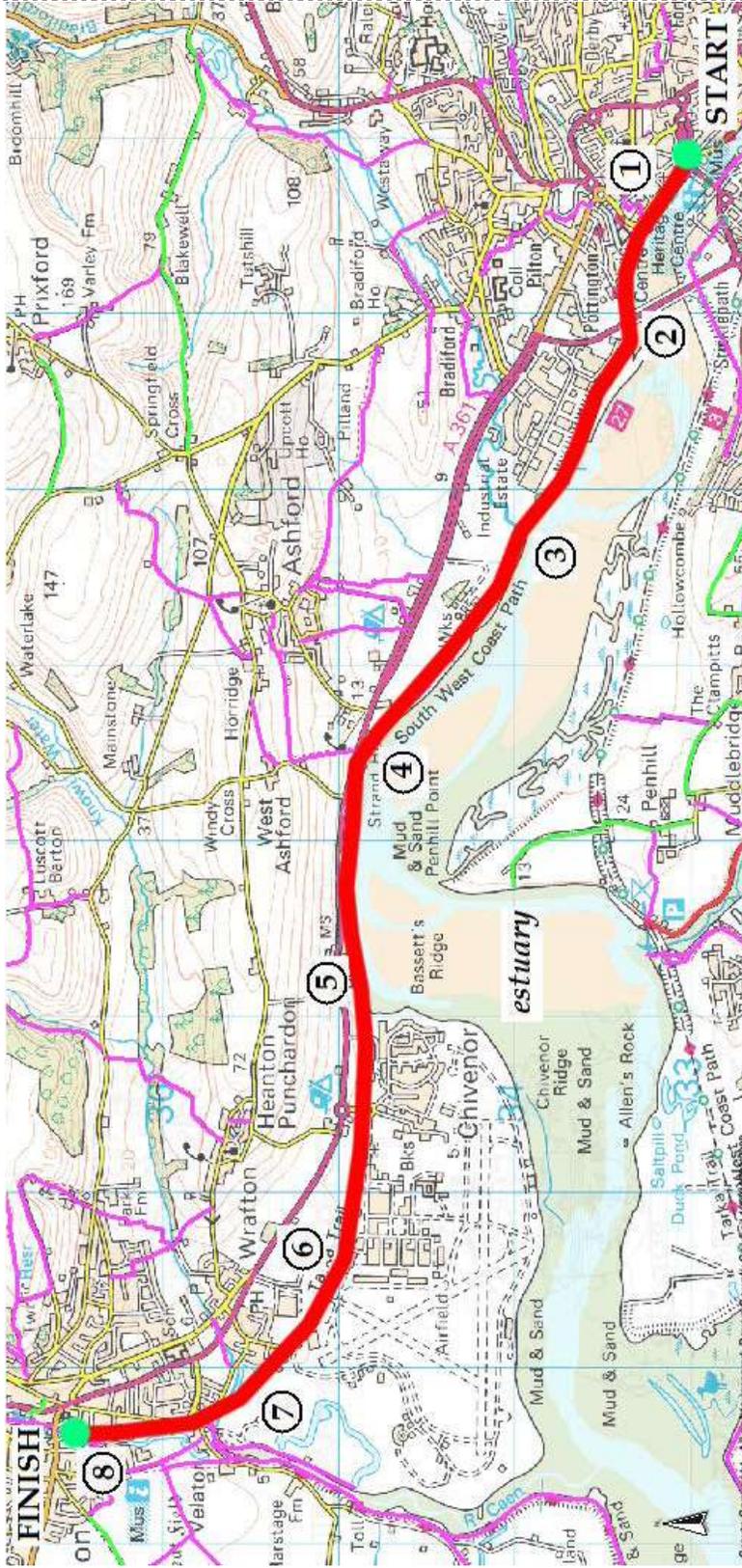


▶ Barnstaple to Braunton Railway Trail

This walk of approximately 5 miles (8 km) begins in Barnstaple town centre and follows the route of the former Barnstaple to Ilfracombe railway line, as far as Braunton. From there, walkers may either retrace their steps or catch a bus back to Barnstaple. The route makes a very pleasant walk but is equally enjoyable by bicycle, in which case the return journey can also be made by bicycle.





