

DEVON

Sketchbook

A pictorial guide to favourite places

Jim Watson



Thurlestone thatch



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The hillside pathway, Lynmouth

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Typical South Devon countryside on the edge of Dartmoor



INTRODUCTION

Devon is many people's idea of the ideal country place to live. Given a big lottery win many of us would be heading for the West Country to spend it. A thatched cottage overlooking the sea. Wonderful!

But Devon is far more than a country idyll set in an equable climate. It's certainly an outdoor kind of a region. Whatever you like to do outdoors you'll probably find all you need here. Some counties are pleased to boast one National Park, but Devon contains two, all of Dartmoor and a significant piece of Exmoor.

Unique in England, the county boasts two separate and distinct coastlines, with some of the best beaches in the southwest. You can tramp across wild moorland, walk along the South West Coast Path and explore the oldest part of the geological treasure house, the Jurassic Coast. Devon also has some of Britain's most-loved seaside resorts, historic towns and cities; picturesque villages set in gentle hedged landscapes crossed by narrow winding roads; and some of the best sailing and boating centres in the southwest. Truly, it has something for everybody.

I've been visiting and enjoying Devon for well over 40 years and researching this book has enabled me to renew my acquaintance with old friends and to discover new places that I look forward to visiting again. Most of my favourites were much the same as I remember

them. Devon has a timelessness that's reassuring and comforting, especially if you live in a part of the country that's rapidly changing.

This book will guide you to a wealth of favourite places along the north and south coasts of Devon, plus some in the Exmoor and Dartmoor National Parks. It will tell you how you can drive there, where you can park and what to look out for. I also hope it informs, entertains and, if you're a visitor, gives you something to enjoy when you're back home.

What it can't do is provide the unexpected surprise that can stay with you forever. I've enjoyed many of my travels throughout this remarkable county. I hope you will too.

Jim Webster

Rugby, 2014



The Anchor inn, Beer

NORTH DEVON



Old boat at Bideford



Dulverton, on the edge of Exmoor

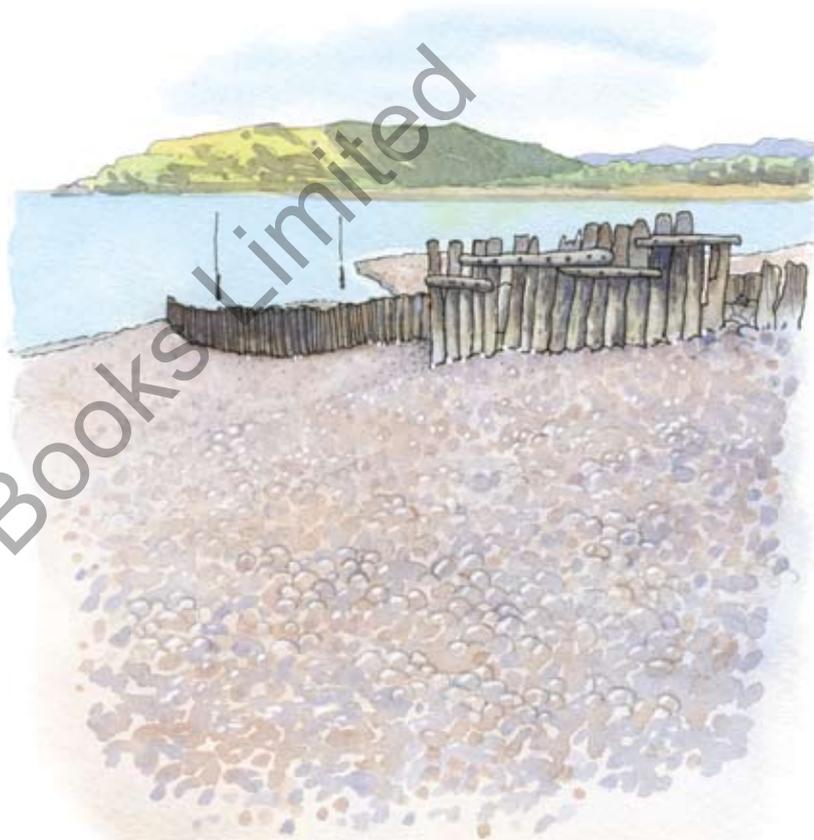
The M5 motorway and the A30 trunk road slice Devon in two along a thinly populated swathe of small settlements, which emphasis the division and effectively turns one county into two.

North Devon is less touristy than the south, with an unspoilt and unsophisticated charm, a place of few dual carriageways and no railway beyond Minehead; of quiet pastoral delights; forest walks and relaxed drinks in real country pubs.

There is excitement too: dramatic cliffs – some of the highest in England; the western beaches washed by Atlantic rollers; smooth green hills slashed by deep and mysterious wooded combes; and dear old Exmoor, more approachable, more colourful and less crowded than Dartmoor.



The Black Venus Inn at Challacombe

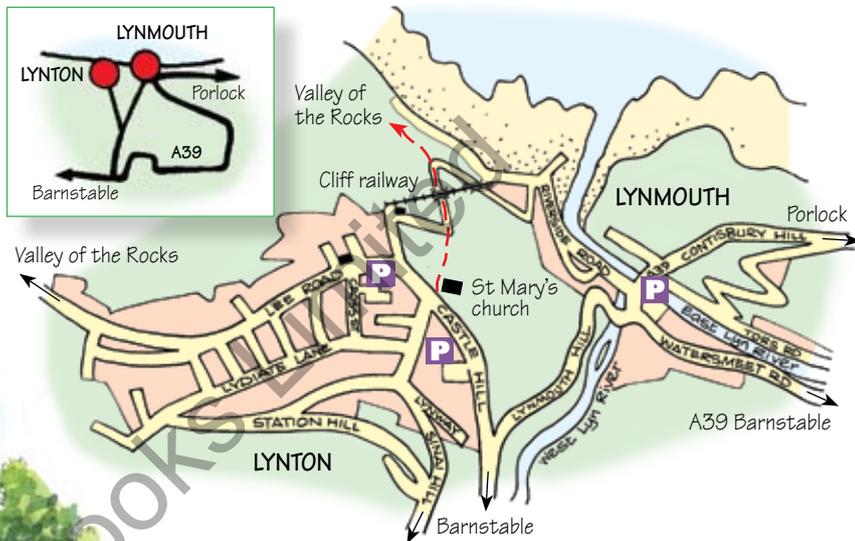


*The beach at Forlock Weir
(Actually in Somerset, not Devon, but far too good to miss)*

LYNTON

Set on a wooded cliff top 500ft (150m) above its sister resort of Lynmouth, Lynton's popularity soared in the 1890s with the publication of *Lorna Doone* and the arrival of literary tourists in search of the book's romantic settings. The summer invasion continues but the town manages to retain an attractive gentility largely unscathed by the excesses of modern tourism.

The imposing Town Hall on Lee Road epitomises Victorian-Edwardian values. It was the gift of publisher George Newnes, a frequent visitor to the town who also financed the nearby cliff railway.



Lee Road



The Town Hall



Queen Street

Lynton's main shopping area winds along Lee Road into Castle Hill. Little alleys lead off with some attractive gift shops. There's even a cinema, up an alley next to the town hall.

