



## Cornwall's North Coast

### Westward Ho!

This walk begins at Westward-Ho! - that delightful and idiosyncratic Victorian seaside resort on the west side of the populated bit of Bideford Bay. No other coastal watering hole boasts such a bizarre and motley collection of architecture, perhaps because the place was entirely the concept of 19th century property developers. They must have seen the flat-ish acres next to golden sandy beach and said: "Build, build, build. Oh, and while we're at it, let's nick the name of a popular contemporary novel to make it all sound romantic."

Writer Charles Kingsley was, apparently, most put out, and who could blame him?

Westward Ho! has rather an American feel to it, in a brick and Gothic sort of way. It's also fertile ground for chalets and caravans. But we walkers needn't concern ourselves with any of this, as we're about to turn our backs on the whole shooting match.

I drove as far as I could to the west of the west-named town, and found a car-park situated above low cliffs, next to a huge and semi-derelict Gothic pile that wouldn't look amiss in a movie about the Adams Family.

Beyond the car park there's a field where people come to walk their dogs - with inevitable unsavoury results. Watch your step and stroll to the far end, or simply join the coast path by going through the gate at the car park.

Shortly after the field, the path swings around a point called Rock Nose and, in doing so, enters a sort of cutting. This groove has a distinct railway feel to it - in fact the wide, level path, even the wood and wire fencing - all speaks of what railway buffs call a permanent way.

It was part of the short but remarkable Bideford to Appledore line. I had no idea this railway headed out to the coast before turning north to pass through Westward Ho! and eventually reach Appledore. It not only did so, but there was even a station on this remote bit of shore. It was called Cornborough Cliffs Halt and I wonder: did the laver collectors of old catch the train here with baskets dripping full of the delicious seaweed? This coast is certainly renown for the stuff.

The line's history was as short as its miles, and not always sweet. Work began in 1898 after various plans had been put forward and the five and a half mile section from Bideford to Northam was completed in 1901. The line ran along the quay



*Basic hike: from Westward Ho! West along the coast path, along old railway at Cornborough Cliff - then footpath to Abbotsham Court and along hilltop lanes back to the Ho!*

*Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 139.*

*Distance and going: about four miles, very easy-going.*

at Bideford, to enter the hills and climb across the watershed to the coast. It wasn't very well run, by all accounts, and often there were more staff than passengers.

By 1908 they'd built the two-mile extension to Appledore, but were too snooty to put on an early train for workers. Instead, the line's owners preferred to spend their money on "blacked-up minstrels" who played at Westward Ho! Station. By 1917 it was all over – the steam engines were required for war work and the metal lines were taken up in aid of the war effort.

Pity, I'd loved to have taken the ride. But the line's disappearance has benefited the environment – I was delighted by the wildness of the coast at Cornborough Cliff, despite it being so close to the urban acres the Ho! and neighbouring Bideford. Indeed I saw more in the way of wildlife along that stretch than I have on any walk in a long time. Most remarkable was a stoat, who seemed to be rabbiting along the very edge of the cliff. When he saw me he dived over the side so I ran to the place, but never saw him again though I sat there and watched for 20 minutes. I hope he didn't plunge to an untimely end.

Had he done so perhaps one of the many herons would have made use of him. There were several of these tall birds wading in the rockpools down on the beach. Added to this I was escorted by stonechats for almost the entire hike. These small noisy birds often accompany walkers – they make a great song and dance about your passing, flying from the top twig of one bush to another as you approach, until you pass out of their territory and into a neighbouring patch, where the next one will take over escort duties. Wheatears will sometimes do the same, and I saw one of these handsome birds at Cornborough.

After I'd walked through the cutting I was able to get a better view of the great sweep of coast that curves southwest around to Clovelly and eventually to Hartland Point. My best-laid scheme, to quote the phrase, had been to march to Peppercombe and then head inland up to the main road where I could wait in the pub for a bus. But the railway had somehow fascinated me, and I made up my mind to follow it inland, thereby devising a circular route back to the Ho! I've had worse ideas – and better, but I think many readers would enjoy this pleasant little tour.

Shortly after the old railway veers from the sea to head for Bideford, the walker is introduced to a low valley. At the bottom, by the beach, there's a footbridge upon which someone has painted the words: "Stop the pollution". Just after this a public footpath heads up across the fields in the direction of Abbotsham Court. I climbed the hill to eventually reach a lane running inland of the court, and then I walked along the paved road to Rickard's Down. Turning left I then made my way along the quiet lane to Lake.

Beyond Lake the lane continues north to an area called Buckleigh, where developers are building new homes, and amongst the buildings a public-right-of-way heads north again. It leads to a National Trust owned area that enjoys superb views of Bideford Bay, and then descends sharply down to the car park where we began.