Route Map

The start point is the Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon, which is located next to Barnstaple old bridge (on the town centre side) and in the town square. If arriving by car, there are several nearby pay and display car parks, including Belle Meadow and the Cattle Market car park. On the opposite side of Barnstaple old bridge and next to the Leisure Centre, a large long-stay car park can be utilised at reasonable rates and is only five minutes' walk from the start.

Barnstaple to Braunton Railway Trail

Barnstaple was a key port centuries ago, for the navy and for commerce. Ships sailed out of Barnstaple and the Taw-Torridge estuary to join Drake's fleet to take on the Spanish Armada.

From the Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon, cross the road that takes traffic over the bridge and proceed along The Strand, keeping the river to your left.

STOP 1

This area was once part of Barnstaple's Great Quay and the attractive building to your left once housed baths and a wash-house. The fancy stonework and statute of Queen Anne on top were added in 1709. It is now grade I and II listed and serves as the Barnstaple Heritage Centre. Inside, exhibitions tell of Barnstaple's shipping history and other important aspects of the town's heritage.

The old bridge, that we are now leaving behind, has traditionally been called Barnstaple Long Bridge. It was certainly built by 1300, but it may be a hundred years older, or more. It has 16 stone arches, spanning the wide River Taw and 13 of them are medieval. The other three, at the town end, were replaced in 1589. It is incredible to believe that much of the original fabric survives, even after a widening in 1796. That it carries the volume of traffic that uses it today speaks volumes for the skill of the ancient stonemasons.

Proceed along The Strand, keeping the river to your left, and keep ahead along Castle Street, to pick up the footpath in front of what used to be Barnstaple Town railway station. The original station opened in 1874 but in 1898 it was re-sited, in order to serve the Lynton and Barnstaple line as well as the Ilfracombe line. When re-opened in 1898, each platform was treated as two separate stations; the one for Lynton was called Barnstaple Town while the Ilfracombe platform was known as Barnstaple Town & Quay. The building now houses Pathfield School Sixth Form.

Follow the footpath now, as it veers left, closer to the river. You will pass a large office block, to your right, which is Barnstaple's Civic Centre. Soon you will reach a swing bridge, which has been constructed to look like a boat. It carries pedestrians and cyclists over the River Yeo but when open, it allows tall-masted ships of 250 tons burthen to navigate to quaysides beyond. Continue along the path until you reach the rugby ground (to your right) and the road bridge (high above).

STOP 2

The Rugby Club was officially recognised in 1877 and since then has been able to boast three full Internationals and six Devon cup wins. It marks the beginning of Pottington Business Park – an area that has always been a centre of industry.

The bridge that soars overhead was opened in May 2007 to link the main A39 road to the road to Braunton and Ilfracombe, avoiding the town centre of Barnstaple. Sometimes referred to as the Western Bypass or Barnstaple New Bridge, it was designed to reduce, as far as possible, any damage to the environment. The Taw Estuary is

designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and the protection of the estuary during and after construction has therefore been important. The impact of noise and disturbance on the estuary's wildlife and habitats has been minimised and a variety of measures taken to protect otters and badgers and preserve and enhance habitats for bats and barn owls.

From here, at low tide you may be able to see the marshes that frame the estuary as it curves down towards the mouth. Unless the tide is high, the effect of silting, which spelled the end of Barnstaple as a port, will be seen in the numerous sandbanks. This marshy ground, however, is invaluable to bird life, particularly wading birds and wildfowl.

As you continue along the old railway line, you will notice evidence of its former use. To the side of the surfaced path you can see the old track ballast becoming overgrown with brambles, gorse and shrubs such as blackthorn, willow and oak. On the riverside, there are the remains of defensive works erected by the railway to prevent erosion of the embankments over which the trains ran.

