

Walk No. 41 Devon's Iron Coast

The coastline in Devon's far north-west corner, between Hartland Point and the Cornish border, is possibly the most dramatic in the County. Indeed, it has been claimed to be the most dramatic in the whole country. The coast here faces 3000 miles of the open Atlantic Ocean, and a combination of the power of the sea and unusual geology has resulted in a landscape of jagged cliffs fronted by long bony "fingers" of rock stretching out into the sea. Not surprisingly, the rugged coastline and the vast expanse of open ocean have resulted in this being a coast of great danger to shipping, exemplified by the numerous wrecks that have occurred here. It is in recognition of the danger that the name Iron Coast has been applied to this area.

As with the rest of Devon's coastline, the area is accessible via the South West Coast Path. This walk starts and finishes at the little town of Hartland, the main centre for this part of Devon. It crosses the coastal hinterland to sample a length of the impressive coastline before returning inland. Picturesque on a good day, this walk can also repay the effort on a winter's day, the wild sea showing the Iron Coast at its most impressive.

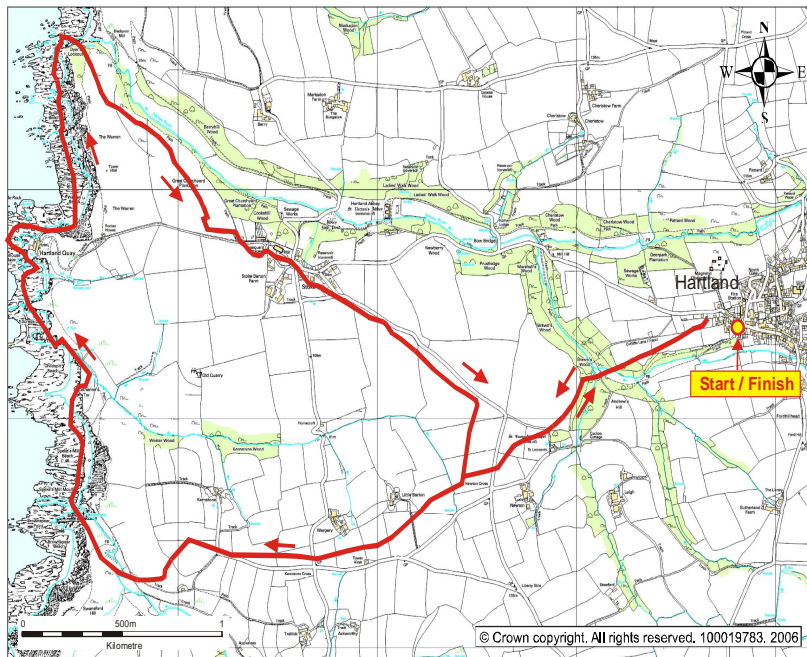
Fact File

Hartland is served by regular bus services to and from Barnstaple and Bideford. For timetable details call Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit www.traveline.co.uk. Hartland also has a car park.

Walk length: 11km/7miles; 4 stiles and one ladder stile; two fairly gradual climbs of 50m/160ft; two steeper climbs, one of 35m/115ft, one of 80m/260ft. The length of the walk and the climbs mean this should only be followed if adequately equipped and reasonably fit.

Facilities: Hartland has shops, pubs, toilets, car park and buses; Hartland Quay has a pub, toilets and shop; Stoke has toilets and tea rooms usually open summer weekends.

The Walk



Hartland is a fascinating little town which dates back to Saxon times. It was the centre of a remote area given the name “stag island” - although never a physical island, its isolation made it regarded as such. This has given the modern name (“hart” being the old word for “stag”). Originally the property of King Alfred the Great, it later passed to Lady Gytha, the mother of King Harold of Hastings fame. Later, in medieval times, it was created a borough and in 1280 it was granted a market as well as an annual fair. However, it was always too isolated to thrive greatly and the market ceased about 1780. The Market Square remains, now occupied by what used to be St John’s Chapel, built in the 1830s, where an earlier Town Hall had stood.

Start in the Market Square, outside St John’s Chapel, opposite the King’s Arms. With your back to the chapel turn right, past the pub and garage, into Spring Field. Go ahead through the gate to a track and then through another gate. Take the left fork of the two tracks ahead.

This is a path whose use is permitted by the landowners as part of a Countryside Stewardship scheme. It belongs to the Hartland Abbey estate, and was originally built as a carriage drive between the town and the Abbey to avoid the steep road. An abbey was established with a church by the Saxon Lady Gytha. It was re-established by the Normans in 1169. Following its dissolution by Henry VIII in 1535 it became private property, and was rebuilt in 1779. The Abbey and its gardens are now open to the public on Bank Holidays and on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from April to September, plus Tuesdays in July and August. It may be reached by following the carriage drive to its end.