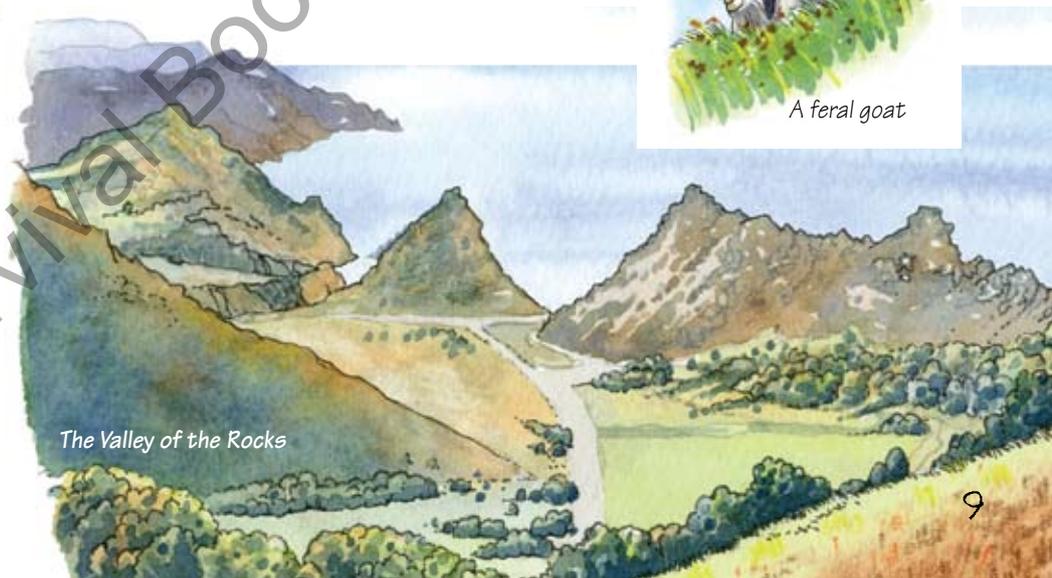
This is prime walking country, not just along the coastal path but inland too. Watersmeet, one of the area's most celebrated beauty spots, is appropriately set where two rivers meet in a magnificent wooded gorge, a couple of miles east of the town.

Beginning at St Mary's church, a tarmac path takes you a mile or so west of Lynton into the Valley of Rocks, a dry heathland valley probably formed during the ice age. It's dominated by extraordinary rock formations jutting from the grassy floor that have been given fanciful names such as The Devil's Cheesewring and Ragged Jack. There's a car park in the valley but it's most impressive when approached on foot.

You may be lucky enough to spot the valley's famous feral goats that have run wild here for, it's said, over a thousand years. More recently they have been accused of running a bit too wild and going on the rampage, munching on flower beds, raiding washing lines and allegedly destroying the village cricket pitch. So in a cunning plan to curb their numbers Lynton Town Council announced in 2013 that 80% of the female goats would be given contraceptive injections – if the villagers could raise the £12,000 cost. See 'em while you can.



A feral goat



The Valley of the Rocks

LYNMOUTH

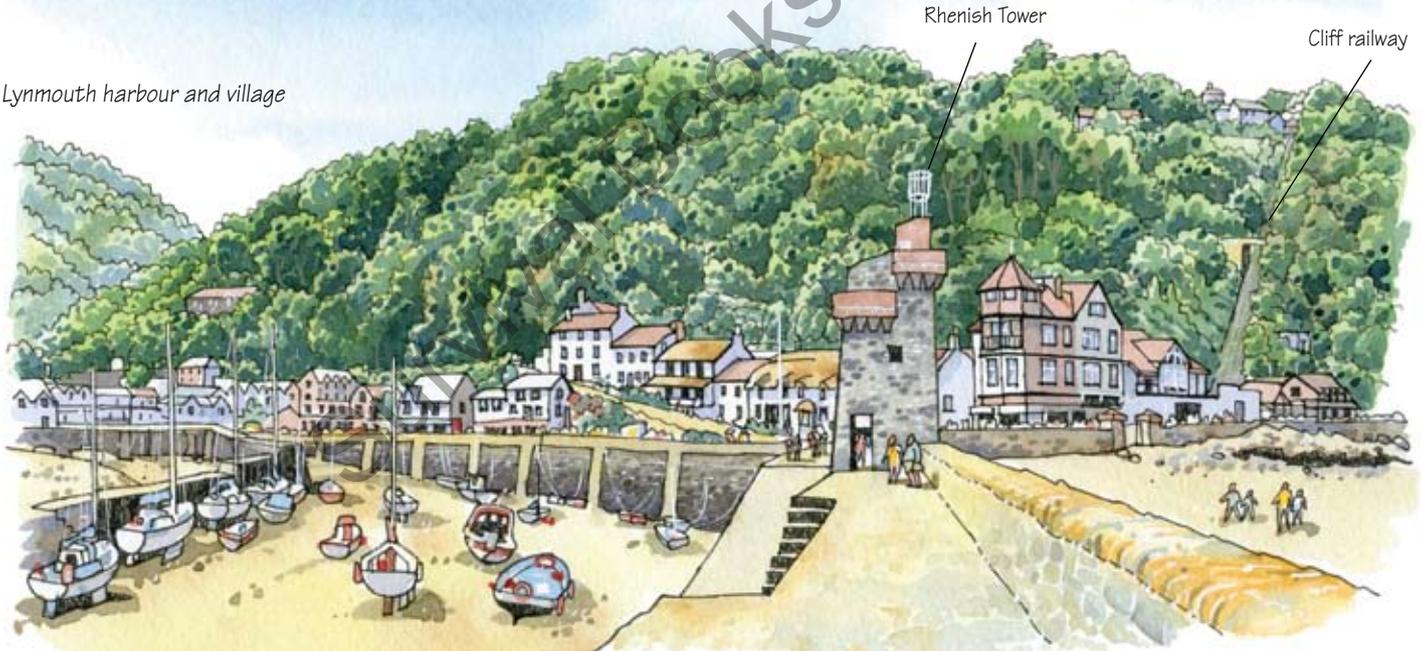
Prettier and more of a village than its cliff top neighbour, the beauty and romance of Lynmouth has been celebrated by artists and writers alike. Gainsborough was a fan, Shelley spent his honeymoon here and R.D. Blackmore, the author of *Lorna Doone* stayed in Mars Hill, the oldest part of the village.

The perfection was shattered on August 15, 1952, after nine inches (23cm) of rain fell on Exmoor in 24 hours. Floodwater surged down the valley, hundreds of trees were uprooted, all the bridges were swept away, Lynmouth harbour was destroyed, houses were demolished and 34 people were killed.

Reminders of the terrible devastation still remain around the village and it's vividly recalled in the Flood Memorial Hall by the harbour. Though few houses were rebuilt, the river was diverted away from the village and the harbour redesigned. Even the Rhenish Tower, a 19th-century folly built on the harbour wall to provide seawater for bathers, was faithfully recreated.

With a street full of gift and tea shops clustered around the harbour and a large coach park at its head, Lynmouth has become more touristy, but still has undeniable charm. And the view of the village from along the harbour wall is perfection.