As you pass the end of Pottington Business Park on your right, look for a small river, which passes under the path from right to left, where it falls into the Estuary, next to a modern steel installment.

STOP 3

This is the Bradiford River and here you may notice some holes in the retaining wall. These allow the passage of otters to the river as they are unable to go under the bridge because of the large wooden sluice gates there, which are

designed to close automatically at high tide. This is a good point at which to survey the surroundings. To your right, over the fields and on the hill-side beyond, is the village of Ashford. At the foot of the hills, the Barnstaple to Braunton road, the A361 races past. Here though, with cattle often munching in the foreground, the scene is usually peaceful.

The line you are following, from Barnstaple to Ilfracombe, was opened from 1874 to 1970 and in its heyday was very popular for giving access to North Devon's seaside resorts, especially Ilfracombe. The line closed on 3rd October 1970 and although attempts were made to preserve the line, by 1977 it had fallen into disuse. In 1980, North Devon District Council purchased the section of line between Barnstaple and Braunton and in 1982 the line was formally adopted as a public footpath. In 1987, the path became part of the South West Coast Path, a 630 mile National Trail that extends from Minehead on the West Somerset coast, around the tip of Cornwall and right along the South Devon coast to Poole Harbour in Dorset. The route went on to become a cycleway.

If you look across the river you can see the embankments of the old Barnstaple to Torrington railway, which closed in 1982. This also forms part of the South West Coast Path, between Barnstaple and Bideford.

Since 1991, both railway lines have formed part of the Tarka Trail, a 180 mile footpath that forms a figure of eight through North Devon. The Trail follows the route taken by Tarka the Otter in Henry Williamson's famous book. The route passes through numerous towns, including Barnstaple, Bideford, Torrington, Hatherleigh, Okehampton, Lynmouth and Ilfracombe as well

as a great variety of landscapes, including wooded river valleys, rugged moorland, coastal cliffs and sandy bays.

Continue along the path, until it almost meets and then runs parallel with the road at Ashford.

STOP 4

A footpath to your right, which emerges from under the bridge, leads to the pretty village of Ashford. At this point, walkers can follow the footpath to the main road and catch a bus back to Barnstaple if they wish.

You may notice a small-holding to the right of the path here. This is part of a working farm that grows organic vegetables and rears organic livestock, as part of the Wholife Project. The Project encourages students with learning disabilities to get involved in every aspect of the farm from feeding the animals and growing the vegetables to helping to sell the produce at the farm shop and farmers markets. From the path, you may spy one of the Gloucester old spot cross large black pigs.

At Ashford Strand, the railway changes from an embankment to a cutting. The line is much more enclosed now and requires a lot of work to keep it clear. As you pass through this section, look for the more unusual tree species such as *escolonia* and evergreen oak.

The next point of interest on the route is the Ashford limekiln. Walkers may gain access to it, just before the bridge over the line. In the 1800's, limestone was brought over from Caldy Island, South Wales, to various limekilns along the North Devon Coast and Taw Torridge Estuary. The stone was unloaded, then broken up and burnt in these kilns. The burnt material was spread on the land to counter acidity in the soil,

which was caused by fertilisers such as farmyard manure and seaweed. The bridge above the railway gave access to the limekiln, which remained in operation until the early 1900s. The limekiln was restored in 1986.

Travel another 300 metres (just over 300 yards) or so along the line and look for the small path on your left. This leads to a bird hide on the banks of the river. The River Taw is broad and shallow here and at low tide areas of sand bank and salt marsh are exposed. The vegetation provides a natural habitat for a great variety of birds while they are overwintering, feeding and breeding. Some species to look out for are curlew, plover, redshank, dunlin, oystercatcher, teal, lapwing, golden plover, shelduck and godwit. Sometimes, you may be lucky enough to see a heron.

