

▶ Beacon Trail

This walk of approximately 2 miles (3 kilometers) starts from Caen Street car park, in the centre of Braunton, and proceeds up North Street before rising steeply to the historic Beacon on top of West Hill, from where a marvellous panorama of the whole area can be seen. Descending from the Beacon, the route continues across the former railway line and the River Caen, through the church yard and into the Square via East Street and Church Street.



Route Map



This walk starts and finishes at Caen Street Car Park in the centre of Braunton village. It is located just off the B3231, which leads towards Saunton. Within the car park, Braunton Museum, Braunton Countryside Centre and The Museum of British Surfing can all be found – each of which are worth a visit before or after your walk.

Beacon Trail

Begin from Caen Street car park by heading towards the main road to Saunton, passing as you go the old Station House, which is now a newsagents (Wensley's). Once across the main road bear left and after a few yards you will find the White Horse Inn. Turn right here, into North Street. This street was once filled with farms and adjoining cottages. Most of the dwellings survive today but all of the farm buildings, and the land that surrounded them, have long since been converted to other uses. A short way up North Street, on the left, is what remains of Town Farm, which was formerly owned by the Hartnoll family, whose records date back to the 1580s. This was the last farm to operate from North Street and nowadays is run from large farm buildings adjacent to Braunton Great Field. The houses now known as 'Gordons', 'Staddons' and 'Brindle' were all once thriving farms in North Street. A forge also stood behind Brindle Farm.

Many villages of medieval origin evolved to a pattern similar as North Street i.e. a single street with houses erected at right angles, the property of which all terminated in a hedgerow to separate the domestic areas from the surrounding fields. Braunton had two such streets - East Street and West Street (now known rather confusingly as North Street). The properties on the right are bordered by the road at one end and the natural boundary of the River Caen at the other. The properties on the left however have their boundaries marked by the line of a communal hedge, a remnant of which can be seen in Ashmead Grove (on your left).

At the top of North Street the route turns left up the short, but steep, Rock Hill and then sharp

right into West Hill Lane. A short distance ahead the picturesque 18th century Beacon Cottage can be seen and the route follows the track up the hill to the right of the cottage.

STOP 1

The path now reaches the bottom of the sunken track leading to the Beacon; this track was used for many years by the wives of seamen on their way to watch for their husband's return into Bideford Bay. When the ship was sighted, they would scurry back down the hill and through the village to meet their husbands - not necessarily to give them a home-coming kiss but perhaps to relieve them of most of their wages before they could spend them in the Mariner's Arms!

The Beacon on West Hill was part of a system of invasion warnings in use since Roman times. However, beacons are chiefly remembered for the part they played during the Armada period at the end of the 16th century. There were constant threats of enemy invasion during this time and, if a Spanish fleet was sighted, beacons all along the south coast would be lit, from Lands End to Dover. Codden Hill was the main link for this area but the two watchmen at Braunton could also probably see the beacons at Hartland, Monkleigh, Hewish and, on a good day, Dunkery. Guarding against false alarm was a problem for the watchmen largely because the £3 it cost to rebuild the beacon was one seventh of the total annual parish income at that time. The following list of payments for materials and labour for the Beacon was recorded in the parish accounts for the year 1626:

1626	£	s	p
<i>Rodger Incledon 164 seams of stones for the Beacon</i>		13	8
<i>Rodger Incledon 7 days work and</i>		7	12

<i>12 stakes</i>			
<i>Richard Hartnoll 6 days himself and 2 horses to carry stones and water</i>		7	8
<i>Richard Hartnoll carrying rushes to thatch the same</i>		1	4
<i>Wm White 4 days work his man 5 days about</i>		7	4
<i>Timber for the door and dormers / 1 /; hooks and twists and nails 10d</i>		3	10
<i>4 happs, 2 staples, lock, key and steel 1/7; one days work and fire box</i>		1	3
<i>5 days work 5/; one days cutting furses 8d; carrying furses 6d</i>		6	2
<i>Helping workmen 1/7; pitching furses 1 day 6d; carrying faggots 1/2</i>		3	3
<i>Sir Edward Southcott for furses 3/a hoop for the barrel to carry water away</i>			3
<i>Faggots</i>			10

Reproduced from the original of the Marshall Accounts by courtesy of Braunton and District Museum.