Lynmouth harbour and village





The cliff railway

Opened in 1890, a remarkable cliff railway driven by an ingenious counter-balance system links Lynmouth with Lynton 500ft (150m) above. Connected by a steel cable, one car goes up the steep 1 in 1.75 gradient as the other descends. Traction is created by putting the two cars out of balance using the weight of 700 gallons of water pumped into the top car's tank and emptying it when it reaches the bottom

Riding the cars is an essential part of the Lynton and Lynmouth visitor experience, but if you prefer to walk up or down the cliff, a tarmac path zig-zags through woodland alongside the railway.

The much photographed scene of whitewashed houses and the 14th-century thatched Rising Sun Inn climbing up the wooded hill from Riverside Road will be familiar to anyone with a Devon calendar or a postcard from Lynton and Lynmouth. Even so the sight of the real thing can be a considerable pleasure. Lynmouth beach is a mixture of sand and shingle. Pleasant enough, but unspectacular.

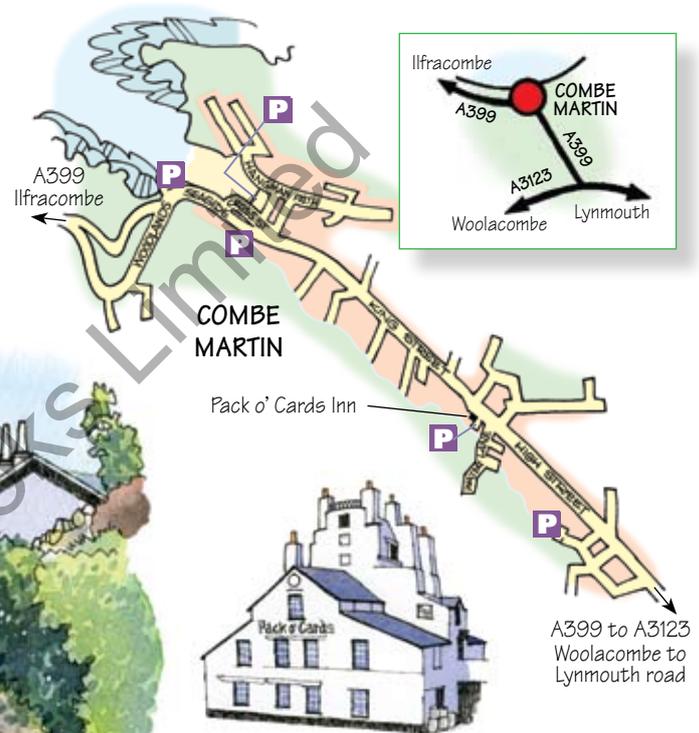


Riverside Road & The Rising Sun Inn

COMBE MARTIN

Set at the end of a sheltered valley, Combe Martin is famous for its unfeasibly long main street which straggles for around two miles down to the seafront. Even driving along it seems to take forever.

The beach is a mixture of sand and rock set in a small rocky bay, a decent place to swim with plenty of pools to poke about in at low tide. This stretch of coastline is fearsomely spectacular and boasts some of the highest cliffs in Britain. It's well-worth exploring – with care!



The Pack o' Cards Inn on Combe Martin High Street was reputedly built by an 18th-century gambler with his winnings. The oddity originally had 52 windows (some were later boarded up), four stories representing the suits and thirteen doors on each level for the number of cards in each suit.

EXMOOR

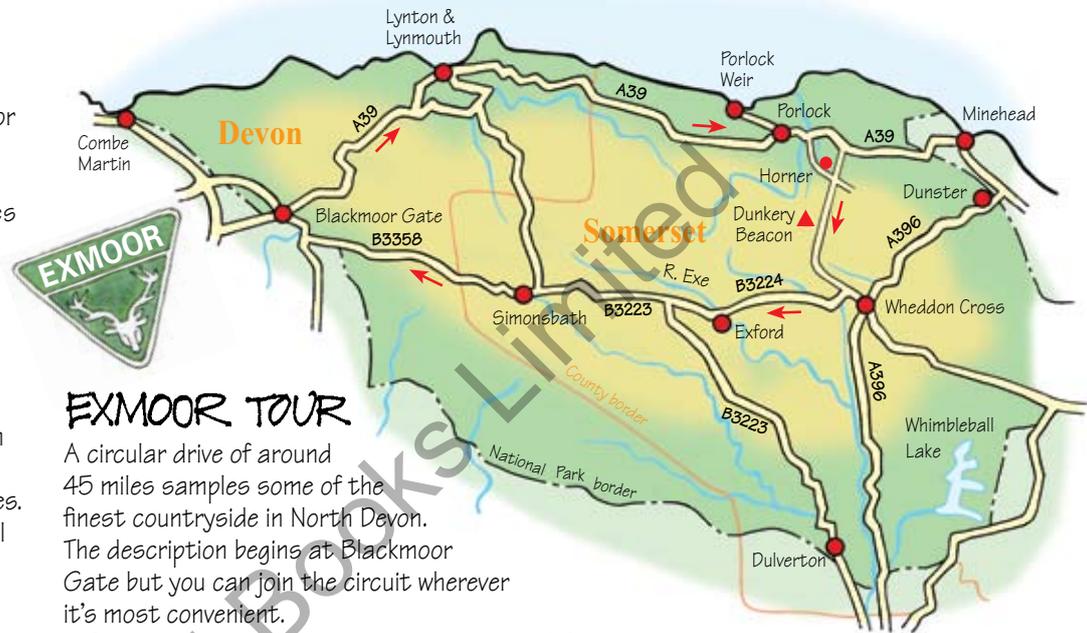
Once a royal hunting forest, Exmoor was designated a National Park in 1954. It's one of the country's smallest, covering 267 square miles with 29% of it in Devon and 71% in Somerset.

The scenery in the park is amazingly varied: high cliffs and plunging ravines; fast-flowing rivers; wooded valleys; picturesque villages; and a high plateau of open heathland with sensational views across the Bristol Channel to Wales.

Though managed by the National Park Authority, much of Exmoor is still privately owned and farmed but there's still good access to a wide network of bridleways and footpaths.



The Exmoor Forest Inn at Simonsbath



EXMOOR TOUR

A circular drive of around 45 miles samples some of the finest countryside in North Devon.

The description begins at Blackmoor Gate but you can join the circuit wherever it's most convenient.

On the outskirts of Lynton stay on the A39 for a dramatic ride along a wooded ravine before emerging at Lynmouth. Beyond the village, pause to admire the views from a hillside car park just after a cattle grid. Approaching Porlock there's a choice of routes: a scenic toll road zig-zagging through woodland or down the famous 1 in 4 Porlock Hill. After visiting Porlock Weir rejoin the A39 towards Minehead, then after a half mile or so turn right onto a narrow road signed Horner & Luccombe.

About half a mile beyond the fairy-tale hamlet of Horner, turn right into a narrow wooded road signed Dunkery Beacon. Climb steadily for a couple of miles and emerge from the woods onto high heathland. The beacon, at 1,704ft (518m) Exmoor's highest point, is a short walk from a car park. Resume on the minor road and gradually descend to join the B3224 near Wheddon Cross. Continue on to Exford and Simonsbath and rejoin the A39 at Blackmoor Gate.

