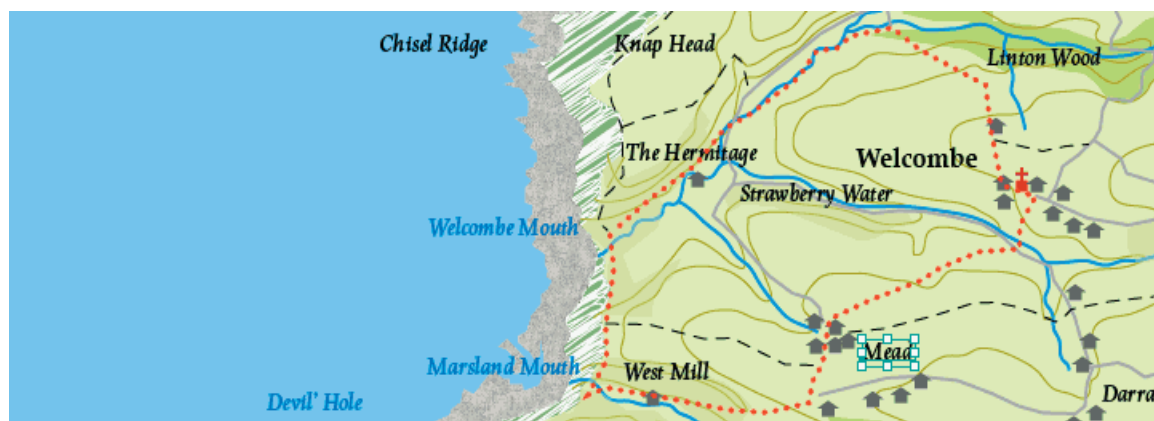




North Cornwall

Welcombe Mouth



When it comes to place names Welcombe Mouth is a bit of a sick joke. Nowhere could be less welcoming than North Devon's 'wrecker coast' – close the Cornish border. The men aboard the ships Maggie, Cornelia, Nancy, Leopoldin Baur, Edward Beck and Avonmore must have thought it to be the most inhospitable place on Earth as they wrecked upon its razor-backed reefs.

All those vessels went to their doom around Welcombe Mouth, and probably more besides. For mariners it is a savage place – but the walker can enjoy all this with equanimity.

Why Welcombe? I'm afraid I don't know how the hill-top hamlet situated above all this maritime mayhem got its name. It sits on a lofty eminence between two river valleys – one stream has come half-a-dozen miles from its source, just a few yards from where the Tamar is born. The other trickles just a mile or so from the more immediate hills. Anyway, where they converge not far from the county border, the OS map gives it the name Strawberry Water. So why not Strawberry Mouth?

To find this hidden demesne you must leave the Bideford to Bude Atlantic Highway and follow the signposts for Welcombe down seemingly endless lanes until a great 'V' shaped ravine reveals the sea.

At the bottom of the hill a track runs seawards to a clifftop car park. This places you in an ideal location to enjoy a selection of walks – both maritime and sylvan. I went for an option that included a little of both, but not before I'd read an interpretation board which announces that Welcombe Mouth is a Site of Special Scientific Interest. It is home to many specialist

Basic hike: from Welcombe Mouth to Marsland Mouth and then inland through hamlet of Mead and across to Welcombe and its church. Back via the northerly Welcombe Valley.

Recommended Map: Ordnance Survey 126.

Distance and going: six miles, steep in places – do not attempt Welcombe to Marsland Mouth along beach on a rising tide.

plants which can cope with the dry salt spray scattered by the sea.

The board talks about thrift, wild carrot and sea campion and says: The area around Welcombe Mouth is lightly grazed under the Ministry of Agriculture's Countryside Stewardship Scheme. This helps create areas of long and short grass, dotted with patches of scrub and bracken. Birds such as the stonechat, with its distinctive call sounding like two stones being knocked together, depend upon this balance using the open areas for feeding and the gorse for nesting.

The board also refers to the strange rock formations that can be found in the cliffs. They were formed some 320 million years ago from sheets of mud and sand on the ancient seabed being compressed and turning to stone over the ages.

You can soon see all this geological mayhem when you go down onto the beach. A path follows a ramp some 50 or 60 feet down to the shore and you get the feeling that people were using this means of access centuries ago. The local wreckers probably used it on a regular basis - they were at their evil work before Parson Hawker turned up at nearby Morwens-tow. He took against the wreckers and persuaded locals they ought to be saving souls, not destroying them.

Having developed rocket-squads which fired ropes and bosun's chairs to stricken ships, he used to dole out brandy to the men chosen to search the shores for bits of body - known locally as «gobbets».

Hawker was suffering from sciatica on the 14th September 1869 when one of his rocket squads were called out to deal with the 1,580 ton full rigger Avonmore which had got into trouble off Welcombe Mouth. A young officer and six Lascar sailors were swept overboard in the storm. But Captain Corfield and 14 men were successfully landed off the Avonmore by breeches buoy. Then the rescuers heard that one man was still aboard, trapped by the wreckage and a local doctor was summoned to be winched out to the stricken vessel where he could cut off the man's legs. But, just as Dr King arrived on board, the rescuers made a superhuman effort and freed the man with his limbs intact.

With that happy note, we proceed south along the beach. You can only do this safely at low tide - the alternative is to climb the coast path over the great hill and down to Marsland Mouth. This is the neighbouring cove and there is a scramble up to the path if you've gone by beach. It's worth it because the littoral along here is rich in mussels. They're small, but delicious.

This walk now continues inland, up the steep sided Marsland Valley past Weir Mill. A footpath climbs the northern flank at the diagonal, so it's not too bad a haul. This eventually reaches a track which in turn links up with the paved lane that runs through the hamlet of Mead. From here we strike inland again, along the hilltop footpath which crosses half a dozen fields to the farm at Witheford.

Another lane – and this time we turn left to descend into the Welcombe Valley and then climb into the hamlet of that name. Past the church and St Nectan's Well we march, over the second hilltop and then down to Watergap Farm situated on the banks of the Welcombe's other stream. Left again, and now it's down the road to the place where a footpath departs along the northern flank of the steep valley to reach the sea – and the car park.

The sailors might not have liked it, but after all those ups and downs Welcombe Mouth will indeed look welcoming by the time you reach it.