Great Field and Marshes Trail

This walk takes us through one of the largest remaining examples of Anglo-Saxon open strip field systems in the country. We start at Caen Street car park in the centre of Braunton and from here, enter the Great Field via Second Field Lane and cross using an ancient path known as Broadpath. We then follow the road between the Great Field and the Marshes to Velator Quay before returning via the route of the Barnstaple to Ilfracombe railway line, which is now a footpath and cycle route. The walk is a delight in the summer, when the great diversity of flora and fauna is at its best.

Route Map

This walk starts and ends at Caen Street car park, which is located in the heart of Braunton village, just off the B3231 towards Saunton.

Great Field and Marshes 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). Turn left along this street and walk until, after about 200 yards (180 metres), you find Field Lane and Second Field Lane on your left. This place is known as Townsend and was once the limit of the old medieval township of Braunton, or Branstone. Turn left into Second Field Lane and walk to the end of this road.

STOP 1

Here, without any hedge or gate to mark the transition, Second Field Lane becomes Broadpath, now the main route across the Great Field. As you walk along the path you gain an idea of the vast expanse of the Field, which is some 365 acres (148 hectares) in area.

The location of the Field is due to several factors; the most important being the geological development of the Taw and Torridge Estuary. In its present form it owes more to events of the past, in particular the ice-ages, than to the influence of the rivers and sea we know today.

The rise and fall of sea levels in Pleistocene times, as the northern ice cap receded or advanced, contributed to the formation of river terraces in the estuary. Seven of these terraces have been mapped in the valley of the River Taw. Braunton Great Field corresponds almost exactly with one of these river terraces with its clearly defined edge. An increase in deposition by the rivers followed the melting of the ice. This resulted in the accumulation of alluvial silt, clay and peat in the lower reaches of the valley, up to 120 feet (36 metres) thick in places. This explains why there is an expanse of fine soil here, some of the best and most fertile in the South West, if not in the whole of England.

Continue walking along the path. When the Saxons started to settle in this area in the 7th Century they had to set about clearing the still heavily forested river valley of the Taw and Torridge. The cleared area was then ploughed using teams of oxen and the slope of the land was used to benefit drainage (this accounts for the apparently haphazard pattern of cultivation).

The expanse was then divided into sections known as strips. Each strip was approximately a furlong (220 yards or 200 metres) long and a chain (22 yards or 20 metres) wide, giving the area of one acre - 4840 square yards - as a land unit.

This measure was permanently fixed by Edward I in 1305. It was based on the amount of land that a man with two oxen could plough in one day. It was a communal system; each farmer had several strips which were intermingled with those of his neighbours so that the most fertile land and the less fertile land were apportioned fairly. Common land was set aside for grazing. In Braunton's case, the majority of grazing was on the tidal salt marshes.

All of the land was owned by the Lord of the Manor. Braunton had four Manors, each owning strips in various parts of the field and this is one of the reasons why the Great Field survives as it does today. Sadly, many of the strips have now been amalgamated and ploughed as one. An example of this is the area known as Lime Tree on your right. In 1788, it consisted of 21 narrow strips (with several different owners). In 1950

there were just 11 wider strips. Now it has one owner and is cultivated as one field, together with most of Ven Pit. The same thing is happening on the left of the path and in many parts of the Field. In 1840 there were around 500 strips altogether but by 1983 it had fallen to about 127.

The division between lands belonging to different owners was formed by turning the ploughshears in, to create divisions or balks that are known locally as landsherds. The path you are walking on is not one of the original footpaths. It began as a trespass across the strips but because of continual use it has now become accepted as the main track. Continue along it until you reach a track leading to the right, which is known as Cooper's Path.

STOP 2

Stop here and survey the track on your right. It is what remains of one of the original tracks that crossed the field from what was once the only entrance in Field Lane to an exit in Saunton Road. Until the 1930's this Cooper's Path was used daily by a hundred or more people walking from Braunton to their daily work on the Bulb Farm. The Bulb Farm was one of Braunton's most successful enterprises, owned by Seymour Cobley Ltd of Sandy Lane, Braunton. The farm grew a variety of flowers such as daffodils, tulips, iris and gladioli, which were cut and sent to markets all over the world, including Covent Garden market in London. It employed up to 140 men, women and boys, who helped to pack 30,000 flowers per week into boxes, which were then loaded onto trains at Braunton station.