However, for this walk, after following the drive across a meadow bear left off the drive at the obvious junction, into the woods (signposted to Elmscott). At the top bear left and climb over the stone stile onto a green lane. Follow this to arrive at a surfaced lane and continue ahead. Keep climbing up this lane to a junction. Here turn left then immediately right (signposted Elmscott). Keep ahead at the next junction (Elmscott, Welcombe). At the next junction again continue along the track ahead, signed as a footpath to Kernstone.

The coastal hinterland being crossed here has a quiet and remote character, much influenced by the nearby Atlantic. These lanes give typical views over the area, especially to the left. Occasional views to the right take in Lundy out to sea, over the landmark of the tower of St Nectan's Church at Stoke, to be passed later in the walk.

At the end of the lane bear left on the footpath signed to Speke's Mill Mouth.

Soon the Atlantic comes into view ahead, over the foreground of an impressive coastal valley.

Follow the path down past Speke's House into the Speke's Mill valley and on to the coast at Speke's Mill Mouth.

Just to the left over the wooden fence at Speke's Mill Mouth is a splendid waterfall, with a drop of some 50m/160 feet. Coastal waterfalls such as this are a geological rarity, although there are a number of others on this coast. They are a result of rapid Atlantic erosion of the coast combined with "young" rivers rising only a few miles inland.

The walk now follows the Coast Path northwards. From the open grassy area turn right and follow the path which climbs the cliff side.

Out to sea is Lundy, and the convoluted nature of the geology of this coast is clear in the patterns of zig-zag strata in the cliffs.

After reaching the cliff top, the path descends to a gate which leads to the valley behind the prominent feature of St Catherine's Point.

This unusual dry valley was once occupied by a stream which later changed its course to the north. St Catherine's Point also known as St Catherines's Tor, is an old sea cliff whose seaward side has been eroded away. The thousands of miles "fetch" of the Atlantic swells result in pressures of several tons per square foot being exerted on the cliffs, resulting in the sometimes spectacular erosion.

Emerging from the valley continue up the obvious track ahead. This soon leads to the car park above Hartland Quay. Take the path on the left, at the bottom of the car park, and descend to the Quay with its shop, toilets and pub.

A quay was first built here in the late 1500s, and its sponsors included Drake, Raleigh and Hawkins. However, the Atlantic storms always made its maintenance difficult and it was finally abandoned after being inundated in 1893. The harbour buildings were converted into the modern hotel and shop. It is a fascinating place to visit, especially the little museum of shipwrecks, and a walk to the little beach shows some of the cliff strata at their most impressive. There are also good views of the rock “fingers” stretching out into the sea.

From the hotel, follow the road back up the hill. Climb the steps on the left opposite the car park entrance, signposted Coast Path to Hartland Point. This stiff climb leads to the access road at the top. Turn left here, over the stile, to the cliff top.

This is the Warren, so called because it was used to raise rabbits for meat in former times. Inland is the prominent church tower while on the coast ahead can be seen the “golf ball” of the navigational aid at Hartland Point with Lundy out to sea. Behind, the coast disappears down into North Cornwall.

The path passes the ruin of the Warren Tower and then descends into the valley of the Abbey River. In the valley bottom there is a junction of paths. Bear right here, leaving the Coast Path, following the path signposted to Stoke. This path follows the valley upstream. After a while it emerges from woodland at the bottom of a pasture. Follow the bottom of this pasture, continuing round to the right and climbing up the edge. At the top go left over the stile just before the road and follow the path to St Nectan’s Church.

A church was founded here in Saxon times by Gytha, mother of King Harold, as a thanksgiving for the rescue of her husband from a shipwreck. The present building dates from 1360 and is both interesting and beautiful. Its features include one of the finest late Norman fonts in the country and a fine medieval rood screen. Most notable perhaps is its superb tower, 128feet/39m in height and used as a landmark for shipping.

Continue through Stoke and just past the telephone box take the lane bearing right, signposted Elmscott and Welcombe. Keep on this lane as it gradually climbs across the coastal hinterland. On reaching a staggered junction turn left past the cul-de-sac sign. The walk now retraces the first part of the outward route.

Follow the lane downhill then at the bottom, at the entrance to Leigh Farm, bear left along the track signposted to Hartland. Cross the stone stile at the end into the wood and bear right. Descend to the junction of paths and bear right on the old carriage drive over the meadow and up through the wood to return to Hartland.

Further Information

For details of the South West Coast Path, an annual guide including an accommodation list is published by the South West Coast Path Association, price £6.00. It may also be obtained from the Discover Devon Holiday Line, Westacott Road, Barnstaple, EX32 8AW, telephone 0870 608 5531, price £7.50 including postage and packing. Quote reference DP33 and make any cheques payable to Devon County Council.

There is a locally produced leaflet on the Hartland Peninsula, available in local Tourist Information Centres and other outlets.

For information on the wider networks of walking routes in Devon obtain the free leaflet "Discover Devon - Walking" from local Tourist Information Centres or the address above. Alternatively, there are details on the website www.discoverdevon.com

OS Maps for this walk:

Landranger (1:50,000 scale) no 190 Bude and Clovelly
Explorer (1:25,000 scale) no 126 Clovelly and Hartland