

Great Field - Great Walk

The large village of Braunton, between Barnstaple and Ilfracombe, is fortunate to be flanked by no fewer than three imposing landscape features. These are Braunton Marsh, an area of wet pasture reclaimed in the 19th century, Braunton Burrows, one of England's largest areas of sand dunes and Braunton Great Field, one of only three such open fields in England surviving from the medieval period. This walk is based on Braunton and gives an opportunity to savour all three, passing as it does over the Great Field and along the edge of the Marsh and Burrows.

The area is also passed through by the South West Coast Path, which skirts the edges of all three features as well as Braunton itself. Over this length the line of the Coast Path is also followed by the Tarka Trail. This is a 180 mile/290 km figure-of-eight walking route following as closely as possible the wanderings of Tarka the Otter in the famous book of that name. Braunton, and especially the Marsh, features quite prominently in the story and the walk gives the opportunity to see some of the places referred to.

Fact File

Walk Length: 7 miles/11km: five stiles, mostly quite low ones; completely flat with no gradients. Note that one short length can be very wet after heavy rain.

Facilities: Braunton has all facilities; there are none on the walk other than car parks.

Braunton is accessible by regular and quite frequent bus services between Barnstaple and Ilfracombe, Barnstaple and Georgeham and Barnstaple and Woolacombe. In the summer, there is also a link to Lynton. For timetable details contact Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit www.traveline.org.uk.

The Walk

Start at the Museum and Tourist Information Centre in Braunton, at the entrance to the main car park in Caen Street. Go to the road and turn left.

Braunton is generally referred to as the largest village in Devon and certainly, with all its facilities, it has most of the trappings of a small town. In earlier days it also acted as a small port, with a quay just outside the town (to be passed near the end of the walk). Until the early 1800s it was generally known as Branton, its name being changed by the Ordnance Survey when they produced their first detailed map of the area.

Almost immediately the road crosses the River Caen.

This relatively short river rises in the high land to the north of the village. It was Braunton's link to the sea in earlier days, when it was often known as Braunton Pill, pill being a common name for a tidal creek or small river on this coast.

Turn left into Caen Field, immediately after the river. On reaching the little stone bridge over the river continue ahead for a short way, then turn right along a footpath.

Just before the path is Hordens Mill. A sign on the wall indicates that it was established in 1254, although the current buildings are later. It was established as a water mill using the power of the river.

At the end of the path (Mill Stile) turn left and then, just beyond the Sea Scouts hut, there is a kissing-gate on the right. Go through and on ahead alongside the cricket field to a stile. Cross this and turn right, now along the edge of the Great Field.

The Great Field is one of only three such communal open fields left in the country, although it is now worked by only a handful of farmers. Braunton was a royal manor from Saxon times until the 1200s, when portions of the field were given away to various lords, causing divisions within the field. Other land owners also had holdings in the field. This complicated arrangement may have helped retain the open field system intact, when most other such fields were lost during the late Middle Ages.

The field was divided into strips each one furlong long (220 yards/200m) by either 5½ or 11 yards (5 or 10m) wide. The strips were separated by unploughed land known as "landshers", although these were later ploughed out. It covers some 350 acres/140 ha; in 1840 it was recorded that it was divided into some 600 strips in 60 ownerships. Both numbers of strips and owners are now much reduced.

Keep ahead next to the Great Field then, at Second Field Lane, turn left onto a public bridleway on a track across the field.

On a bright day it is very atmospheric in the middle of the Great Field, framed by the heights of Saunton Down on the right and with the dunes of Braunton Burrows ahead. The track passes the ends of some obvious remaining strips.

Keep ahead on the main track across the field. Eventually, as the track leaves the field, it becomes hedged (this length is usually very wet in winter) and then arrives at a surfaced lane. Continue ahead on this lane.

Having left the Great Field this lane is now passing over part of Braunton Marsh, which will be virtually encircled by this walk. The marsh was extensively drained during the period 1811-15 by the building of the Great Sea Bank, by the well-known engineer James Green, part of which will be seen later. However, early reclamation was taking place as far back as the Middle Ages.

The lane crosses a marsh drainage channel (noted on the OS maps as Sir Arthur's Pill) and then passes one of the marsh barns.

These barns are known as linhays. Most were built during the period 1815-20, soon after the marsh was finally reclaimed, and were used for cattle shelters and fodder stores.

Another drainage channel is crossed, and a linhay passed, next to some holiday accommodation, and then the straight length of lane arrives at a junction. Turn left here and follow this lane past a car park and on ahead past the No Unauthorised Vehicles sign. Go on to a track. Here the line of the South West Coast Path and Tarka Trail is picked up.

The South West Coast Path, together with its accompanying Tarka Trail here, officially follows a line behind the dunes of Braunton Burrows here. However, most Coast Path walkers probably walk the length of Saunton Sands on the far side of the dunes, unless the tide is really high, then pick up the official path near Crow Point, which is ahead.

