



Mid Cornwall

Porthcothan - Bedruthan



Basic Hike: from Porthcothan Cove inland to Penrose and back via Bedruthan Steps and the coast.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 106.

Distance and going: seven miles easy going. The map shows a footpath which follows the northern bank of the stream at Porthcothan. To find it you must climb a short way up the hill that leads towards Padstow and there you'll see a track on your right.

Ordnance Survey's Explorer Map 106 persuaded me there was a decent chance of a circular stroll without my having to start the car's engine once ensconced at my favourite campsite on the North Cornish coast.

The big golden sand beach at Porthcothan stretches inland with all the wide self-importance of a great river in its final lap of estuarine glory - except there is no river, just the trickles and runlets of an extremely modest stream.

Up at the top of the beach this stream makes a bit of a fuss with a puddle or two - the great sandy gut that promises a river of force is made by a brook so small that the Ordnance Survey doesn't even bother to give it a name on the map.

Past Porthcothan Mill the path takes you up to the hamlet of Penrose. Not a soul stirred in the lonely corner that somehow ended up in Cornwall instead of Connemara and so I took the road due south back down into the river valley and up the other side towards Trethewell.

Just after bridging the stream the lane twists left, then right and at the latter corner a footpath heads across the field towards the coast. This cuts a dog-leg and rejoins the road at Trevorgey. Directly opposite another lane climbs gently to Engollan where yet another branches right to Tregona. Here you have a choice of following it past Bedruthan to the busy coastal road or turning right down the valley along a footpath

which eventually terminates on the B3276 further north at a place called Efflins. The former route will take you close the Bedruthan Steps which is undoubtedly one of the most fabulous beaches to be found anywhere in the region.

The National Trust owns much of the cliff-top property there and has a large car park and visitor information centre. I veered north and took the option of the shorter route past Efflins to Pentire Farm.

This corner of coast is also owned by the National Trust and here the organisation has a hostel where volunteer workers can stay.

The Countryside Manager of the Trust's extensive North Cornish properties once told me he had just three wardens covering 40 per cent of a 100 mile long stretch of coastline. «So we very much rely on volunteers,» he said. «Some of whom come on organised full-time work parties, while others are just interested in doing a day or two here or there. The Beach Head Hostel is where they can stay.»

I had asked him the name of the curious plant which seems to dominate so many of the cliff-top hedgerows around this particular part of the world. Having walked around dramatic Park Head and descended down to a bay called Porth Mear I had wondered, as I have often done before, about this strange feathery shrub that sits upon all the dry stone walls near Trevendar Farm. «Tamarisk,» said the countryside manager immediately. «It comes from South Africa originally and you often find it around parts of the Mediterranean coast. The point is that it is tremendously salt resistant so it makes an excellent windbreak near the sea.

«By-the-way,» he added. «When you were down there in the valley behind Porth Mear did you notice that we've been doing quite a lot of work up in the reed beds by the stream? That valley really is a marvellous habitat for wildlife but it does need looking after...»

I had noticed. This peaceful, silent coombe is one of my favourite places in Cornwall and often have I seen a peregrine quartering its secret crooks and crannies. There is something quietly exotic about the place - the dry stone walls and the ancient tracks are audibly escorted by the souging of the gently bending tamarisk.

Often I have come here of an evening - it is one of the most glorious places in the world for sunsets. I say this because a line of rocky islands runs parallel with the coast and so adds an extra element of interest to the golden scene.

Once, while sojourning in the sand-bottomed gut that lies between the shore and the islands with my large and unusual Bristol Channel prawning net, I was approached by a man who seemed politely interested in what I was doing. We chatted for an hour and he told me all sorts of fascinating things about the Porthcothan coastline. It was Nick Darke, the playwright who lived locally and evidently loved the place with enormous and poetic enthusiasm. I was saddened by news of his death - I only met Nick that one time but I thou-

ght him to be one of nicest people I have ever met upon my adventurings around the Westcountry coast.

I was reminded of the meeting the other evening when I sat above the gut watching a particularly spectacular sunset. It all seemed other-worldly and profoundly beautiful. But I was soon brought back down to earth - returning to my canvas abode in the campsite above I found a note pinned to its flapping door. It said: «Gone to the pub...»