EXFORD

Regarded as the centre of Exmoor, Exford is an attractive no-nonsense village with an absence of twee country cottages but with a strong sense of community. An ancient crossing of the River Exe, the present substantial stone bridge was built in 1930.

The main street winds sleepily past a large village green and shops providing the necessities for life in a fairly remote country area. There's a post office and general store, a garage, an agricultural machinery supplier and an amazing shop packed with all manner of outdoor clothes, hats, walking sticks, horse saddles and tack – all in various shades of green and brown. None of your dayglow cagoules here, frightening the wildlife.

Exford also has two hotels. The White Horse Inn beside the river is headquarters of the Devon & Somerset Staghounds which has hunted on Exmoor since 1875. It's a good place to stop for refreshment but if you have strong views on hunting this is probably not the place to air them!



Exford

The view north from Dunkery Beacon

Wales

Bristol Channel

Porlock

Minehead

PORLOCK



Porlock High Street

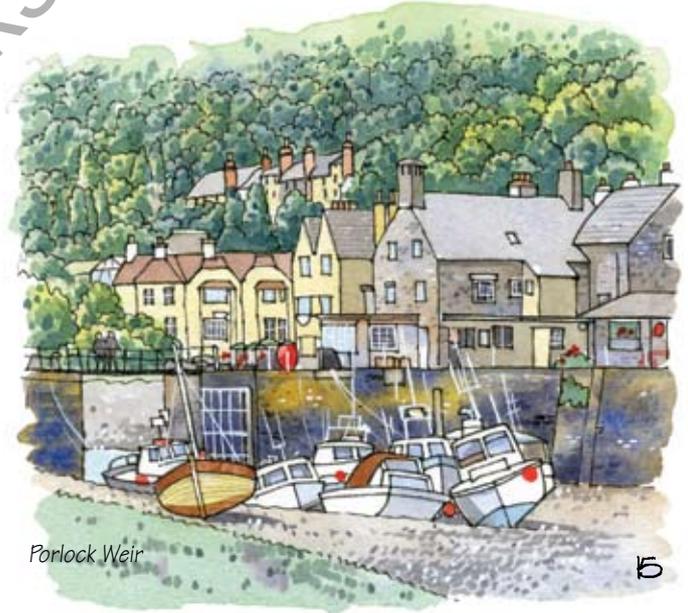
Porlock lies in the Somerset part of the Exmoor National Park, beautifully situated in a deep hollow, overlooked on three sides by hogbacked Hills. The High Street winds attractively past hotels, cafés, a 13th-century church, antique shops, galleries and an excellent food store.

The late 18th-century poets Wordsworth and Coleridge roamed these hills, with Coleridge complaining that he was interrupted by 'a man from Porlock' while writing *Kubla Khan* and was unable to finish it. Another poet friend, Robert Southey, stayed at The Ship Inn which features prominently in *Lorna Doone*.

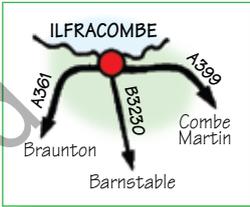
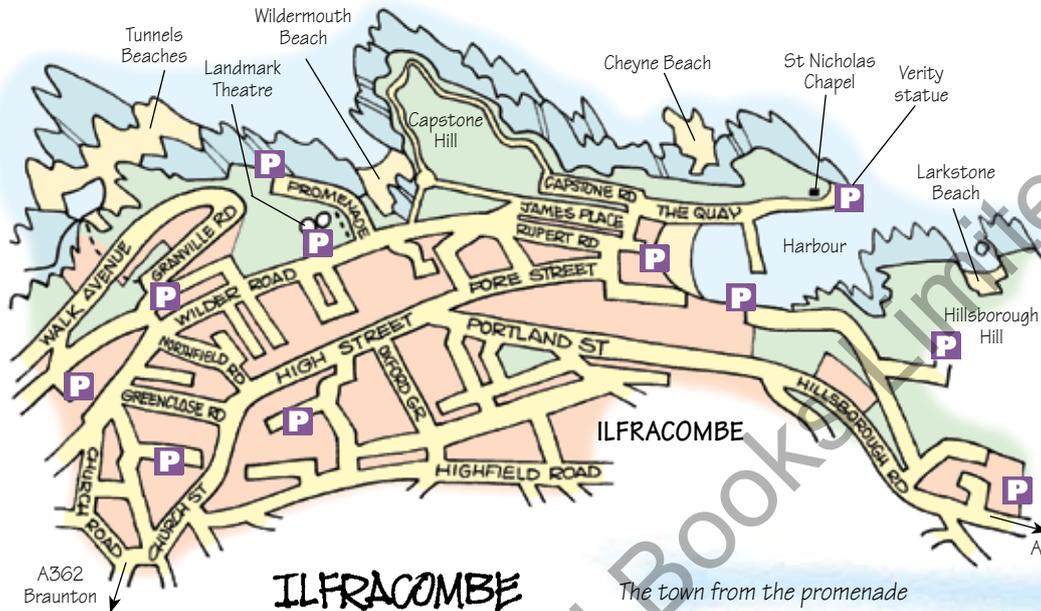
Modern-day visitors can park at the village hall at the western end of the High Street or in a car park at the other end, near the Exmoor Classic Cars Museum.

Porlock has everything a visitor could want, except perhaps the sea. However, this is taken care of a couple of miles away at the ancient and atmospheric harbour of Porlock Weir, once a busy port for trade with South Wales.

Today it's a sleepy spot with thatched cottages, a rambling old inn, a restaurant and a handful of gift shops. The beach isn't your golden sand variety but even more impressive; a wide bank of smooth pink, blue and grey duck egg-sized stones, difficult to walk on but beautiful to behold. Weather-beaten groynes totter down to the shoreline and boats scatter all over the place at low tide. Backed by wooded hills, it's an artist's paradise.

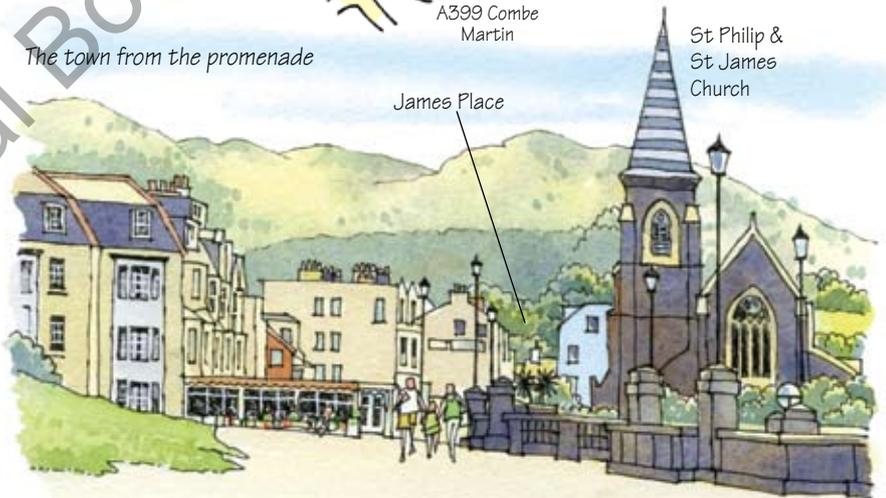


Porlock Weir



The town is set in a remarkable cradle of hills – all providing wonderful views. Hillsborough Hill is particularly special as the viewpoint for the classic harbour scene depicted on numerous calendars and postcards.