The track is in the shade of old Ash trees planted on top of the dry stone bank. On your way up this track look out for the large variety of shade tolerant plants like wild arum, lesser celandine, wood sorrel, hedge parsley and red campion. The dry stone walls, which criss-cross the Beacon, are mini nature reserves, providing many different habitats for creatures like woodlice, centipedes, millipedes, snails, beetles and spiders. The walls themselves have been colonised by a variety of moss, lichens and ferns. Wall pennywort or navelwort grows from many crevices. It is easily recognised in winter and

spring by its round shiny leaves, which are about the size of an old penny.

Honeysuckle, ivy and other climbing plants can also be seen clambering over these old walls. Halfway up the sunken section of the path, on the right hand side, a mix of blackthorn and hazel take over, with hazel dominating on the left. At the top of this section of the trail is a large patch of wild garlic, a plant synonymous with damp woodland and seen at its best in the spring.

STOP 2

At this point the path forks. On the old boundary bank to the right is a very ancient field maple, which is Britain's only native *acer* species. It was probably coppiced many years ago, whereby the young, versatile stems were regularly harvested to make hurdles and the like. From this tree the oldest part of the village, gathered around the parish church of St Brannock, can be glimpsed through the branches. Crowning the top of Chapel Hill, overlooking this part of the village, is a small roofless building. This is all that remains of St Michael's Chapel, thought to be a seaman's chapel where prayers were offered for their safe return. It also served as a landmark to guide sailors home. Although the land it stands on is privately owned and therefore difficult to access, the chapel still attracts much interest from people who notice it from the village.

The route now follows the original path to the left, passing a large crab apple tree and later a substantial clump of honeysuckle – another natural woodland plant with a glorious evocative perfume. Other species to be glimpsed along on this section are blackthorn, bryony and the first

of many sycamores which now make up the majority of the trees on the Beacon.

The Beacon has not always had a thick covering of scrub and trees. The woodland here is known as secondary woodland because it has evolved to cover the land of the Beacon which, even as late as 1943, was grass-covered farmland. The old stone walls are remnants of former field boundaries, which are now abundant with invading blackthorn and rapidly regenerating sycamore. Paintings and postcards show the Beacon as locals remember it, when short turf covered the top, which was itself covered with primroses. It made a lovely picnic spot and was popular with courting couples.

It is known that Mr George Eli Luscombe, who lived in Frog Lane, had a walled garden on the Beacon, where he grew strawberries. He also kept goats, usually four or five nanny goats, which freely grazed the area. They were of course aided by rabbits, who helped to keep the turf short. Many rabbits were killed off during the myxomatosis epidemic of the 1950s and 60s. It has been estimated that 99% of the rabbit population of Britain died at this time and it had knock-on effects in that buzzard populations suffered and attacks by foxes on hen roosts became much more frequent. Here on the Beacon, the scrub began to encroach and eventually the trees became prolific.

STOP 3

The path forks again here. The higher path climbs up through dense scrub to the summit but for now we are going to follow the lower path to the left, which leads along the edge of the Beacon area and passes a concrete water tower. This was erected during World War II to supply water to American troops, who were billeted in Nissen

huts on the land below the Beacon that is now covered with houses and known as Saunton Park. The path goes on to skirt the edge of the Beacon, passing areas of gorse, bracken and hawthorn. A Devon name for hawthorn is hagthorn – the haws being known as ‘hags’. It has traditionally been revered as the most likely home for fairies and out of doors its blossoms have been used for decoration. Across Britain however, there was the belief that bringing hawthorn blossom into the house would be followed by illness and death. Mediaeval country folk also asserted that the smell of hawthorn blossom was just like the smell of the Great Plague in London. Botanists later discovered that the chemical trimethylamine that is present in hawthorn blossom is also one of the first chemicals formed in decaying animal tissue.

Other plants to be seen in this area are a bay tree, violets, stonecrop and elder (the berries and flowers of which make excellent wine and cordial). In summer look out for the speckled wood butterfly, which is common on this patch. Also stonechat and bumble bees that colonise the gorse.

The path leads gently downhill until it comes to the edge of the Beacon area and then swings uphill via a series of steps. These lead to the stone information cairn and viewpoint.

STOP 4

From the stone information cairn, which marks the summit of the Beacon, a panoramic view of the Taw Torridge Estuary and Braunton opens out. On the opposite banks of the estuary lie the villages of Appledore and Instow. Hartland Point, and its lighthouse, can be seen on a clear day on the faraway headland. Lundy Island, some fifteen miles off shore, can also be made out

on the horizon. Braunton Burrows, a vast system of sand dunes, lie behind the beach. Braunton Burrows forms 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.



