



East Devon

Branscombe West



Anyone who walks in the Westcountry regularly will know that it can occasionally become uncomfortably cold despite being Britain's warmest region. At such times it's best to repair to one of the south coast's more sheltered zones - and nowhere in Devon beats Branscombe when it comes to south-facing warmth.

The wind was stabbing down the beautiful Branscombe Valley like some dreadful dagger from the north the winter day we went there, but later, along the Undercliff, we changed seasons and entered spring. We were so warm we could have pulled out deckchairs and sunbathed.

No wonder they used to grow mainland England's earliest potatoes and broad beans along here.

Mind you, anyone attempting this walk will soon be warm - no matter what the weather - just by climbing the Alpine-like slope that stretches up from the seaside car park at Branscombe. It is a slope of the house-roof variety. As you walk, so your nose scrapes the steep hillside in front of you.

Goodness knows how high the ridge is at the top. It is a ridge by-the-way - rather than a bluff or cliff. I say that because, only when you get to the top do you realise that the southerly hill which protects the village of Branscombe is, in fact, one of those sham eminences with no substance to its spine. The slope ascends steeply up through the beech hangar from the village - and then ends abruptly in a sea-facing abyss.

The South West Coast Path follows this ridge as it treads its way prettily west past various old quarries towards a place called Berry Camp. From the path we can look down through

Basic Hike: from Branscombe Mouth west on coast path to Weston Mouth and back along the beach. Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 115.

Distance and going: five miles, one steep climb and descent.

Food and drink: there's an excellent little cafeteria at Branscombe Mouth or two pubs in the village.

the woods to see the picturesque village escorting the stream past the ancient and handsome church of St Winifred.

On the other side, far below, there's the beach at Branscombe Ebb and from this high vantage point you can see why Branscombe became one of the smuggling capitals of the south coast. What looks like a remote and isolated stretch of coast is in fact just a few hundred yards (as the seagull flies) from the village which is hidden and protected by the great ridge.

Apparently two Branscombe farmers, called Bray and Fry, were the hardcore smugglers here back in the bad old days. It must have been a romantic time of swash-and-buckle, but it wasn't so funny if you were caught bringing in the brandy. There were huge fines, long terms of imprisonment, hard labour - and, if you were really unlucky, transportation. The high odds meant people played the game very seriously - sometimes fatally.

Things came to a head in this loveliest of all corners of South Devon with the suspected murder of Branscombe customs officer John Hurley in 1755.

But it wasn't all hatred and murder - a contemporary account of smuggling in Branscombe by George Pulman, published in 1857, portrays quite a different picture:

"Smugglers could not have been much in dread of the excise-man for, when a child, I have often met strings of their horses by daylight, in charge of only a single person, travelling along the secluded roads and heavily laden with the contraband. The smugglers' horses were all remarkably sagacious. They travelled in single file, eight or ten together, and one of them - the oldest and most experienced - was called the Captain. He led the rest, and they all knew the 'enemy' and how to treat him. It was dangerous to attempt to stop them and, truth to tell, the experiment was seldom tried."

Without seeing a single smuggler we continued our walk in the sunshine along Coxe's Cliff, over the top of Weston Cliff, and down to Weston Mouth. Much of the territory covered on the route is, by-the-way, owned by the National Trust - including this latter chunk down the steep contours into Weston Combe.

The tide was out so we decided to head back along the beach. It's a bit of a trek, made all the more arduous by the fact the shingle is of the small and rolling variety. The actual distance is about two-and-half miles, but it feels more like five by the time you get back to Branscombe Mouth.

It's worth it though, because this is a wonderful, lonely bit of the littoral - and you can do what we did, and stop for a picnic on the way. We came to a halt at a place called Littlecombe Shoot where I was amazed to find a sort of secret holiday camp. The place is merely a scattering of chalets, old and new, spread across the undercliff in a higgledy-piggledy way.

From this enviable demesne, it's merely a matter of stumbling along the shingle to Branscombe Mouth.