



North Devon

Morwenstow



Getting there: Morwenstow is just off the A39 Barnstaple to Bude road and on the Devon/Cornish border.

Basic Hike: From the church at Morwenstow, down past Rectory and St John's Well to find footpath down through the bottom of the valley, then down to the cliffs and the SW Coast Path which you take to Higher Sharpnose Point. From there head inland up Tidna Valley to footpath that leads left back to church.

Recommended Map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 126 Clovelly and Hartland.

Distance & Going: Short hike of about three miles - very muddy in places - steep in others.

There are times at Morwenstow when you are glad you've arrived by car and not by beleaguered boat on that awful, sinister, shore - and glad too that there were no wreckers around to welcome you with a knock on the head. That's the way it was for unlucky visitors a couple hundred years ago. If the razor rocks of Cotton Beach, Higher Sharpnose Point or cynically named Lucky Hole didn't get you - the locals would.

Not that the good folk of Morwenstow had to resort to setting up dodgy lights to lure sailors to their doom. The wind, the sea and those terrible rocks are so well orchestrated in their overture of destruction, they need no help in dealing with little ships armed with nothing more than canvas wings. In the days of sail such vessels caught off here in the wrong wind, were mere moths in a storm.

Watching dawn arrive over Morwenstow's cliffs in a bad nor' westerly must have been grim indeed if you were in a sailing ship. If the locals gazing out from the cliff-tops had worn T-shirts back in those days, the logo would have said: «Welcome to Hell.»

As good a place as any then, for an atmospheric hike - especially if you wait for a day when low, black clouds and rain scud off the Atlantic to give you the full, authentic effect...

They go on about Heritage UK nowadays - where our history and tradition is potted for us in interpretation centres, museums and the like - but come to Morwenstow on this most savage coast on such a day, and you can almost hear the sailors scream without having to resort to an audio guide to enhance the experience.

All you get, and all you need, is the National Trust's little notice-board showing a map of the land they own around here and how you can walk from the famous old church, down to the sea-cliffs, and back by a different route. Tucked in the valley behind the board is Morwenstow Church nestling in its wooded graveyard over-looking the sea. Rooks caw and flurry about in the wind which moans through the bent old trees as you cross the stile by the lych-gate and enter a demesne that seems to belong to another dimension.

Perhaps it's something to do with the white ship's figure-head that you used to see on the left hand side as you walked down towards the church. It has been removed for renovation, but used to mark the grave of Captain Peter and many of his sorry men, who died on the nearby razor-rocks, back in 1842.

They had been on the brig Caledonia out from Rio de Janeiro via Syra, Smyrna and Constantinople when her luck began to wane. It started when she reached the eastern Mediterranean where the cook was badly injured in a knife fight with an innkeeper.

Imagine the scene as you wander through that cold wooded graveyard 400 feet above the crashing Atlantic... A barrel-lined inn, cool and dark in the heat of the southerly sun on the shores of the Bosphorus; strange scents of the east; lilting, dangerous, seductive music and perhaps an exotic dancing siren or two. Was it the dancing girls who caused the fight?

What a rude awakening those wine and sun-soaked men must have had when they saw the cliffs of the Sharpnose on that cold black dawn. Hell indeed... Captain Peter ordered the men up the rigging as the Caledonia was pushed onto the rocks by the hard-blowing NNW gale, but no sooner had they climbed it the mast came down killing most of them.

There were only two survivors. A tortoise which somehow managed to swim ashore to be collected by a local boy, and mariner Edward le Dain who was found much be-draggled, but alive, by a farmer the following morning. If he had any luck at all it was that he had washed up here during the time of the Reverend R.S. Hawker, the eccentric, intellectual and humanitarian parson. If le Dain had arrived a few decades before he might well have been left to bleach his bones on the rocks.

Talking of Hawker let's begin the hike by taking the foot-path to the right of the church and passing down between the outbuildings of the vicarage which he built. The house is now a private residence, but while you're walking by, have a look at the chimneys which adorn the place. They represent each of the church towers which had been relevant to his life up to that point.

The wonderful now house is now a very classy and delightfully romantic bed and breakfast establishment.

Not far beyond the vicarage the path turns left down through a small wood to follow the stream at the valley bottom to the sea. Winter walkers be warned - this can be very muddy but the National Trust has recently put in a few walkways that certainly help.

After ten minutes or so of bog-hopping you'll come to the sea, but don't get any ideas about exploring the beach. An attempt to descend the cliffs around here would guarantee you a passage to join Capt. Peter and his crew. The sharp rocks far below are so efficient at cutting up human limbs that Parson Hawker used to dole out brandy to the men chosen to search the shores for bits of body - known locally as «gobbets».

Armed with such thoughts, go easy as you ascend the coastal path to reach the old parson's hut - which is still there, thanks to the National Trust, and is reckoned to be one of the smallest buildings they own. A path zig-zags down to the hut which stands just the way it did the day it was built out of ship's timbers and driftwood a century-and-a-half ago. Open the stable door to sit in the tiny room and the place makes a fine and cosy refuge from the wind.

In here, gazing out at the ocean, you can almost feel the mental presence of Hawker next to you - puffing away at his opium, dreaming up new ideas such as the Church of England's Harvest Festival and writing lines like:

And shall Trelawney die?

Here's twenty thousand Cornishman

Will know the reason why!

But as the afternoon darkens, leave the dear old Parson to his musings and walk down to Higher Sharpnose - the headland you'll see lurking below - and frighten yourself by leaning out to watch the waterfall tumble into the abyss.

Then it's up the Tidna Valley and back over to Morwenstow which is an easy and pleasant end to the walk.