The company had two other farms in Spalding and Inverurie, which combined to make it probably the largest bulb-growing company in the world during the 1930s. The Braunton farm suffered somewhat during the war, when it was thought that the moonlight glinting on the greenhouse roofs caused an enemy bomber to target it, thinking it was Chivenor, which resulted in a loss of bulbs but thankfully no lives. The farm ceased to trade in 1969, having traded for nearly half a century.

On each side of Cooper's Path are narrow strips, showing landsherds that were curved by the ox-drawn ploughs of medieval times. The area to the left of Cooper's Path is called Bowstring due to its very pronounced curves.

Looking along Broadpath again now, you should be able to make out (on the horizon) the peaks of the sand dunes at Braunton Burrows. Beyond them lie Saunton Sands and the Atlantic. 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. The dune with the largest amount of bare sand showing is called Flagpole Dune, where the military used to fly a flag to warn the public that they were live firing.

Continue along Broadpath, in the original direction, until you reach the first track to the left.

STOP 3

This is the headland between an area called Broadpath (which takes its name from the path we are on) and Higher Thorn. Notice how the strips of Higher Thorn lie at right angles to those of Broadpath. As mentioned earlier, this change was made so that farmers could plough with the slope and take full advantage of the natural drainage it offered. Headlands were the turning spaces required by the oxen teams and are today used by tractors when ploughing the strips. It was the custom to place loadstones - usually large stones from the beach - at the end of the landsherds to mark the boundaries. Unfortunately none of them survive today as they have succumbed to modern farming methods and been buried.

Continue along Broadpath. You are now coming to the far side of the Great Field and the end of open cultivation. The hedges on your right and ahead to your left are pre-19th Century. The lane between them was once the only exit from the Great Field to the Marsh and was gated to keep out the cattle that were grazing beyond. Until the end of the 19th Century it was the custom, after harvest, to graze the cattle on the stubble of the Great Field for a month or so after Barnstaple Fair, which is held annually in September.

In the summer, many butterflies including the large skipper, meadow brown and small tortoiseshell frequent this lane. Butterflies are among the least destructive and most beautiful of insects. A fairly easy way of telling butterflies and moths apart is the fact that most butterflies fly by day and are brightly coloured whereas moths are usually dull coloured and fly by night. Most butterflies rest with their wings folded over their back while moths rest with their wings fanned out. There are exceptions to this general guide; the six- spot burnet moth being one. You may see these distinctive black and red moths on the marshes as they are one of the few species of moth active during the daytime.

Around the southern edge of the Great Field, to the left of where we are and along Marsh Road towards Velator, there are small fields behind the remains of the Great Hedge. The Great Hedge was erected to keep the sea out, before the Marshes were drained. They are themselves heavily embanked and, although now they have gates opening on to Marsh Road, they were originally accessed only through the Great Field. Their banks were the second line defence against floods. If high tides and gales drove across the Marsh to overwhelm the Hedge Bank at points where the land was lowest, these fields were there to absorb the worst and their internal gates could be hastily blocked to prevent damage to the crops on the rest of the Great Field.

Continue along the lane until it meets the corner of the metalled road.

STOP 4

You are now standing on the edge of what used to be a river terrace, at the former limit of the tidal range. The strong blackthorn hedge on your left is the medieval barrier that protected the Great Field from salt spray and storm tides. In those days, cattle would have been grazed here but it was a dangerous area, because of the tides, with rather poor quality grazing. In 1808, Braunton Marshes were visited by a man called Charles Vancouver, who was preparing to publish a report for the Board of Agriculture. He estimated that, in their current state, the marshes were worth as little as £10 but that, if they were reclaimed from the sea, they could fetch up to £3

per acre. The suggestion was, perhaps unsurprisingly, well received by local landowners and by 1811 a scheme was in place to enclose the marshes, drain them of saltwater and provide what became a rich and fertile grazing land.