Keep on the track as it continues alongside the edge of Braunton Burrows.

Braunton Burrows forms one of the largest areas of sand dunes in England. The area was designated a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 2002 for its environmental and scientific importance. It is Britain's first Biosphere Reserve, a designation which gives it world status.

Note that as well as being environmentally and scientifically valuable, it also has a military importance as can be seen from the signs. Military use of the area dates from at least the Second World War; indeed, this track is known locally as the American Road since it was built by American troops at that time to allow military access to the Taw Estuary.

Keep following the track to its end, where it broadens out into an open area. There is a boardwalk entering this area from the right. Leave the track here, turning left along the obvious path. This leads to a car parking area. Follow the access track ahead towards the obvious white house. Turn right along the path just before the house then turn left onto the embankment.

The White House, as it is always known, is a prominent landmark on the Taw estuary. It was earlier the Ferry House, the slipway alongside being the site of the old ferry to Appledore which fell into disuse in the 19th century. This was an important ferry crossing point on the North Devon coast. Nearby was the site of St. Anne's Chapel, now lost in the dunes, and a road to Saunton once crossed the dunes from the ferry, also now lost.

This location gives a superb panorama over the joint estuaries of the Taw and Torridge rivers, the Taw on the left being joined by the Torridge from ahead and right. The exit to the sea is round Crow Point, the sandy headland to the right. On the opposite bank of the estuary is Instow. The prominent jetty was used to supply fuel to the old Yelland Power Station which stood on the shore opposite until the 1990s.

The walk now continues on the South West Coast Path and Tarka Trail. Look out for National Trail acorn symbols.

Follow the embankment ahead

The area of marshland on the left is Horsey Island, reclaimed later than the rest of Braunton Marsh, between 1850 and 1857, by the building of the embankment and cutting of drainage ditches. The first corner of Horsey Island passed is now reverting to marshland.

The embankment is a superb vantage point for views over the whole estuary area. Views encompass not only the estuary itself on the right but the marshes on the left and the rim of surrounding high land - notice the church tower of Heanton Punchardon - together with the settlement of Braunton itself.

The embankment path bears to the left, away from the main estuary.

The smaller river here is the River Caen, crossed in Braunton at the start of the walk and historically Braunton's access to the sea. On the opposite bank is the Royal Marines base at Chivenor, important among other things for its air-sea rescue helicopters.

Keep ahead, and the embankment is joined by a road.

At this point Horsey Island is left behind, the land on the left now being the edge of the main part of Braunton Marsh. The area figures prominently in "Tarka the Otter", Tarka spending a bitterly cold winter on the marsh.

Keep on the embankment, next to the River Caen.

The path soon passes the Toll House, used to collect tolls on the private road to the White House. Old maps refer to it as the Inspector's House.

The River Caen has been straightened here. The old course originally meandered to the east, towards the edge of the Royal Marines base, but was canalised to enable larger boats to approach Braunton.

A little further on the path leads to Velator Quay.

This was Braunton's main quay, although it is a little way out of the village, since the river becomes too small for boats of any size beyond here. The quay was used especially for imports of coal from South Wales and limestone from Pembrokeshire; exports included clay and gravel for pottery and building, as well as agricultural goods.

Keep ahead on the path past the quay on the grassy embankment next to the river, joining the road at Velator Bridge.

The bridge was built in 1815 by James Green, the eminent engineer who also built the Great Sea Bank to reclaim Braunton Marsh. This is another prominent Tarka location, the otter having to bite off his own toes having been caught in a gin trap here.

Cross the bridge and follow the road to the roundabout. Turn left then bear right along the footpath and cycleway towards Braunton.

This is the line of the old railway between Barnstaple and Ilfracombe. Built in 1874, it became the line of one of the arms of the Southern Railway's Atlantic Coast Express. It was closed in 1970.

At the gate at the end bear right then at the railway signal go immediately left. Walk left over the old railway lines then right, next to the river, to arrive next to the main car park and the starting point in Braunton.

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 £7.50 and available in bookshops and Tourist Information Centres. It may also be obtained from the Discover Devon Information Service, Westacott Road, Barnstaple, EX32 8AW, telephone 0870 608 5531; make cheques payable to Devon County Council and quote reference DP33.

There is a comprehensive information pack on the Tarka Trail, also available at local Tourist Information Centres, price £2, as well as a free introductory leaflet. These may also be obtained from the above address, price £3.50 including post and packing for the information pack - quote reference DP102. For the free leaflet quote DP101.

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 address above. Alternatively visit the website www.discoverdevon.com which has all the walks information.

OS maps for this walk:-

Explorer (1:25,000 scale) no. 139 Bideford, Ilfracombe and Barnstaple
Landranger (1:50,000 scale) no. 180, Barnstaple and Ilfracombe.