After you have returned to the main path and continued in the direction of Braunton, you will come across an impressive castle-like building on your right.

STOP 5

The castellated building to the right of the path is now known as the Tarka Inn. It was once, however, known as Heanton Court. Heanton Court was the centre of the old manor, which can be traced back to the Domesday Book. It was once the home of one of Devon's oldest family, the Bassetts. In the 1860's it was owned by Sir William Williams, whose opposition to the proposed new railway was such that it delayed construction for ten years. It sparked a wave of popular unrest in the area, leading to riots in Ilfracombe in 1863. Today, Heanton Court (at one time reputed to be haunted), is a riverside pub and restaurant.

The river, once busy with traffic making for the quay at Barnstaple, is now used by pleasure boats, water-skiers and fishermen. At certain times of the year, during very high tides, you may be lucky enough to see the MS Oldenburg taking passengers from Barnstaple and Bideford to Lundy Island.

If you look across the river from Heanton, in the distance you can make out the Barnstaple to Bideford railway again and the old quayside that it served at Fremington. We now part company with the River Taw, as the path heads inland towards Braunton. Take care when crossing the road at Chivenor, at the former level crossing. Here, at Chivenor Cross, walkers are able to catch the bus back to Barnstaple if they wish. We now proceed along the old railway beside RMB Chivenor.

STOP 6

Chivenor began life in 1934, which the North Devon Airport was built. At the start of the Second World War, Chivenor became an RAF station. Throughout the war, RAF Coastal Command was based here, flying Wellingtons, Blenheims and Beaufighters on maritime patrols and anti-submarine missions against German U-boats in the Battle of the Atlantic. After World War II, the station was largely used for training, particularly weapons training. In 1947, the base began training fighter pilots and Spitfires, Vampires, Meteors, Sabres and Hunters were used and during the 1960s, one of the RAF's Tactical Weapons Units (TWU) used Hawker Hunter aircraft for training here. Surprisingly, there was no train station for Chivenor, only a small single siding along this section of the line. Personnel had to use the nearby Wrafton Station.

In 1974, the RAF station was left on "care and maintenance", though No. 624 Volunteer Gliding Squadron continued to fly from here. The TWU returned, flying BAE Hawks in 1979 and 1981. In 1994, the TWU left Chivenor and merged with No. 4 Flying Training School at RAF Valley. The RAF handed the airfield over to the Royal Marines and these days it is known as RMB Chivenor. The RAF still has the "A" flight of 22 Squadron here, which operates two search and rescue Sea King helicopters. No. 624 Volunteer Gliding Squadron also remains, operating Vigilant T1 motor gliders.

As you continue to pass the Base, you will eventually reach the home of "A" flight, 22 Squadron, which is located at the far end. You might see one of the yellow search and rescue helicopters in action. Keep ahead and follow the path until you reach an area to your right, where a boardwalk leads away from the main path, into Velator Wetlands, on the right.

STOP 7

Velator Wetlands is a haven for wildlife, which until recently had been closed to the public. In 2004, a community and schools art project helped to open the area for visitors and now, if you have time, you can visit the ducks there and survey the water from a boat-like structure, which is designed to bring you closer to water-level. The site, owned by the Environment Agency, is less than 20 years old. It is a shallow lake that was formed during a flood alleviation scheme, but is being allowed to regenerate into a natural wetland area.

From the path, look to your left and you will see another wetland area – that of Braunton Marshes. A scheme was carried out here between 1815 and

1857, to enclose the marshes from the sea, drain them of saltwater and provide what became a rich and fertile grazing land. Even today, it is known as some of the best land in the country. Beyond the Marshes, you may be able to make out the peaks of the sand-dunes that form Braunton Burrows, in the distance. The Burrows form the centre of the country's first newly designated Biosphere Reserve – a world class designation that puts it alongside Ayer's Rock, the Danube Delta and Yellowstone National Park.



