



The Tamar borderlands

Cotehele



Basic walk: From Cotehele Quay up the Morden Stream, leaving it at Comfort Wood to ascend to Clampits and Norris Green before descending down through Danescombe back to the Tamar and the Quay.

Distance and going - about five miles easy going with one short steep climb.

Food and drink - available at National Trust's Edgcumbe Arms on the Quay, or the Carpenters Arms.

Ferry - Tel: 01822 833331 for details of varying times.

I first came across the location for this walk in the unlikely setting of central London where a Turner painting called 'Crossing the Brook' hangs in the Tate Gallery. Many of his works urge the question, "where can that be?" - and the brook in this case happens to be near Cotehele in the Tamar valley.

Some years later I flew down the Tamar in a small plane and spotted the dreamy demesne from the air. Then I passed by in hot sunshine on a boat heading for Calstock and saw the old quay, looking cool and unspoiled under the trees. Another time I arrived at this personal Elysium by the clinker built ferry, and on yet another occasion I belted past in a go-fast salmon fishery protection speedboat.

It is easy to pass by lovely Cotehele when you are enjoying the river, but if you ever get the chance, stop and take a stroll around this delightful estate. The first time I did this walk I was met by the National Trust's property manager at Cotehele who was armed with any number of useful leaflets and bits and pieces which comprehensively explained the lay-out and history of the 1,289-acre estate.

It was he who recommended us to take this circular hike around the place but in doing so he mentioned the fact that, although this walk is on public footpaths and therefore freely accessible, it would be much appreciated by the trust if folk were to call in and pay to see the house and grounds.

«We'd very much appreciate it,» he murmured, «if you could sort of point your readers in the direction of the main reception area at the house. There is a charge for entry into the house and gardens and, you know, we do rely upon this to help run the estate.»

It's worth every penny and if you won't take my word for it then know that not only Turner, but George III and Queen Victoria both landed at Cotehele Quay and loved the place.

You could wax long and lyrical about the Quay itself and its rich and interesting history, but as we're meant to be on a hike and we've yet to take a single stride, we'd better get on by turning left from the wharf and heading the few yards to Cotehele Bridge. This crosses the Morden Stream as it meanders through an area of reed-beds before entering the Tamar - it's worth hanging around a while in this magical spot gazing into the mesmerizing movement of the rushes in the hopes of spotting a kingfisher or two.

Just across the stream under the trees there are the remains of extensive limekilns typical of the kind found up and down the great river which was once bounded on all sides by market-gardens and orchards. The area's acid soils have always needed the sweetening addition of lime and the results must certainly have paid off.

So abundant were these gardens in their yield that it is said that pleasure boats would come up from Plymouth in the strawberry season especially so that passengers could enjoy the heady phenomenon of the entire valley being filled with the scent of the ripening fruit.

It's always easy to linger near the water, but we must be on our way - having now walked all of 100 metres - and pass through the gate without crossing the bridge and head off up through Elbow Wood. Halfway along there's a footbridge which will take you up to Cotehele Mill, but note that this is part of the National Trust estate and admission is for ticket-holders only.

Yet another reason then, to have paid the entry fee up at the house because the mill is well worth a visit so that you can see the old craftsmen's workshops. Blacksmiths, saddlers, wheelwrights, carpenters, cider-makers and of course millers - all plied their trades here since mediaeval times although the sturdy buildings date from the 18th century.

Back on the track and we leave Elbow Wood to cross the lane at Newhouses and stroll alongside reassuringly named Comfort Wood. The path continues up over the fields to the hamlet of Clampits where we go straight along the lane past the Carpenter Arms where we take a footpath on the right hand side of the road that allows us to miss Metherell and head straight for Norris Green.

From here there are several routes down to the valley which lies to the north-east, but I chose to drop into Danescombe to see the ruined paper-mill which has just been extensively renovated by the trust.

A few years ago you would have seen nothing of the three-storeyed ruin but the undergrowth which covered it. So today it is particularly interesting to view what remains of a mill in which brown paper was being manufactured more than 200 years ago.

Further down the valley there's evidence of a good deal more industry as you pass disused mine shafts and the remains of the Cotehele Consoles and the Danescombe Valley Mines. Copper ore, its by-product arsenic and 'mispickel' (unrefined arsenical pyrite) were all hauled out of here, but now there are only bats and the odd holidaymaker who's rented one of the converted buildings from the Landmark Trust.

If all that industrial archaeology isn't enough for just one wooded valley, there's still the sawmill to come. Once described as the 'most complete' water-powered mills in the Westcountry, this venerable industrial unit was linked to the river by its own tramway - remains of which can still be seen. In today's peaceful surroundings it is difficult to imagine that this ruin (which has also just been renovated by the trust) was once capable of planking more than 2,000 feet of timber in an hour.

Now it's a case of going up the path which leads back to Cotehele Quay, and on the way passing a fantastic viewpoint where you can enjoy a vista of Calstock and its impressive viaduct, before descending past the Chapel in the Wood which marks the spot where a swashbuckling member of the Edgumbe family fooled pursuers into believing he had leapt into the river in a desperate attempt to shake them off.

We've only just scratched the surface of the story of Cotehele and its environs, but once you've been there you promise yourself that you will most certainly have to return again and again.