



The Tamar Borderlands

Bere Alston



Basic hike: from Bere Alston Station east to Tuckermarsh, north down footpaths to the Tamar, then west returning up the path past Buttspill.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 108 Lower Tamar Valley.

Distance and going: two miles could be muddy.

If ever there was a land within a land, then that place is to be found tucked away deep in the Westcountry betwixt two of our great rivers and two of our counties. The Bere Peninsula is a world unto itself – by which I mean it is difficult to reach unless you go by train. Once you are there, it is a surprisingly private place.

They don't go in for public rights of way much in the ear-lobe-shaped wedge of land that dangles south between the rivers Tamar and Tavy. Which may explain why this website hasn't darkened the peninsula's doors much before.

But, where there's a will there's a way – and the way in this particular case lies just to the north of the peninsula's capital – the little town of Bere Alston itself.

In and around the valleys near an area called Tuckermarsh, there are a number of footpaths that will get you down to the banks of the Tamar and allow you tremendous views of Cals-tock and its magnificent railway viaduct.

The Bere peninsula is difficult to reach. It most certainly isn't a place you can pass through, as the road bridges connecting it both span their relevant rivers higher upstream.

Having explored the rather quaint, cosy, little town centre, I thought I'd better look the place up in W. G. Hoskin's encyclopaedic book, *Devon*: "Bere Alston, now a small town and the principal part of the parish (of Bere Ferrers)," he writes. "(It) originated in the time of Edward I as a mining settlement. The silver-lead mines were worked here from the 1290's intermittently down to the late 19th century.

"Reginald de Ferrers obtained a market and fair here in 1295, and shortly afterwards set up a borough. As a parliamentary borough from 1584 to 1832, Bere Alston returned a remarkable number of eminent men, including Lord Chancellor King and Sir George Beaumont."

In times of yore, the river (and I'm talking Tamar here) was the main highway in these parts – which undoubtedly explains why so many of the peninsula's footpaths lead down to the waterside and, frustratingly, nowhere else. It was a land of quays and tiny wharves, which all did business handling the raw materials disgorged from the local mines and, in season, the large amounts of cherries and strawberries which used to grow here.

But, unusually for the area, the paths from Tuckermarsh do link with others, and so afford the opportunity for a local walk or three. The best of these I am determined to leave until summer when, I believe I'm right in saying, when a small ferry plies to and fro allowing walkers access to the Cornish bank.

But there is a pleasant little meander to be had, nevertheless, and this would be an ideal stroll for anyone visiting the area by the excellent Plymouth-Gunnislake branch-line.

And it's at Bere Alston Station that we'll begin our hike. A fag-smoking man sat on the platform the day we arrived, and told us all the paths were near impenetrable and that we dare not set off so late because we'd never find our way back in the dark.

He was wrong, the paths were fine – but he did show us how the platform had recently been extended to cater for the big express trains which he reckoned would soon be coming through again from Okehampton.

"Have you seen the way the sea is eroding the mainline up at Dawlish?" he asked. "It won't be long before it's washed away, so they are planning to re-open the mainline down from Okehampton."

Are they? Maybe this bit of railway news has passed me by, but I'd be interested to know more.

We walked along the side of that disused old line by crossing to the rear of the station car park and turning left along an unmade lane. This passed several homes and eventually ducks under an old railway bridge, to continue east to a place called Tuckermarsh Bridge.

Just before this hamlet, a footpath begins its route downhill towards the river to our left. Passing alongside woodlands it descends and it is along here that you are treated to tremendous views of the famous viaduct which carries the Gunnislake branch-line over to Calstock from Bere Alston.

The 12-arched colossus is constructed of concrete blocks (unusual for the time it was built) and each arch has a 60-foot span. The railway crosses 120 feet above the river. The bridge once had a steam-driven, vertical hoist that was built on the Calstock side to lower wagons to a busy quay. It was one of the highest such lifts England, rising and falling and dizzying 113 feet.

Our path now joins the riverside by entering woodlands whose trees hang elegantly over the water. It was getting dimpsey when we were there and we had to be careful while walking along the narrow path above the river. It is a good 15 feet down to the water and, so steep are the banks, I got the feeling you'd have a devil of a job fishing yourself out should you have the bad luck to fall.

After a few hundred yards, the path tucks into a tiny bay where old stone walls suggest this once played host to one of the many quays that punctuated the waterside in these parts. Not far above, in the woods, the remains of an old tin mine and chimney, lurked in the gloaming, and I guessed this wharf would have once been the outlet for the ore mined from the hill.

You could continue along the riverside from here, passing through yet more woods on the way to Ferry Farm and on around the peninsula's north-westerly spur to the spot directly opposite Cotehele but, as I say, I'm leaving that for a summer's day.

Instead, we took the path inland – up past a place called Butspill – beyond the old mine and its long-disused shafts, and into the fields directly below the station. Now it was merely a matter of avoiding the attentions of a herd of frisky young bullocks and finding the small lane that leads up to the station car park.

A modest two-mile stroll, but one which gives the walker a redolent taste of this once busy – and quite beautiful – corner of the Tamar's land within a land.