Also near the Wetlands site, you will notice a post, similar to others you have passed along the way. These are gradient marker posts, which signify the change in gradient between one post and another. Here, 246 represents a 1 in 246 gradient and 1760 1:1760. They were supposed to assist the engine drivers, much like road signs do today. Very few survive on the old Barnstaple to Ilfracombe Line, there is one outside Heanton Court, another two between Wrafton and Velator (one by the gate at Wrafton, the other close by and damaged by a flail mower.) Many were stolen, although best of luck, as they weigh a ton and are set in the ground twice as far as they stick out! The best surviving and most rare example is on the wall of Ilfracombe Museum, which shows the 1:36 gradient. Rare because most British railways, certainly passenger ones, did not exceed this sort of slope. The Slade Bank was supposed to be one of the steepest gradients

for mainline trains in the country, certainly the hardest standing start for a steam locomotive.

You will soon reach a roundabout, which was built on the site of the former Velator Gates crossing. It is here that the Coast Path and the former railway line part company. You may wish, on another occasion, to follow the Coast Path – which leads from here to Horsey Island, Crow Point and Braunton Burrows. At the roundabout, continue across the road, straight ahead, and follow the public footpath signs (to the right hand-side of Tesco) into Braunton.

As you continue, look for other relics of the old railway age. Follow the path along the avenue, keeping Tesco to your left, and you will soon emerge opposite an old signal post. Skirt around the signal post and continue along Station Road. The next road on the left also has rails embedded in it and these would have been part of another crossing, known as Braunton Gates. Enter the car park here and proceed to the right hand side of the buildings ahead.

STOP 8

Today, little evidence remains of what was once a very busy station. The track was doubled in 1888 and Braunton had five sidings on the 'up' line and two on the 'down' line. The two on the 'down' line were used by 'banker' engines, who waited here for trains to Ilfracombe. The sidings were situated to the left of the main line, at the lower end of what is now the car park. In the days of steam, the excessive gradients beyond Braunton, towards Ilfracombe, meant that many of the longer trains required additional engines, to help push them up the gradient and also help them to brake as they descended into Ilfracombe. They were known as 'banks' and required one or

► Barnstaple to Braunton Railway Trail

even two 'bankers' to help shunt the trains to and fro.

As you move through the car park, look for the old goods shed. It is the first building you come to and is now a youth centre. It's stone construction and arched windows indicate its original purpose. If you proceed further, past Braunton Countryside Centre, you will find a newsagent on your left. This was once the station house and marks where the 'down' platform stood, where passengers who were heading for Coyde or Saunton Sands alighted. On your right, across the grassed area, the red brick building once stood behind the up-line platform. It was once Lake's Private Hotel and would have been used by railway passengers. Gone are the old platforms, signal box and level crossings.

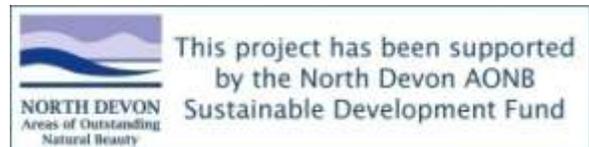
It is here that our journey ends. Across the road, it is possible to follow route of the old railway line through Braunton but the line beyond, to Morthoe Station, is closed to the public. The bus back to Barnstaple can be caught in Exeter Road. From the car park, press ahead to the road and turn right along Caen Street. At the crossroads at the end, turn right again onto Exeter Road – a bus stop can be found nearby.

We hope you have enjoyed this walk and that it has inspired you to find out more about this part of the North Devon Coast Areas Outstanding Natural Beauty. For more information please visit www.explorebraunton.org or go to Braunton Countryside Centre or Braunton Museum or pay a visit to The Museum of British Surfing.

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The Countryside Code

- Be safe, plan ahead and follow any signs
- Leave gates and property as you find them
- Protect plants and animals and take your litter home
- Keep dogs under close control
- Consider other people