The town from the promenade



When Victorian developers discovered Ilfracombe with its natural harbour overlooked by spectacular cliffs, they quickly turned the centuries-old fishing port into a popular resort.

These days the elegant Victorian and Regency terraces and villas on the hillside look a bit jaded but there's a enough going on to maintain the town's position as the top resort in north Devon.

Fishing, mainly for crab and lobster, continues, with a small fleet of brightly-painted boats moored on the south side of the harbour.

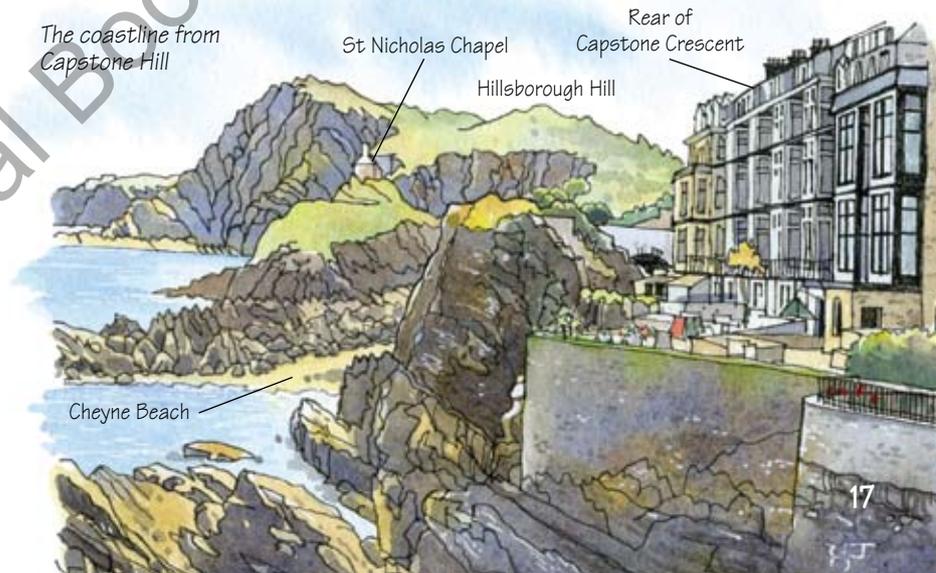


Fore Street

Running steeply down to the harbour, Fore Street has an eclectic mix of gift shops, restaurants and pubs, including the 14th-century George and Dragon Inn and the old police station, now the La Gendarmerie restaurant.

Five of Ilfracombe's six beaches are sand and shingle with rock pools at low tide. The other beach – actually a series of little coves – is also the oddest. Tunnels Beaches are accessed from Northfield Road through tunnels bored by Welsh miners in the 19th century. Previously inaccessible, the beaches are of grey sand and shingle towered over by grey cliffs creating a slightly claustrophobic moonscape. But not in a bad way, couples even get married here. Privately owned, the beach area is being developed with bars and cafes. Worth the small entrance fee – you'll never see anything like it.

A tarmac walkway follows the shoreline around the base of Capstone Hill providing some sensational views of the remarkable ragged and jagged rock formations along the way. A walk to the grassy hilltop is rewarded with a wider view, even – if you're lucky – a glimpse of the Welsh coast across the Bristol Channel and Lundy Island, 25 miles out to sea where the Bristol Channel meets the Atlantic Ocean.



The coastline from Capstone Hill

St Nicholas Chapel

Rear of Capstone Crescent

Hillsborough Hill

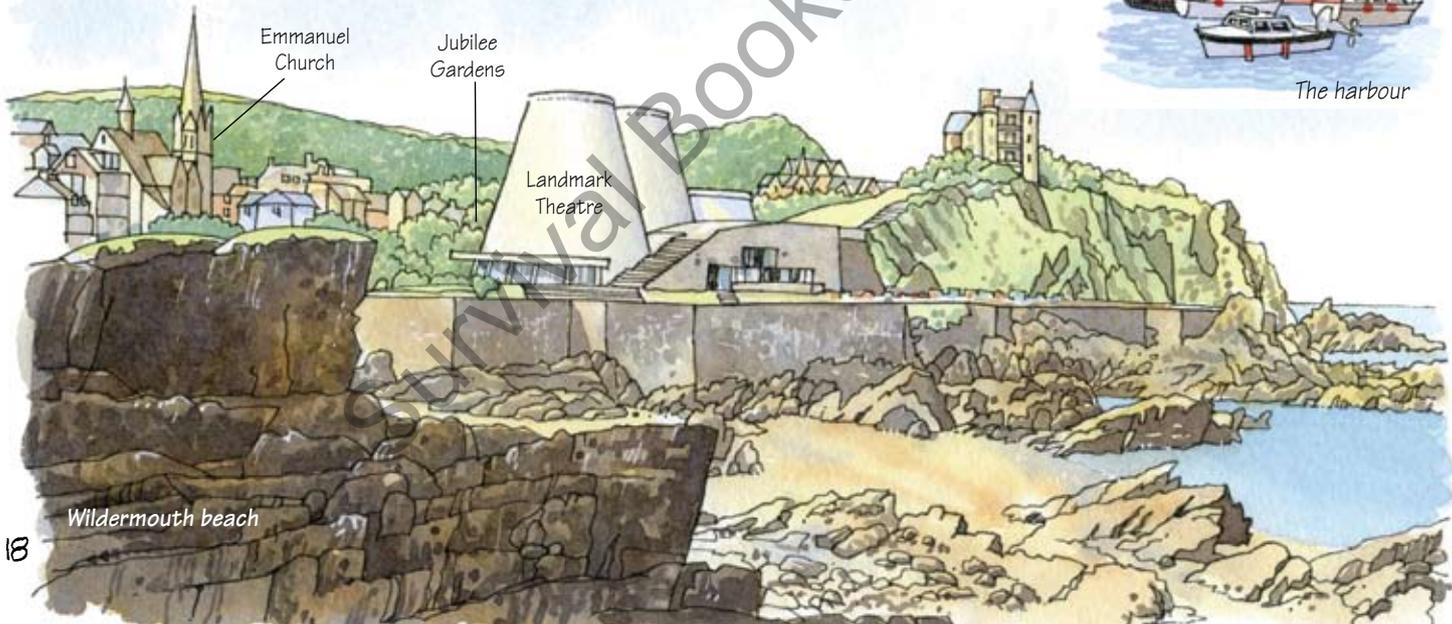
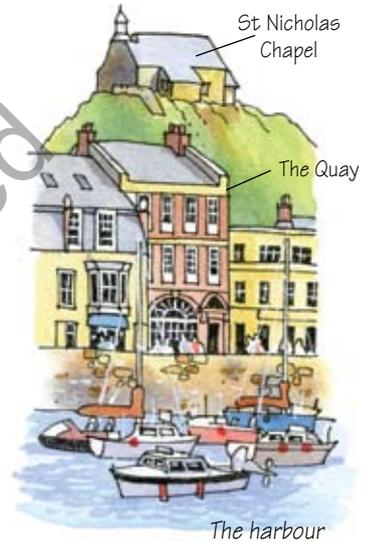
Cheyne Beach

A pathway climbs around Lantern Hill to St Nicholas Chapel, the town's oldest building which once offered succor to 14th-century pilgrims *en route* to Hartland Abbey. It later served as a lighthouse for over 500 years and a family dwelling for two parents and 14 children.

