



North Devon

Fremington to Instow



Here's a hike anyone can do – wheelchair users included. It's dead flat, the way is paved (or, at least, semi-paved) and you get great views of the Taw and Torridge estuary as you go.

It travels along part of the Tarka Trail – that fabulous thoroughfare that meanders through no less than 180 miles of the Westcountry's finest hills and dales.

For those few folk who don't know the Trail, here's a bit from the official blurb:

“A looping route through North and Mid Devon, from the rugged Atlantic Coast, the Estuaries of the Two Rivers of Tarka the Otter fame, the Rivers Taw and Torridge through rural Devon Countryside onto the Northern Slopes of Dartmoor, and the source of the River Taw. The Trail between Barnstaple, down the Taw, upriver to Bideford, following the Torridge to Torrington takes the route of a disused railway line and is particularly suited for both cyclists and walkers. Along the North Devon Coast, following the South West Coast Path, taking in Baggy Point, Mortehoe, Lynmouth up Countisbury Hill to Exmoor, Lorna Doone Country.”

This walk is along the easy bit. To be exact, we explore the flatlands which accompany the disused railway line between Fremington and Instow. I was there recently in the company of a disabled friend who fancied a bit of fresh air. The walk from Fremington Pill, west along the old railway line along to Instow was just what we needed, though we did make the return leg a bit more interesting by following the shore-side path out

Basic hike: from Fremington Quay along Tarka Trail (disused railway line) to northern edge of Instow and back around Instow Barton marsh and East Yelland Marsh before rejoining the Trail.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 139.

Distance and going: five miles – extremely easy going.

over Instow Barton and East Yelland Marshes (not recommended for wheelchairs).

Fremington is one of the small villages dotted along the old main road that runs along the southern side of the estuary between Barnstaple and Bideford. The road might have been superseded by a new main drag that wends its way over the hills inland, but it's still busy enough nevertheless. To get away from the sound of the internal combustion engine you must turn towards the water down the tiny lane that leads along the side of Fremington Pill.

This is a rather unusual waterway for the north coast, in that it looks for all the world like the sort of creek you'd find in the flooded river valleys of either south Devon or south Cornwall. Samphire clings to the mud-banks, egrets stalk and herons gaze.

When the tide has quit the River Taw and the vast sand and mud-banks stretch west toward the horizon, only a single modest weaving stream is left to add an element of wetness to the place. The trickle provides a mere suggestion of ports and keels, cargoes and the sea. Old hulks, like the majestic and melancholic hull that has careened itself just inside Fremington Pill, lie about the place leaving you with the feeling that this is the shore that the sea forgot.

Thoughts of vanishing oceans increase when you gaze at the empty riverside quays and know that, not long ago, each groaned under the weight of barges and barquentines, schooners, coasters and ketches that would lean against the walls for support once the tide had gone. It is difficult to imagine that Fremington was once seafaring community of major importance and its quays and wharves clattered with the constant import and export of goods.

We parked down at the quay, which has recently been revamped along with the old station house that has now been converted into a rather enticing looking café. Diners were turning up in their finest togs the evening we were there so, scruffy to the hilt, we took the mainline out of town.

We were not the only ones perambulating along here of a summer's evening, and there were plenty of cyclists as well. Not that the quiet buzz of the place in the least bit distracted us from the estuarine views.

Mind you, these disappear for a while as you enter a cutting on the other side of the bridge which spans the Pill. Keep going though, and you'll soon pass Home Farm Marsh and see how the river bank has come back to meet the line near a place called Isley Marsh.

The old line now does a gentle curve to the south, so that it leaves the river again. This is at the great bend of the estuary where you can take the aforementioned detour. We kept going along the Tarka Trail on our outward journey, and it was only when I was sure my companion could cope that I put it to him we might like to return via the more interesting coastal route.

We found the footpath heading out towards the water-side as we approached the little resort of Instow. It's well worth finding because, not only is the path as flat as the proverbial

pancake, but it allows for much better views of the place where two of Devon's major rivers unite.

As soon as you reach the low banked shore, you will be able to look out over Black Ground to the long riverine sandbank known as Sprat Ridge and the boiling waters of Neck Gut. You'll also be able to gaze at Appledore looking maritime and picturesque on the other side of the Torridge. At least, that's how it looks in the evening light.

At the apex of Instow Barton Marsh there's a jetty, and on the other side of the stream from there you can see the vast massif of Braunton Burrows stretching north to Saunton Down.

It's all splendidly wild and scenic out there adjacent to this confluence of stream, and you get that edge-of-the-world feel that some places have.

Once past East Yelland Marsh it was a simple plod back along the line to Fremington Quay, despite the fact that the gloaming was rapidly turning to darkness.