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North Devon

Hartland Quay Southern Circular

This circular walk boasts some of the most dramatic and savage coastal scenery to be found anywhere. The list of local shipwrecks at the Hartland Quay Museum is enough to bear witness to the savagery of the littoral – but aim your camera in any direction up or down this coast and you are guaranteed stunning views.

The long drive out towards the "Promontory of Hercules", as Ptolemy is thought to have called the great bastion that is Hartland Point, is well worthwhile because - wherever you reach the coast around North Devon's finest corner - you will find excellent walks aplenty.

But to reach this hike, head for Hartland Quay and not for Hartland Point, which is some miles distant.

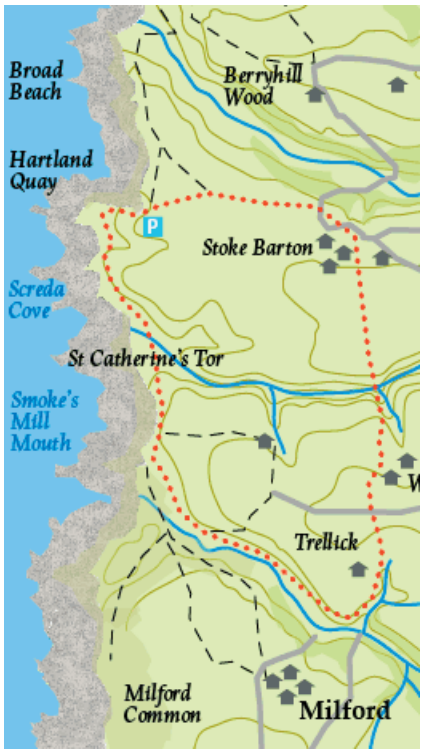
The walk starts at the car park adjacent to the Rocket House, just to the right of the road which leads down to the pub and museum at Hartland Quay. Now a modest dwelling with a big view, it was once the home of an award winning rescue service known as the Hartland Life Saving Apparatus Company.

Before the days of Seaking helicopters, rockets were a shipwrecked sailor's best friend, reaching the parts of a sinking ship that other methods simply could not. Needless to say, the rocket squads who worked from here were among the busiest rescuers anywhere in the country, firing their rockets and lines to many a vessel swept onto this windward shore.

It's a quick five-minute walk down to Hartland Quay where you will find a pub and a museum. The latter was founded in 1980 in order to preserve material relating to the history and character of the local coast. The museum occupies two upper rooms of the historic quay buildings, which once housed the families of coastguards, labourers and tradesmen in the days when the place was a thriving port.

We turn south along the coast path, which climbs away from the extraordinary quay to reach heady heights above Screda Point, before descending to the strange demesne around St Catherine's Tor.

The tor itself is one of the most remarkable protuberances to be found anywhere along the South West Coast Path. It looks like a miniature mountain that's been cut in half. Somehow its location is surprising and unexpected. I say that because a low, remarkably flat field sweeps around the inland base of the tor



Basic hike: From the car park above Hartland Quay, down to the old harbour, then south along the coast path to Speke's Mill Mouth - inland up the valley to Milford, then north over hills to Stoke before finally taking the footpath back to the Rocket House above the quay.

Distance and going; just over four miles, steep in places.

in an altogether unlikely way. The whole effect suggests the flat field was somehow manmade – indeed, it is three-parts surrounded by a giant wall.

I can find no reference to this strange place or to the wall in my many reference books or on the Internet – all I can discover is that St Catherine is supposed to have meditated a while on top of the Tor. St Nectan, the Celtic Saint, is also believed to have made his hermitage somewhere near here – and there's also reference to the fact that remains of a Roman villa have been found close by.

The coast path takes you across the flat field and returns you to the sea cliffs on the other side of the tor, above Speke's Mill Mouth. The views south are certainly of the stunning variety, the cliffs are contorted into an insane and rocky dance. I was reminded of something I'd read in the Handbook for Travellers in Devonshire written by a J. Murray in 1879. "No words," say Sedgwick and Murchison (whoever they were), "can exaggerate the number and violence of these contortions, - sometimes in regular undulating curves - sometimes in curves broken at their points of contrary flexure, and exhibiting a succession of cusps, like regular pointed arches."

The coast path now descends to Speke's Mill Mouth where the stream tumbles over the edge of a cliff in a series of dramatic waterfalls. You can take a detour by climbing down the new looking steps to the beach, but the route of our walk heads inland up the steep sided valley.

After about a mile you reach a road – a slight detour at this point will take you to Docton Mill, a restored water mill where teas and lunches are now served among the celebrated gardens.

We turned left at the crossroads and walked up the steep hill past Trellick House and onto Wargery Farm. From here a track will take you north to Stoke – the small village you would have driven through to reach Hartland Quay. Turn left once you get to the lane that passes for the main drag, and head for the 14th century St Nectan's Church. This old temple boasts the second tallest tower in Devon, a Norman font and wagon roof, and a marvellous 15th century rood screen.

Adjacent to the coastal end of the graveyard, a path issues into the neighbouring field and runs parallel with the lane from Stoke all the way to the Rocket House above Hartland Quay.