The aptly-named Landmark Theatre, reminiscent of a pair of massive white binoculars, is a £4.5 million arts and entertainment complex completed in 1997 as part of the council's regeneration plan. The twin cones, each 73ft (22.5m) high were built using more than 300,000 bricks.

Nearby is an interesting mosaic marking out the world triple jump record of over 16ft (18.29m) achieved by former Ilfracombe resident Jonathen Edwards in the 1995 World Athletic Championships. It does look a remarkably long stretch. Children and adults who really shouldn't, cannot resist trying to emulate his jump. Most get no further than the 'hop' section.

Jubilee Gardens are a glorious celebration of the Victorian legacy, where you can sit and admire a wonderful panorama of the town and the hills beyond.



Fast food outlets and gift shops line the harbourside with The Quay, a century-old inn turned into a modish restaurant and bar by contemporary artist and co-owner Damien Hirst, providing a more upmarket experience.

Summer visitors who'd like to sample a quieter pace of life can board the MS Oldenburg for a trip to Lundy Island.



The Lundy ferry



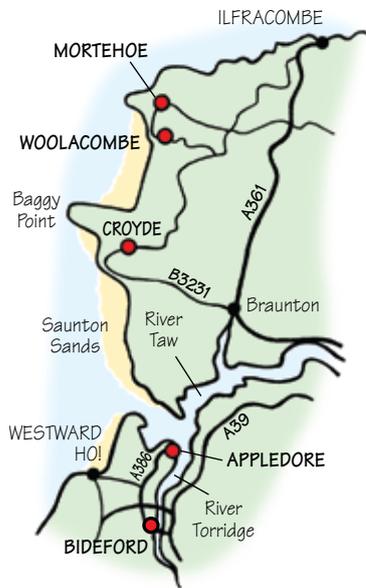
An Ilfracombe fishing boat

Damien Hirst has invested heavily and generously in the area but his most controversial gift to the town has undoubtedly been Verity, a 66ft (20m) bronze-clad statue of a pregnant woman holding a sword aloft while standing on a base of legal books and holding the scales of justice.

Hoisted into position beside the harbour car park on October 16, 2012, the statue has received a 'mixed' reception. Whatever you think of modern art and this piece in particular, you can't miss it. And like it or loathe it, Hirst has loaned Verity to North Devon council until 2032.



Verity



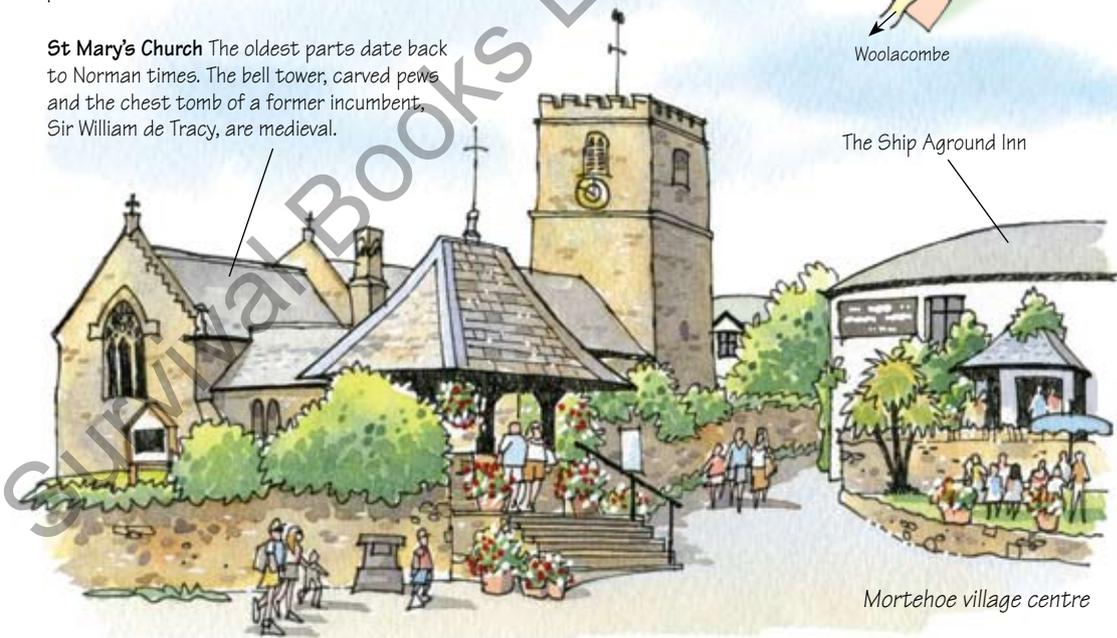
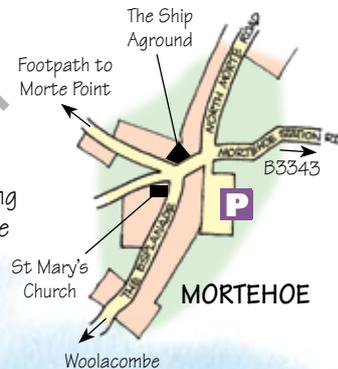
The rugged north coast of Devon turns sharply south at Mortehoe to a long stretch of the best beaches in the county. Only the great rocky outcrop of Baggly Point and the broad slash of the rivers Taw and Torridge estuaries interrupt this 10 miles of continuous sandy delight.

MORTEHOE

Mentioned in the Domesday Book and formerly a small farming community, the village of Mortehoe has grown to cater for modern tourism. A large car park and a vast caravan and camping site on the outskirts bear testament to the area's popularity. There's also three pubs, a village store, post office, restaurants and cafes.

