



South Devon

Bantham

When you are standing up on the Ham, some 50 or 60 feet above the estuary, you see the River Avon's impressive curves sweeping down from the north only to go through an almost 180 degree bend before wriggling west and south again as it turns into the bay. It is one of the most scenic estuarine views in the region - and it is what you are treated to at the beginning of this walk.

Basic Hike: Around Bantham Ham and south along Coast Path through Thurlestone Golf Course, before returning via Thurlestone village and footpaths inland.

Recommended Map: Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure 20 (South Devon).

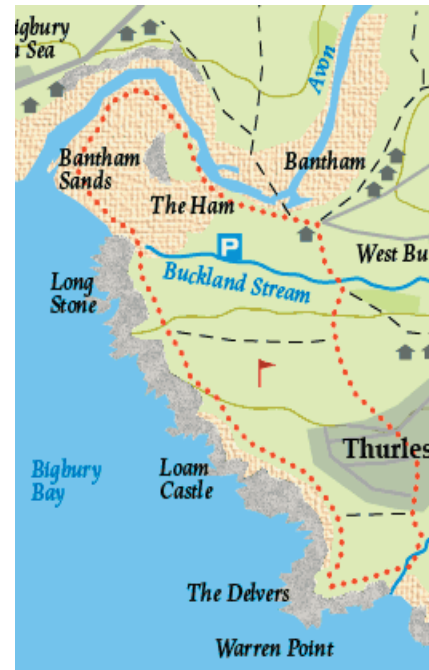
Distance & Going: Four miles easy going, but make sure you set off up hill diagonally to the left at the end of the hike to avoid muddiest field in Devon.

There's a car park on the Ham at Bantham which, if you don't know it, is the triangular shaped area of dunes that escorts the River Avon out into Bigbury Bay. If you're following this hike, don't be tempted to cut across the dunes to find the coast path: you'll get there in the end, but it's more fun to wander around the edge.

There's plenty to admire, like the red boathouse down on the river, which must be one of the prettiest examples of its kind anywhere in the region. You can also enjoy good views of Burgh Island across the bay and conjure mental images of the old pilchard days when a huer would give the cry from the top of the islet and the resulting catch would be cured in cellars dug into the rocks over there.

Times don't change much, as this excerpt from S.H. Burton's book *The South Devon Coast* (published 1954) proves: «Bantham Hams juts out across the mouth of the Avon and has in recent years been so plagued with motorists that special parking places have had to be set aside. This, of course, is the point at which the cliff path ceases to be interesting: nothing so quickly destroys the charm of a lonely coast as the slug-like vehicles of the present day, gaudy with chromium paint and as likely as not equipped with a wireless that blares out the Light Programme or, worse still, Radio Luxembourg.»

There were plenty of slug-like cars parked there the day we climbed off the Ham and onto the cliff path which leads south to Thurlestone. At the top of the first ascent you are treated to



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fabulous views of Bigbury Bay and its famous island. The next thing you'll see are golfers. That's because this part of the coast path weaves its way alongside the Thurlestone Golf Course. One sign, warning hikers of the dangers of high velocity golf balls, says: «Stick to Path and be Quick!»

We were quick all right. With a Force 9 gale blowing we weren't taking any chances on the accuracy of the man who was dressed like Bertie Wooster, but managed to cross the fairway to the garden walls of the line of expensive looking villas unscathed.

What sweeping sea views those expensive homes have... Far below in the bay is Thurlestone Rock, which is said to give the village its name. In Saxon times this was called Torlestan - derived, perhaps, from the old word thirled, meaning pierced or drilled. The rock has indeed got a huge hole right through the middle and such are its proportions that they say on a windy day you can hear its weird moaning and whistling all the way over in Kingsbridge. The rock though, doesn't seem to perform in an easterly - we didn't hear a sound.

At the southerly end of the golf course the path meets with a made-up road where we turned left, uphill, to the village of Thurlestone. If you are architecturally sensitive you might groan out loud upon seeing this corner of Devon, but then, it is the sort of «Gin-and-Jag-land» where architects from half-a-century had their wicked way.

At the top of the hill Thurlestone's mighty church acts as a sort of antidote to the architectural blues. Not only is it a handsome affair, but its ancient annals contain many an engaging tale of yore. For instance, in 1328 the Bishop of Exeter commissioned the Archdeacon of Totnes to reconcile the church which had been «polluted by the spilling of blood therein.» Who's blood? What terrible thing had occurred within these gaunt and splendid walls? I am afraid I do not know - but what I can tell you is that the Abbot of Buckfast arrived to do the heavenly deed only to find that the early gin-and-jag set of Thurlestone wouldn't pay his fees. The answer? The Bishop of Exeter threatened to ex-communicate the whole lot of them unless the money was paid - which, of course, it duly was.

Just to the left of the church a footpath takes us inland back to Bantham. We cross another part of the golf course before descending into a valley so that we can climb back to the village where we began. Be warned: the footpath signs disappear in this valley and consequently we ascended an extremely muddy field.

But eventually, after a steepish climb, you regain Bantham at a convenient point not far from the Sloop Inn.