



Devon

Scabbacombe Head



Basic Hike: From Coleton Camp car park east to Scabbacombe Point, and then west along Coast Path to Inner Froward Point and back via inland route.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure 20 South Devon (you won't really need one as the route is simple and there is an explanatory map on a board at the car park.

Distance and going: four-and-a-half miles - steep in places.

In Brixham parlance the phrase «To go round the Head» was once used as a term for dying. Well, the surprisingly remote coastal region on the west side of Berry Head has nothing to do with the Great Hereafter - but the area does have a mysterious, forgotten-world quality all of its own.

Walk there and you feel far from life's modern merry-go-round - even if you can see the massive urban conurbation of Torbay from the tops of the hills.

The coastal corner between Brixham and Kingswear on the Dart is South Devon's forgotten land. A world of rock stacks and roosting ravens, shags, fulmars and gulls; a littoral zone of inaccessible coves and dreamy demesnes.

Westcountry Walks has been to these lonesome marches before, when we trudged the classic circular route that took us down to Kingswear and back to Coleton Fishacre via Forward Point. Now we turn our attentions to a scramble around Scabbacombe Head, which dominates the next section of the seacoast towards Brixham.

The National Trust property of Coleton Fishacre is well sign-posted from the main Brixham to Kingswear road, though you do have to make your way down a couple of miles of narrow country lane to reach it. Once there, turn left and park in Coleton Camp car park, which marks the start of this walk.

All you do is climb over the stile in the eastern corner of the car park and walk down the track that descends toward the sea. As you go, you can look north over the hedge to observe the coast edging its way up towards Berry Head in a series of bluffs. It's an odd sort of landscape where grand cliffs are frayed by landslides that seem to dominate the proceedings from here to Sharkham Point.

Instead of going that way though, we turn south along the South West Coast Path at Scabbacombe to begin a two-and-a-half mile roller coaster of a walk that will take us all the way to Inner Forward Point.

Great walking it is too, if you don't mind the ups and downs, because the path offers a variety of views - both vast and sweeping, and intimate. One minute you are atop some windswept heath looking at the great vista of Start Bay, culminating far to the south at Start Point - the next you are down close to the tumbling waves, surrounded by cliffs and delighting in the unexpected sight of half-dozen violets peeping from a grassy nook in the rocks.

Few places in Britain can boast violets at this time of year, but these sheltered, south-facing hillsides are full of unseasonable secrets, as well as being famous for other flora, such the oddly named bastard balm and the celebrated saw-wort.

Ivy Cove is a great gash of a thing where a landslide has cut deep into the hill, and here the coast path does its usual trick: it simply ascends up and away to miss the slip, and the descends back down again once it's crossed to the other side. No wonder you climb the equivalent of four Everests if you do the whole 630 miles from Minehead to Poole...

No sooner have you negotiated one deep gut, there's another to climb around - but never mind, it's all great sport and is guaranteed to keep you fit.

Now at last the coast curves around the west and soon we are entering the dreamy demesne of Coleton Fishacre, perched in its sylvan realm high above Pudcombe Cove. Alas you cannot see the beautiful Lutyens-inspired house from the path, but you can enjoy the woods that seem to hang above the vertiginous shore like a misty green cloud.

Huge Corsican pines give the place an Mediterranean air, and if I ever envied anyone anything it is Rupert and Lady Dorothy D'Oyly Carte who lived here after the architect Oswald Milne finished building the place for them in 1926. At

least, they lived here when they weren't involved with Gilbert and Sullivan.

This wooded vale makes a good place for a sheltered picnic, but note that if you wish to ascend to the trust-owned house through the gardens - they are only open on a seasonal basis (phone: 01803 752466 for details). Up and up again we climb through the trees, and then follow the path south west past Kelly's Cove and Old Mill Bay, and then swing due west around Outer Froward Point to enter the scrub woods near Inner Froward Point. During this last section there are fantastic views of the Mew Stone and its companions, the Shag Stone and Shooter Rock.

The Mew Stone is by far the largest of these rocky islets and it's covered by roosting birds and guano. Like all big seabird colonies, this one seems to emanate a strange, uneasy, melancholy sound that squawks across the water from the distant crags. There's a large cormorant colony out there and grey seals are often to be seen lolling about on the lower rocks.

Now we walk up the track inland past the 80-foot high Day-mark standing proudly in its field. The hollow, stone construction was built in 1864 as a navigational aid for shipping and stands rather elegantly on eight angled columns.

The track takes us to the lane where we turn right to stroll half-a-mile back to the car park. Along here we are treated to a great panorama of South Devon - ever rising to the crags of Dartmoor - and that is when the thought strikes home that this really is the county's forgotten corner, tucked away beyond Torbay and the Dart.