The County Engineer James Green was employed and three Marsh Commissioners were appointed to oversee the project. Details of the construction work are scant but there is no doubt that the engineering work involved was expertly carried out. The level of water in the network of drainage ditches (some 16 miles / 26 kilometres altogether) was designed to be gravity-fed and to this day is accurately controlled by a system of sluice gates. A bank was built (one hundred feet thick) to protect the newly-enclosed area from the ravages of the sea and this was known as the Great Sea Bank. At first livestock was banned from the embankment in case they caused it to subside. Pigs were particularly mentioned in the strict regulations, as being rooting animals they were thought to be particularly troublesome and anyone who allowed his pigs to wander on or near the bank was fined 10/- per animal. Later, when the grass took root on the bank, sheep were recognised as the most effective means of keeping it short and are still used for this purpose today.

By 1815 the first phase of reclamation had been completed and the responsibilities of the Marsh Commissioners were transferred to the Marsh Inspectors, who would oversee the maintenance and management.

The bridge ahead of you crosses over the boundary drain. Also ahead are some buildings constructed during World War II by American soldiers, while they waited here for the D-Day invasions.

Turn to your left and proceed, with care, along the road. If you walk along this road during the summer months you cannot fail to notice the large numbers of cattle in the melds. The Marshes are now considered some of the best beef-fattening lands in the West of England and some fine examples of the Devon Red cattle are often to be seen grazing on the lush pastures. Today, the marshes also abound with wildlife and are a rare example of how man's intervention can have a positive effect on the ecology of an area. The diversity of habitats are now richer than they were ever likely to have been as an intensively-grazed salt marsh. Continue walking until you find the circular thatched structure to the right of the road.

STOP 5

You are now standing across the drain from a reconstructed thatched linhay, or field barn. This and other linhays were probably built following reclamation of the Marshes to provide shelter for the cattle and, in their lofts, to store hay. They were valuable shields against the storms in winter and refuges from the flies in summer. Most of the other linhays have become redundant and fallen into disrepair. This is due largely to an increase in the size of individual holdings and the greater intensity of beef production, which means that nowadays the cattle are only kept on the Marshes during the summer months. This linhay is unique as it is the only circular example on the Marshes. It has been designated a Grade II Listed Building.

You may see swallows here, swooping low over the melds as they hunt insects. The reed bunting

may also be seen hunting for caterpillars, beetles, freshwater snails and seeds among the marsh plants. Other small birds that you may encounter along this stretch are the meadow pipit, sedge warbler, yellow hammer, willow warbler, pied wagtail and grey wagtail.

The black moorhen, with its distinctive red forehead and bill with a yellow tip, is a common feature of the Marsh drains along this section of the walk. As it swims, it jerks its head as it picks insects, water weeds, snails, wild fruit and seeds from the water surface or bank. It spends the whole year on the Marsh drains, near thick cover, in which it can hide when danger threatens. Incredibly, it can sink when alarmed, leaving only its bill above the water.

You might also spot a coot, which can be distinguished from the moorhen by its white bill and forehead, giving rise to the expression "as bald as a coot". It is more likely to be seen in the winter, having traveled here from the continent, and is also larger than the moorhen.

A pair of swans are usually to be found feeding in this part of the Marsh during the summer, most years accompanied by their cygnets. The canals and drains of the marshes are a rich source of food, with over thirty species of Diatom alone being found in the watercourses; the main one being Epithemia. Diatoms are microscopic algae that convert inorganic nutrients in the water into food by the process of photosynthesis. They provide grazing for countless small animals, the zoo plankton, who become food for aquatic animals such as sticklebacks and other small freshwater fish fry. They in turn become food for herons and the occasional kingfisher. The stickleback is one of the most widely distributed of British freshwater fish. They can tolerate quite salty water and so can be found in the Taw Torridge Estuary and along the coastline.

Continue walking along the road until you reach the entrance to the Toll Road, which leads away to the right.

STOP 6

The small carnivorous mammal, the stoat, may sometimes be seen around this area. Rabbits appear to be petrified by this animal and remain rigid with fear when they spot one. The grey heron is also seen along this stretch sometimes, waiting patiently to catch an eel.

The ditches that drain the marshes have always been useful for providing water for the livestock that graze here and they also act as stock barriers. However, someone had to maintain them. The Inspector's House is situated at the beginning of a toll road, which extends away towards Crow Point and the estuary. This house was traditionally given to an employee of the Marsh Inspectors and received free accommodation in return for carrying out various duties. These might include destroying rats and moles who threatened to undermine the banks, checking and controlling water levels, cutting weed, clearing drains and rounding up escaped stock. The same person was often paid by the farmers to tend their livestock and they would also have been responsible for collecting the tolls from anyone who was not a marsh owner but wanted access. The tolls were, and still are, used to maintain the road and surrounding area.