In the foreground lies the 350 acre tapestry of Braunton Great Field and, beyond it, Braunton Marsh. The Great Field is one of only two remaining examples of medieval open strip farming in the UK, where each farmer or freeman was apportioned a number of quarter acre, half acre, or full acre strips for their use. Acre strips were usually 22 yards or 20 metres wide and 220 yards or 200 metres long (a furlong). This was thought to be the area an ox could plough in one day. Today the Great Field produces crops of barley, potatoes, cauliflower, cabbage and root crops. Braunton Marsh is chiefly used for grazing, having been reclaimed from the sea early in the 19th century. Further to the left of the view, you can make out Codden Hill – the largest hill towards Barnstaple. The whole area before you plays an important part in Henry Williamson's book, *Tarka the Otter*.

From the cairn, it is possible to continue over the summit of the hill and return to the fork in the path mentioned at STOP 3. The route of our walk however turns down behind the hill, so that your back is to the view and you enter the woodland section of the trail.

STOP 5

The path is almost a tunnel between blackthorn, hawthorn, sycamore and holly trees as well as blackberry bushes. Of course these all provide for the variety of birds, including the Great Tit, that live on the Beacon. Nowadays the Beacon is a peaceful haven for woodland birds such as tits, jays, and, in summer, warblers. Buzzards soar above and sparrow hawk and tawny owl make an occasional appearance. However the Beacon was also used during the war, when a Bofor gun was positioned on the top to allow troops to practice their firing.

Apart from the many varieties of ivy only a few plants grow beneath the trees. This is because very little light penetrates the thick scrub in summer. However, in spring there are large areas of bluebells, ground ivy and wild arum together with a varied selection of fungi. Some areas along this section are more open, allowing other species to develop such as sycamore, bracken, honeysuckle and gorse. A close look at one of the holly trees reveals that it has far fewer prickles on its upper branches than on the lower ones. This is thought to be the tree's reaction to the reduced need to repel browsing animals, such as deer, as it grows bigger and taller.

The path now bears to the right and descends along the line of the of field boundary. There are steps but in wet weather this section can be slippery. Occasionally there might be what appears to be a path crossing at right angles to yours. Look carefully at this as it might be the route of a badger as it clears its set and goes in search of clean bedding and food. If you're lucky, you might find footprints or strands of the badger's fur clinging to brambles that it has brushed past.

STOP 6

All along this section and in other parts of the walk an abundance of fungi can be seen growing on dead wood, particularly during the autumn months. These fungi aid the decomposition of the wood and play their part in maintaining the ecological wellbeing of the area. One of the fungi encountered may be Jews Ear, a soft rubbery fungus found chiefly on elder. The bright orange colour of Witches Butter is also common. Closer scrutiny may reveal the destructive black rhizomes of the honey fungus. Looking just like lack shoelaces, this parasite spreads between the bark and wood of living and fallen trees.

At this point, it might be worth inviting you to explore more of Braunton on another occasion. Many visit the area for its stunning surf beaches, others enjoy the peace and tranquillity of the countryside, some pass through Braunton on their way to other places and yet very few of the visiting public realise just how special this area is. The village is reputed to be the largest in the country and around 10,000 people live here. It hasn't always been as large as this though; in living memory there were just seven streets in Braunton, each of which had farms. Farming and shipping were the two industries that sustained Braunton from medieval times right through to the second World War and it surprises many to learn just how reliant Braunton was on the sea. Much more can be discovered at www.explorebraunton.org, at Braunton Museum and the Countryside Centre (both of which are located in the car park at the start and end of this walk).

The path now levels off and enters an area thick with primroses in the spring. Please remember to follow the path to help preserve these lovely plants. Other species seen in the season are a

wide variety of ferns including harts tongue, ground ivy, early purple orchid, dogs mercury and wood sage.

STOP 7

This area was once cleared of scrub and replanted with a variety of indigenous tree species – ash, silver birch, mountain ash and oak. There is also a self-seeded apple tree on your right. In among the trees, in the appropriate season, you may be able to spot primroses, ground ivy, early purple orchids, campion, foxglove and burdock.

