



## The Quantocks

### Kilve - Lilstock



The beach that burns – that was the headline we dreamed up the other day when we travelled out across the lonely clay-lands that lie under Quantock's northern hills.

Seeing we were there, and our little fire did nothing to warm us up in the bitter east wind – we decided to take a quick hike. On this occasion we are going to use Kilve Pill as the beginning of our walk. To find it we turn off the A39 Bridgwater-Minehead road in the centre of Kilve and head north along the beach road – past the ruins of the ancient Chantry and eventually down the bumpy lane to the small car park that we find just inland from the cliffs.

We'll be heading off in an easterly direction along the cliffs, but not before we've been down onto what is surely one of the most fascinating sea-shores in the country – and one of the only ones that catches fire. No wonder the place has been designated a Site of Geological Special Interest. I have never been there and failed to find a fossil of some sort. But, equally fascinating are the many other weird and wonderful stones that punctuate the great blue lias pavements which are a feature of the place.

I won't go on about the history of oil shale here but do take a look at the strange red brick structure that dominates the car park. Known as a 'retort', it was built in the early 1900's when there were great plans to develop open-cast mining and boil the oil out of the rock. Fortunately for beautiful, unspoiled, West Somerset, these plans never came to anything.

Nor did the local sport of 'glatting'. No one seems to hunt the elusive conger eel with dogs any more - which, I suppose,

*Basic Hike: from Kilve Beach, on the West Somerset coast, east along the cliff-top path to Lilstock – and then back, either via same route, or over hill past Kilton.*

*Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 140 – Quantock Hills.*

*Distance and going: three-and-a-half – or five miles depending on return route. Very easy going.*

is just as well from a conservation point of view. It was a very popular sport for working folk a century or more ago. Terriers and spaniels were specially trained to hunt among the rock-pools along this coast at low tide, and their enthusiastic owners would follow them, warily, with sticks. I have seen a man bitten by a conger, and it was not a pretty sight.

Turning our backs on such perilous delights we mount the cliffs to the east of the little pill (the name given to the pool where the Kilve Stream makes its entrance to the shore) and head off eastwards. I suppose 'mount the cliffs' is a little bit grandiose, as the cliff in question is only about three feet high – but the drop does become ever dizzier as we strike off toward a distant building known as the Range Quadrant Hut.

This is a white painted structure that has been erected on the very lip of the cliffs so that Royal Navy observers can watch the antics of jet bombers which screech about these parts dropping bombs and missiles on a number of target buoys a mile or so offshore.

Anyway, what has always amazed me about this bombing range is that it is only a mile-and-a-half from one of the biggest nuclear complexes in Europe. There are no fewer than three giant nuclear reactors at Hinkley Point – and I shouldn't think any one of them would appreciate having a bomb through the window. I haven't seen the jets at it for some time, and I don't really know whether or not they bomb here now.

The audible memory I have of the walk I took the other day is of the deep boom of wave upon pavement, mixed with the rustling clatter of the dead and dried up burrs that populate the cliff-top.

Eventually we reached lovely, lonely, old Lilstock. It is, somehow, one of the most haunted of locations along our entire coast. There used to be a working harbour here, and a hotel, though there is barely a trace of either structure left now - only the memory of a wealthy landowner whose daughter was expiring from something or other. Doctors advised plenty of fresh air so he built her a sort of pagoda out on the quay, and there she sat watching the boats come and go, and the wind and waves.

What happened to the girl? Where did I get the story? Those were the questions I pondered on my way back.

I had planned to return via an inland route past the hamlet of Lilstock and up the hill to Kilton where a footpath crosses to Lower Hill Farm and from there descends into the Kilve valley alongside a wood – but so extraordinary are the shoreline views from the coast path, I turned on my heels and walked back the way I had come.

Not only are you treated to vast vista of northern Quantock and Blue Anchor Bay, but you can see distant Minehead and its burgeoning hill dominating the west. And, even better than this, you can see the fantastic pavements and strata of the Kilve beach SSSI.