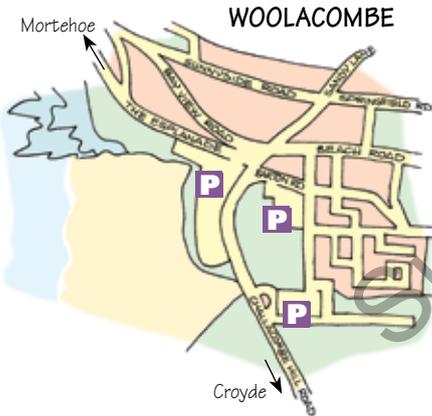
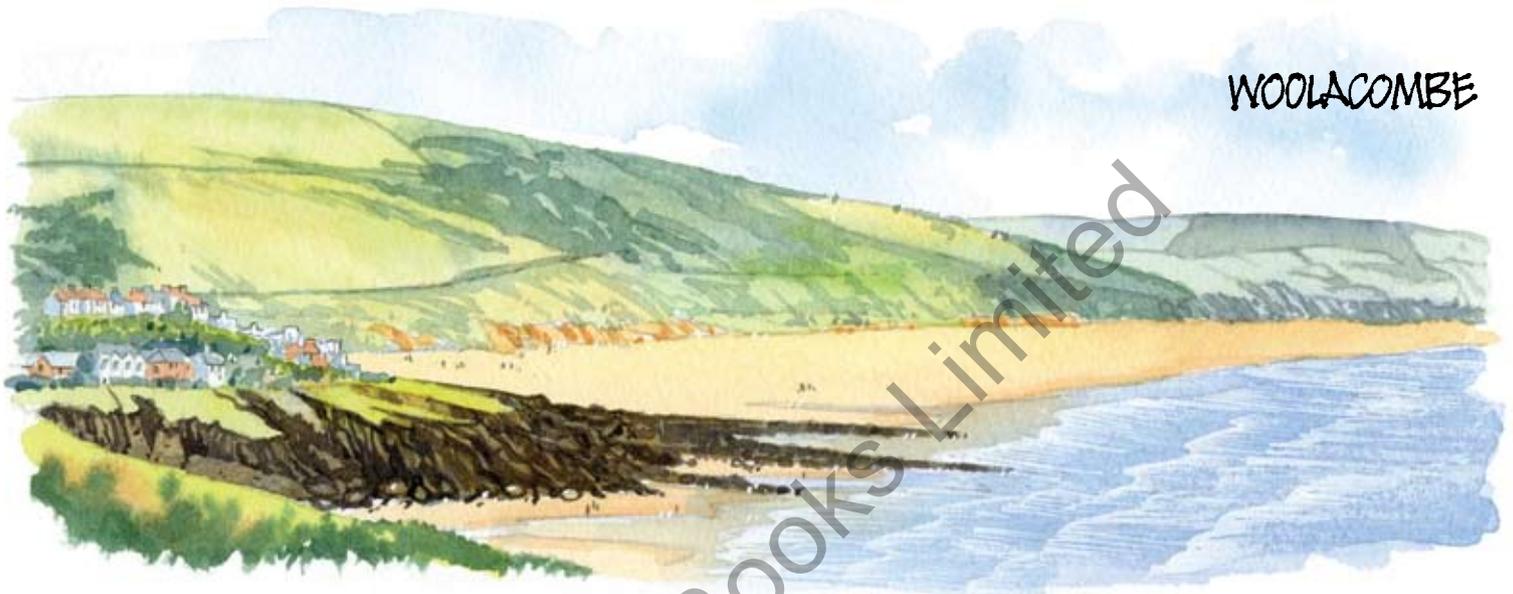
The Heritage Museum behind the car park revels in the swashbuckling history of local smuggling and shipwrecks. Walk a mile out of the village to Morte Point to see the sharp-rocked scene of the crimes and possibly the seals which bask on the north side.

St Mary's Church The oldest parts date back to Norman times. The bell tower, carved pews and the chest tomb of a former incumbent, Sir William de Tracy, are medieval.



Mortehoe village centre

WOOLACOMBE



Driving south along the cramped road from Mortehoe an elevated view of the sea opens up on your right and you think nothing can beat this. Then something does. You turn a corner into Woolacombe and a vast golden expanse of super-clean beach is revealed. The rather characterless village cannot compete but it doesn't need to. Woolacombe is all about the beach, the village is only there to provide facilities for the droves of summer visitors.

The resort became popular in the late 19th century. A few seafront Regency villas remain but it's now dominated by hotels, caravan sites, holiday homes, restaurants and cafés. Lively in summer but rather sad in winter. Except of course for that beach!

During the Second World War, small boat crews and infantry of the US Army practised amphibious landing assaults here in preparation for the Invasion of Normandy, part of Operation Overlord. Woolacombe's long flat beach was considered to closely resemble the one at Omaha. A stone memorial to the soldiers, dedicated in 1992, is sited on the grassy headland at the northern end of the beach.

CROYDE

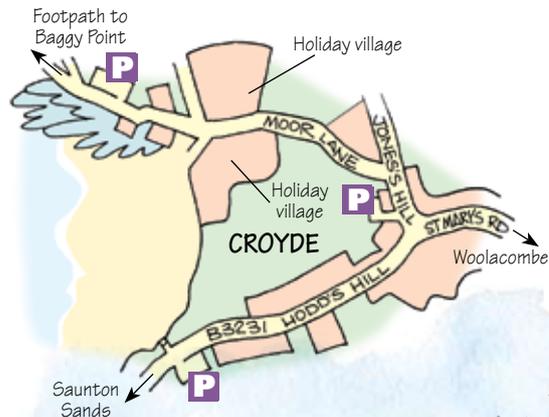
Blessed with a beautiful crescent bay and acres of golden sand, Croyde attracts a multitude of summer beach-lovers and surfing devotees all year round. However, away from the beach hot-spots and the Moor Lane camp sites, Croyde is also a pretty village of thatched cottages and narrow lanes, although it can be horrendously busy, especially when there's a beach music festival taking place and youth culture is at full blast.



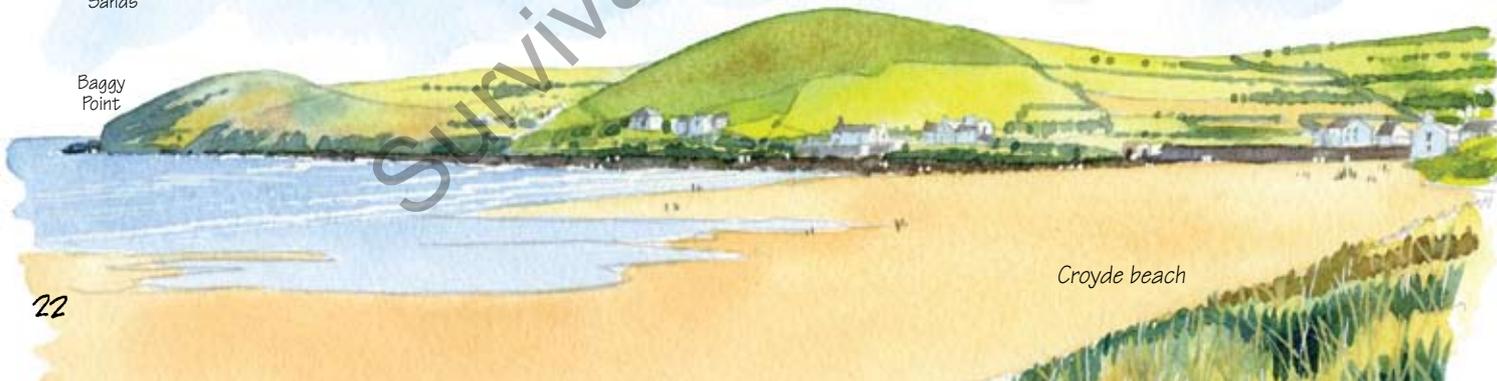
The Thatch – a surfer's hangout in Croyde village



Thatched cottage at the centre of Croyde



The village hall car park fills up quickly but there are two others serving the beach. The Moor Lane end is the livelier with fast food eateries and beach shops. For a quieter time head for the one at Hood's Hill, but you'll have to cart all your gear down a long flight of steps to the beach.