On the left of the path is the old field boundary, which has now expanded to three or four times its original size. White butterflies can sometimes be spotted here. When you leave this area you will soon come to STOP 2 and to the end of the circuit of the Beacon.

To complete the walk, retrace the route down the sunken lane and Rock Hill and at the bottom of Rock Hill follow the lane to the left. Shortly after, make a sharp turn to the right down a narrow public footpath. At the bottom of this you will emerge onto the track bed of the disused Barnstaple to Ilfracombe railway line, now part of National Cycleway 31. Here you may either turn right to follow the path back to the car park or continue straight ahead, carefully cross the main road and head towards the parish church. Once safely across the main road, bear left and cross a small bridge, to enter the church yard.

STOP 8

The parish church was reputedly founded in the 6th Century by its namesake Saint Brannock, who was a Celtic missionary. When St Brannock died, his mortal remains were buried at Braunton, where they have remained to this day. This fact

makes Braunton unique, for very few churches can claim to possess the whole body of their patron saint. During the reign of Elizabeth I it was discovered the Braunton held not just St Brannock's body but other relics as well. On 26th June every year, in accordance with tradition, these relics were paraded through Braunton to celebrate the anniversary of St Brannock being interred beneath the high altar of the church. During the Second World War, work was being carried out on the high altar and, much to the horror of those doing the work, a stone coffin was discovered full of bones. The lid was replaced and the hole covered in, but it does make us wonder if these were the remains of our own St Brannock.

The present parish church is Norman and was built in 1310. It is believed to be the third building to occupy the site; nothing remains of the two previous churches except a slab of stone that can be seen near the West window.

Walking through the graveyard, follow the avenue of lime trees until you reach a point where the path is crossed by another. Ahead of you, to the left of the path you are on but on the far side of the new path, is what is known as the Peace Tree. When the Americans were based in Braunton during 1944, they became fascinated by the village and its age. They were particularly intrigued by St Brannock's church and became friendly with its vicar, the Rev J H Prince. With war service creating a lack of manpower in the village, the churchyard had become very overgrown and so the reverend was delighted when the American soldiers offered to clear it. As they worked, they came up with the idea of planting a tree in the churchyard, as a lasting reminder of the goodwill that was engendered

between the two nations at this perilous time. The tree was duly planted and a plaque was erected beneath it.

Continue ahead and out of the churchyard, emerging next to Dean's Bridge. Turn right and walk past the New Inn on your left into Church Street. This street used to be one of the original thoroughfares of the settlement of Braunton and is rich in its collection of medieval buildings, especially on your right, opposite the Black Horse. There were formerly the King's Arms and the Rising Sun hereabouts which, in addition to the Braunton Abbot's Inn on the left of Abbots Hill, suggests this used to be the centre of social activities in Braunton.

The walk back through Church Street passes the front windows of buildings that once housed a great variety of shops, including a milliners, bank, co-op, tinsmith, plumber, veg and ice-cream shop, bookshop and saddler. Through traffic took this route to Ilfracombe until the bypass of Chaloner's Road opened in 1924. Continuing through East Street, we pass by Broadgate. This was once the manor house of Braunton Gorges, one of the four Braunton Manors. Continuing along the street there is now little evidence of the series of burgage plots formerly found here, except perhaps for one farmhouse sitting uneasily between the Agricultural Inn and the Chapel.

STOP 9

Eventually we reach the village square, which was the centre of village life for many centuries. Four village pubs once surrounded it and in the centre was a large elm tree. All major village

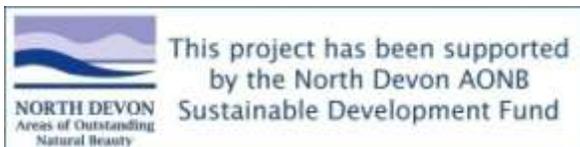
events were commemorated under the Cross Tree until it was finally felled during 1935 in the name of the motor vehicle. A slate slab was installed, which was inscribed with the words 'Here stood Cross Tree till 1935'. This is just next to the traffic lights where you will need to cross. Proceed into Caen Street and follow a short distance until you see Caen Street car park to the left, which is the end of the walk.

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.

Adapted from a leaflet first produced by Braunton Parish Council. Text written by David Rowe (adapted from the original written by Bill Foster and Mary Breeds) and edited by Katie James for the Explore Braunton project – funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Devon Renaissance, North Devon AONB and Devon County Council.



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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