In 1843 the Marsh Inspectors had gained possession of a house known, thanks to its colour, as the White House - which is situated at the end of the toll road near Crow Point. In 1942 it was requisitioned by the war department and used most probably for the storage of

ammunition and land mines, which were placed on the expanse of beach between the estuary and Saunton three miles north. After the war, the house apparently received compensation but further payments were made to the Inspectors House and these were due, it is thought, to the heavy increase in military traffic that would have damaged the toll road. RAF and US army vehicles routinely rumbled past on their way to the south end of the Burrows where much military training took place.

Another day, you might like to complete the route titled Crow Point Trail, which starts at the opposite end of the toll road.

Continue along the road towards Braunton, past Marstage Farm and over the humped-back bridge, then turn right, over the drain, just before the car park.

STOP 7

You are now standing at Velator Quay, which used to be a very busy port indeed. Up to a hundred vessels at a time were using this area before World War I. Before the advent of motorised road transport, the most efficient way of transporting produce from the village (and, notably, the Great Field) to market towns around the country was by sea. Ketches from South Wales and the Bristol Channel ports brought coal, bricks, salt, flour, fertilizers and limestone and returned with potatoes, apples and cider to name but a few. Another Braunton product was manganese ore, which came from a local mine.

Probably the most famous Braunton ship was called *The Result*. She was, without exception, considered to be Braunton's most treasured asset and in her hey-day she was the finest sailing vessel in the coasting trade. In 1909 she was bought here by J Clarke and, at 122 tonnes, was the largest vessel ever to come to Velator. She must have been an awe-inspiring sight and indeed she is remembered with affection by everyone who speaks of her.

Looking across the River Caen to your right, you can see an area of reeds. This is the former channel of the River Caen, which was blocked off by the construction of a new, straightened river channel in the 1850's. This area plays an important part in Henry Williamson's book 'Tarka the Otter'. Today the otters only use the marshes occasionally in the winter, to 'lay-up' for a while.

Turn left and walk beside the Quay towards the open grassed area. Under you are the wrecks of several ketches, which were buried here when the area was landscaped. Continue alongside the river until you reach the weir.

STOP 8

This is the point at which Knowle Water and the River Caen meet. It is also an important entry point for water onto the marshes and is located here, above the tidal reach, to prevent salt water entering the system. This is a good place to spot kingfishers, so keep your eyes open!

Continue up the concrete steps and down the other side, taking care when stepping down onto the road. Turn right to go over the bridge and proceed towards the roundabout ahead. At the roundabout, bear left and then look for the footpath and cycleway that begins to the right of the entrance to Tesco.

This path follows the track bed of the former Barnstaple to Ilfracombe line, which ran through

Braunton. Its arrival heralded the end of shipping, as rail transport became more popular than shipping but it was itself to be succeeded by motor transport. The Barnstaple to Ilfracombe Railway was built in 1874 by the London and South Western Railway (LSWR), as an extension of a rail network that stretched right back to Waterloo Station in London. Originally built as a single track, the line was quickly doubled, so that by the turn of the 19th Century, both the LSWR and Great Western Railway were operating the line. In 1926 the line acquired mainline status and at its height, just before the Second World War, an incredible 24 passengers trains travelled in both directions on their way to and from the seaside resort of Ilfracombe. Even right up to closure in 1970 it was still possible to catch a train direct from London to Braunton!

If the railway interests you, you might like to do the Braunton Railway Trail another day.

Follow the track all the way to the end, where you will notice an old signal post ahead and to your right. Pass the signal post and proceed straight ahead along Station Road, before passing the police station and entering Caen Street car park. Bear right once inside the car park and you will soon recognise the place where we started.

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.

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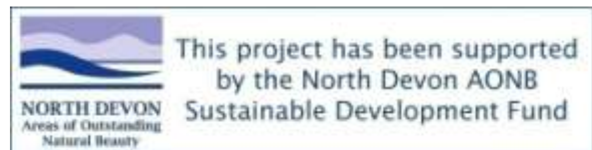

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The Countryside Code

- 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