Croyde beach



Baggy Point

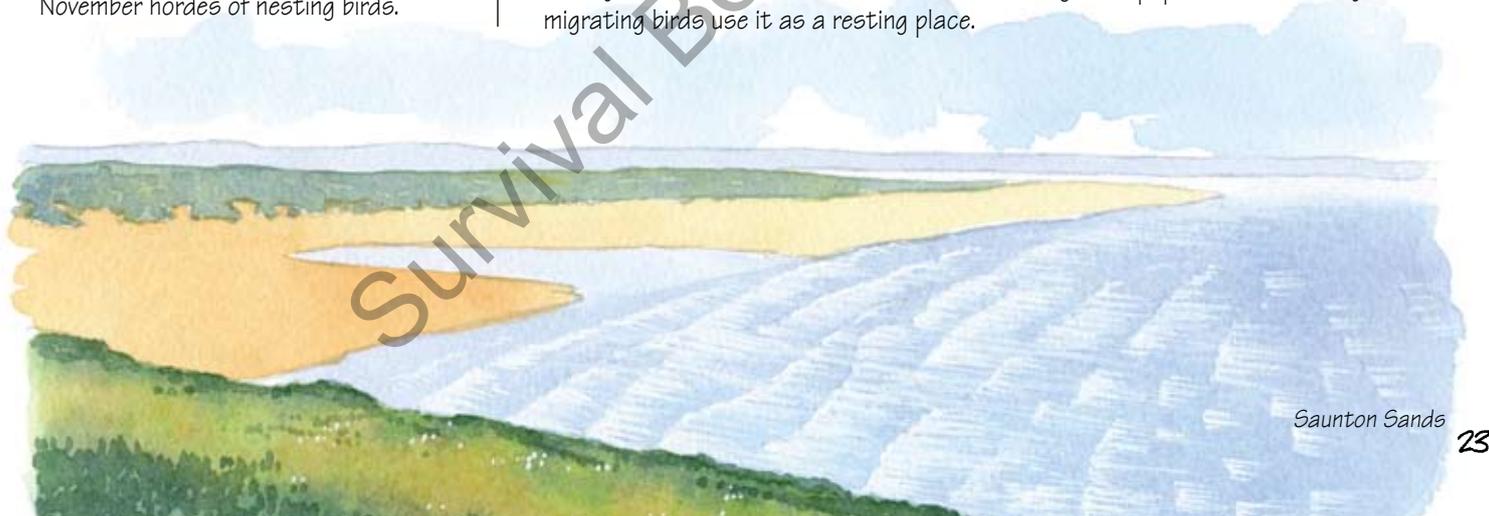
A lovely mile-long walk out of Croyde, Baggy Point is a fantastic viewpoint. The vertical cliffs attract rock climbers and from September to November hordes of nesting birds.

SAUNTON SANDS

The road from Croyde climbs to an elevated view across the area's largest beach of all, Saunton Sands. With the Torridge and Torr estuary three miles distant and Atlantic breakers endlessly rolling in, it's a magnificent sight. Less developed for long stay holidays than Woolacombe, Saunton Sands caters more for day visitors with a car park, toilets and café at the northern end and the white 1930s Saunton Sands Hotel on the clifftop above. Good for bathing, although the southern end should be avoided due to strong and unpredictable currents in the estuary.

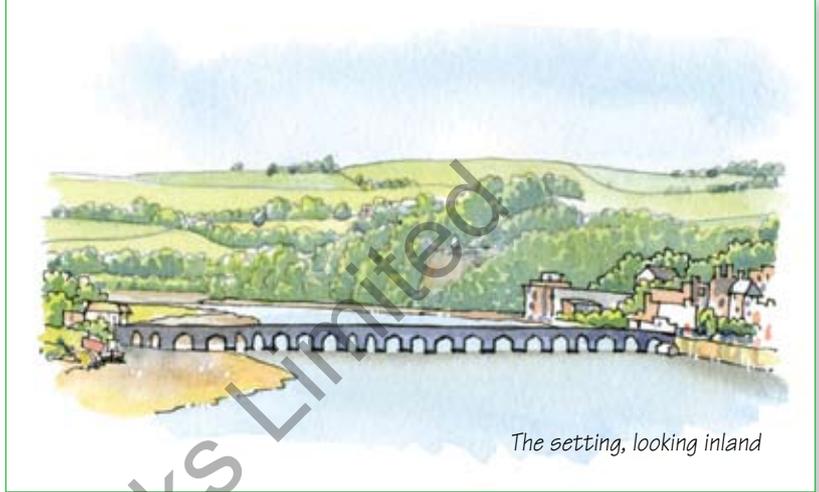
Not only a world class family beach, Saunton is also renowned for some of the best surf in the country. When there's a good swell it can produce line after line of beautiful long slow rollers that are an irresistible draw for longboarders from all over the country.

And that's not all. Between the beach and Braunton village lies Braunton Burrows, one of the largest sand dune systems in England, famous for its plant and animal life which received Biosphere status from UNESCO in 2002. It's home to a huge variety of moths and butterflies. Flocks of wading birds populate the estuary and migrating birds use it as a resting place.



BARNSTAPLE

North Devon's largest town and local government centre, Barnstaple grew up around the lowest crossing point of the River Taw about seven miles upstream of its outlet into the Bristol Channel. The major part of the town sits on the eastern bank connected to the western by the ancient 16-arch Long Bridge.

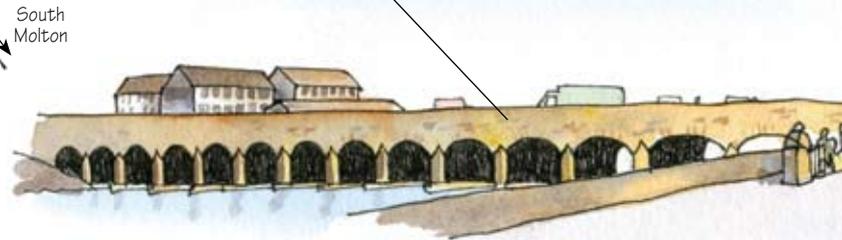


The setting, looking inland

Barnstaple is a compact, lively town with all the familiar chain stores strung along the High Street and Boutport Street, but there's also many alleys to explore, quiet corners and some fine buildings.



Long Bridge The 16-arch bridge was originally built about 1437 but has been much altered since. Last widened in 1963. A new Taw bridge was opened in 2007 which has helped relieve Barnstaple's notorious traffic congestion.





The historic Guildhall & High Street

The town's early prosperity was built on wool, much of it exported, but when the River Taw began to silt up business transferred to Bideford. Some sea-going trade survived and even today coastal vessels still dock with building materials and other bulk cargoes. Clay dug from the Taw and Torridge estuary sustained an important pottery industry in the area for hundreds of years.

The Georgian Guildhall, built 1826, has been central to Barnstable's history over the last two centuries. It's still used by the Town Council and tours are available to view the old courtroom, mayor's parlour and town plate.

The **Museum of North Devon** has lively and imaginative exhibits with Tarka the Otter featuring heavily. The Tarka Trail passes through the town

Clock Tower Erected in 1862 as a memorial to Prince Albert.

Boutport Street

The Square

