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West Somerset

West Somerset Coast Path · Part 2

Last week we left the new West Somerset Coast Path at a point where it is forced to climb inland around the northerly flanks of the Quantock Hills. This is unfortunate in many ways because, by their nature, coast paths should always be within the sound of waves. But the diversion, forced upon the Somerset County Council by the owners of various holiday parks, has the slight advantage of allowing walkers fabulous views of West Somerset and of the section of coast path they've just walked.

However, we must turn our backs on the views and trudge eastwards from the Windmill Inn at West Quantoxhead along the footpath that runs parallel to the main Bridgwater road. This wends its way just under the forest to eventually issue onto the open moor under West Hill. Now the walker is treated to sweeping views of Bridgwater Bay and the upper reaches of the Bristol Channel.

Just before it reaches Smiths Coombe the footpath meets a junction, and at this point the coast path descends to the left to reach the main road. Careful how you cross, this is a busy thoroughfare - but, once on the northern side, you will enter one of the least spoilt and most quiet sections to be found along any stretch of coast in the region.

To reach the sea-cliffs, the path descends along a ridge just to the west of the picturesque village of East Quantoxhead. We turn right at the coast and pass the viollage, which is half a mile inland, to head towards Kilve. As you go spare a thought for the lonely Revenue Man who used to patrol this sequestered shore, it must have been a difficult job; the villages and

Basic hike: this is the second half of the new West Somerset Coast Path - from West Quantoxhead to Steart.

Distance and going: 12 miles, very easy going.

Recommended map: Walkers should follow the easy to recognise ammonite marker signs, but the map to have is Ordnance Survey's Explorer 140.

hamlets of the hills were apparently awash with contraband booze 200 years ago.

A few hundred yards inland at Kilve Pill there's an ivy-clad ruin of an ancient chantry - once used by local smugglers as a storehouse. The monks had long gone and eventually the smugglers quit the place themselves after they'd set ablaze to it in a panic to rid themselves of incriminating evidence. Apart from the pyrotechnics, they were a clever lot. Apparently they trained ponies to gallop off to a pre-ordained place on their own, should they hear special whistle. Even more resourceful, the horses were taught to break into a trot at the word «Whoa!» and stop at the phrase «Gee-up!»

Now the coast path traverses a particularly deserted part of the littoral. Huge cornfields spretch away inland but the real interest lies seawards beneath the cliffs. The limestone «pavements» and other rock formations along this section of the walk are some of the most dramatic in the country - though they are, of course, only visible when the tide is out. Past the Royal Naval bombing range lookout building, we come to Lilstock, which I am convinced is the loneliest, least visited, beach in the Westcountry to have its own car park.

There's a long thin gulch behind the main shingle back, and this is all that 's left of Lilstock Pill. There used to be a working harbour here - and a hotel - though there is barely a trace of either structure now. Sailing ketches - between 15 and 20 tonnes - used to pull in and out of the long defunct harbour. They'd unload their limestone over the side into horse-drawn carts and take away cargoes of local grain.

A local landowner called Sir Peregrine Acland attempted to bring further fortune to the place by building a small quay so that pleasure steamers from Bristol and industrial South Wales could call. They did, for a while - and then operations ceased after the shingle choked the Pill.

The coast path continues east now to meet the most shocking and surprising of structures to be found on any section of coast path. I am talking about the three huge stacks of Hinkley Point nuclear power station. The walk around the coastal side of this vast complex is one of the weirdest bits of seaside hiking to be done anywhere.

If you like Dr Who and other TV shows that attempt to portray some futuristic Britain, then you'll love this bit. You walk along a sort of caged concrete tunnel and you can hear the hum of atoms being crushed as you

go. Gulls hover on the warm up-draughts above the reactor stacks and you may even see a peregrine come swooping out of nowhere to dive between three different atomic versions of oblivion.

Then it's out onto the teasle-lined shore and on our way to Stolford. No one should ever go to Stolford without first arranging to call on Brendan Sellick, the mud-horse fisherman. At this time of year Brendan and his son catch shrimps by going out across the deadly mudflats of Bridgwater Bay on their weird mud-horse contraptions. I've written about them before in this newspaper, so I'll just content myself by saying that

these shrimps are now in season, and they are the very best maritime treat to be had in the Westcountry.

After Stolford the path curves around the seaward edge of the flat vastness otherwise known as Catsford Common. And so we come to lonely Steart, perched improbably on the flat, flat lands at the mouth of the Parrett. Steart, with its silos and chicken-sheds, is the village at the end of the world, let alone at the end of two fantastic trails. But there it is - set in an alien landscape from some 1960's sci-fi movie - at the junction of the new West Somerset Coast Path and the River Parrett Trail.

Now all you have to do is walk that latter route, turn right at the English Channel, keep going along the South West Coast Path until you reach Land's End, then head back up to Minehead along the north coast. It's a circular walk of a mere 630 miles - the longest waymarked walk in the world.