also been attributed to the 16th century. Originally it carried the main road to Torrington from the south. The old toll house is next to the bridge.

Turn right on the path just before the bridge, following a Tramp waymark. Follow the path along a pleasant stretch of the River Torridge.

The Tramp waymark guides walkers on a 20 mile circular walk created by the Torridge Ramblers to celebrate the Millennium.

After crossing a stile the path arrives at a metal fence. Turn right here, still following a Tramp sign. Follow the track past the water treatment works to arrive back on the canal line of Rolle Road. Turn left here.

This length clearly shows the raised towpath on the left of the line of the canal bed.

Pass underneath the old railway bridge and shortly afterwards take the path doubling back to the right through an arch. This leads to the old railway line, now the Tarka Trail.

To continue on the walk turn left, under the railway bridge, but it is worth turning right for a few yards to reach a viaduct over the Torridge, giving good views up and down the river.

Return and walk underneath the bridge over the railway to arrive at Torrington Station.

The railway from Bideford to Torrington was completed in 1872, and gave the town a direct link all the way to London. Beyond Torrington a narrow gauge mineral line extension was built to the clay quarries at Meeth and Peters Marland, and this was rebuilt as a full-size passenger railway in 1927. All passenger services ceased in 1963, and clay traffic in 1982. Since then, the line has become transformed into a cycle and walkway, part of the Tarka Trail. It is also suitable for pushchairs and wheelchairs, which can use it for many miles in both directions from Torrington Station. Rolle Road, also suitable for such use, may also be accessed from here.

Walk along the old railway through Torrington Station on the Tarka Trail.

The path continues down the Torridge Valley crossing the river twice, both bridges giving good views of typical Tarka haunts.

After crossing the second bridge, keep an eye open on the right for a sign indicating a footpath to Weare Giffard. There is also another Tramp sign this way. Turn right here.

For those interested in the Tarka story, it is worth continuing on the Tarka Trail for a short way to the next Torridge bridge. From here, on the left will be seen Beam Aqueduct, which carried the Rolle Canal over the river. It was in the shadow of this aqueduct that Tarka was born.

Follow the footpath towards Weare Giffard, climbing the steps and crossing the stile into the wood. Keep following the path through the wood, ignoring the occasional side path, until descending some steps after a stile. Here, a major cross path is met. Turn right here to arrive at a road.

To the left is the village of Weare Giffard. This is a long, picturesque village on the floor of the Torridge Valley. The village has a pub.

The route of the walk turns right at the road, uphill.

Although not especially busy, the road does get some local traffic so make sure children and dogs are under control here.

There follows a long, steady climb up the road. At the top of the hill look out for the entrance and car park of the golf club and take the track which leaves the road diagonally to the right immediately afterwards. This path leads to another part of the Commons.

Keep to the main track as it descends gradually downhill into the valley of the stream known as Common Lake.

The name derives from the fact that it crosses the Common. Lake is from an Old English word for stream, not the modern word.

Near the bottom is a junction of tracks. Bear left here on the path with the stone block showing it is called Barmaid's Path.

This is said to be the route favoured by a Victorian barmaid from Torrington for taking her "gentlemen friends" for a walk. It runs along the side of the valley of the Common Lake, the buildings of Dartington Glass becoming prominent ahead.

Follow Barmaid's Path until it ends at a lane. Turn right then cross the bridge over the Common Lake. Just after the bridge is a road junction. Going back and to the right here is a signed public footpath. Follow this uphill to cross a grassy meadow to a stile. Cross the stile then turn right along the obvious path to a surfaced track. Walk uphill on the track

towards the glass works. At the top bear right into the area marked for “Staff Parking Only” and continue next to a fence to a lane.

Dartington Glass was established here in 1966 by the Dartington Hall Trust, which was itself established in South Devon to achieve economic and social regeneration of a rural area. The glass works was begun in order to enhance local employment and local crafts and skills.

On reaching the lane bear left uphill into Stoneman’s Lane and on to New Street, the A386. Turn left here, along the pavement, as far as the pedestrian crossing by the church. Cross the road here and take the path alongside the churchyard.

Torrington church was blown up in 1646 during the Civil War Battle of Torrington. It was rebuilt in 1651 and more fully restored in 1864. The spire is quite a landmark locally. This was added to the church in 1828.

Follow the path to arrive back at the High Street.

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 Holiday Line, Westcott Road, Barnstaple, EX32 8AW, telephone 0870 608 5531, price £3.50 including post and packing [quote reference DP102 and make cheques payable to Devon County Council]. There is also a free introductory leaflet on the Tarka Trail available locally or from the address above [reference DP101].

There is also a series of six free leaflets on walks on the Torrington Commons, available at the Tourist Information Centre. A free leaflet on the Torridge Ramblers Millennium Path is also available.

For information on the wider network of walking routes in Devon obtain the free brochure "Discover Devon - Walking" from local Tourist Information Centres or from 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.