

Tunnels for ladies and men, whilst Raparee beach to the east of town was reserved for ladies. Ilfracombe's fame spread as a charming seaside resort.

The town now expanded. Elegant terraced buildings spread up the hillside from the front and many hotels sprang up. Visitors poured in from paddle



steamers which began to ply the channel. In 1906 over 160,000 passengers disembarked. 1874 saw the arrival of the railway which opened the resort to the whole country. By the 1930s as many as 50 mainline expresses would arrive on a summer Saturday, visitors coming from all strata of society.

As elsewhere, after WW2 rail travel declined to be replaced by the car. The line to Ilfracombe closed in 1970. Before long foreign holidays gripped the imagination and became affordable to most, with a consequent decline in UK holidaymaking.



In recent years Ilfracombe has adapted, by catering for different types of visitor including many from abroad, and by offering short breaks spanning the whole year. The town occupies a uniquely attractive coastal setting with fine countryside on its doorstep. The many attractions of North Devon lie within easy reach.

Ilfracombe



A Brief History

The Ilfracombe area has been inhabited since the Iron Age when Celts established a hill fort on Hillsborough, the large hill to the east of the town. The Domesday survey notes the town's name as a derivative from Anglo-Saxon meaning 'Valley of the sons of Alfred'. The town developed as two distinct communities, a farming settlement centred on the parish church, and one based on fishing and maritime activity exploiting the natural harbour. In 1208 the town provided King John with men and ships to invade Ireland, and again for King Henry III in 1246. The first recorded incumbent of the church was Oliver de Tracy in 1272. St Nicholas's chapel on Lantern Hill was built circa 1361 and is the oldest working lighthouse in England.

Throughout the years the town continued to provide men and ships for various wars, The port grew in importance in the 18th and 19th centuries based on shipbuilding, fishing and services to other channel ports and to Ireland. The first lifeboat station was commissioned in 1828. The formation of the Ilfracombe Sea Bathing Co. in 1823 established the town as a holiday resort, with access to the Tunnels beaches being worked by Welsh miners. Originally segregated bathing saw separate tidal pools at the

ilfracombe
curious coastal charm

Town Trail

1 Go by coast path to the harbour. Return by picturesque Fore Street.



View from Hillsborough

This leaflet is one of a set of three describing walks starting from Ilfracombe Tourist Information Centre at the Landmark on the seafront. Allow an hour or more.

Walking directions and historical notes

Your detailed walking directions are in boxes (see **1** below). Other text tells you about what's to see. Start at the Tourist Information Centre.



- 1** From the Information Centre go left to skirt the head of Wildersmouth beach. Continue past the paved **Clapping Circle** to join the coast path between **Capstone Hill** and the beach up to the point where the path curves right. This is **Windy Corner**.

The **Clapping Circle** is so named from the squeak that clapping excites from the nearby cliff. Just above the beach on the left is located **Preachers Rock**, once used by priests in years gone by. On a clear day **Windy Corner** is a good place to stop and scan the horizon. From the left look along the coast which leads to **Bull Point** and its lighthouse, and locate **Lundy Island**, just to the right on the horizon. Moving right the coast of **South Wales** comes into view with the low hills of **Gower** directly opposite. To their right lies the city of **Swansea** about 28 miles away, and further right on a very clear day the **Brecon Beacons** can be seen.

Clapping Circle



- 2** From Windy Corner continue along **Capstone Parade** above the cliffs, turning inland at its end. Here turn left onto **Capstone Road** and walk to its end by the **Sandpiper** pub.

Walking now along **Capstone Parade**, one can look ahead on the coast to **Lantern Hill** with its hill top chapel and the entrance to the harbour. Behind, the brooding presence of **Hillsborough** provides a magnificent backdrop.

Capstone Parade was much frequented by ladies and gentlemen of elegance and especially commended as 'suitable for bath chairs'. The Parade was built with money raised by subscription from gentry and residents.

Instead of following the Parade, more energetic readers might like to ascend **Capstone Hill** for its superb all-round panorama of the town and coast.



View from Capstone Hill with Katy



View west from Capstone Hill

The statue on the summit was erected in memory of a student, Katy, who met her death falling from Hillsborough. Returning to the main route, as you walk along **Capstone Road** look out for the round plate to the right and the mosaic showing an otter recording the stay by Henry Williamson, author of 'Tarka the Otter'.



- 3** At the Sandpiper turn right then left onto **The Quay**. Follow this alongside the harbour to the entrance of the pier head car park.

As you turn the corner onto The Quay, see the restored **Royal Britannia** inn. Its history dates back 300 years with recorded visits by Lord Nelson. Another visitor was Prince Edward who became Edward VII, when the hostelry was permitted to add the "Royal" to its name and to display his resplendent coats of arms which adorn the frontage (since removed for painting the inn).



As you walk past The Royal Britannia along The Quay with the popular harbour beach and moorings to the right and numerous shops, take-aways and cafés to the left.

4 Reaching the end of The Quay, enter the head of the harbour. Visit in turn from the left: the **Aquarium**; note the **Harbour Office**; **St Nicholas Chapel** on **Lantern Hill**; and the main quayside where the Oldenburg docks. And finally, inspect the sculpture **Verity**.

Ilfracombe aquarium, located in the original 1890 lifeboat station, gives a fascinating insight into the magic of local aquatic life.

By means of a series of well-cared-for tanks containing numerous exhibits, you take a zoned journey from Exmoor down freshwater streams to the estuary with its rock pools, and to the marine habitats of the Bristol Channel.



Now walk past the **Harbour Office** to the left and up to **St Nicholas chapel**.

St Nicholas chapel, which sits on **Lantern Hill**, overlooks the entrance to the harbour and, besides its role as seamen's chapel, is reputed to be the oldest working lighthouse in England dating back to 1321. Today its little tower houses a green flashing navigation light. It ceased as a chapel when Henry V111 dissolved the monasteries in 1540 and was later used as a reading room, a laundry and for band practice. Improbably, records show a washerwoman, a Mrs Davey, and her 14-strong family living there for a time despite the nearest water supply only to be found in Broad Street. The chapel is now open as a mini museum. The cannon placed outside is a relic from a defensive battery here that guarded the harbour.

This view from St Nicholas chapel shows, from the left, the North Devon Coast to Lynton and beyond; the looming mass of **Hillsborough** with its Iron Age fort; and well to the right, **Rapparee beach** which in Victorian times was for 'ladies only'.



Ilfracombe harbour, the only significant anchorage on the North Devon coast, has sheltered mariners from the middle ages to the present day. In the 13th and 14th centuries Ilfracombe was the embarkation point for army expeditions to Ireland, Scotland and France. It is noteworthy for its great tidal range often exceeding nine metres and consequent tricky currents offshore. Its main uses now are for commercial fishing, chiefly along the southern quay, providing for the tourist trade, and anchorage for leisure craft. A frequent visitor is the **MS Oldenburg**, the **Lundy Island** supply vessel.



The **MS Oldenburg** was launched in 1958 in Bremen to be used for a ferry service between mainland Germany and the Frisian island of Wangerooge. In November 1985 she was sold to the Lundy Co. to replace its transport boat, the Polar Bear. After a refit at Appledore Shipyard and installation of new engines she has since served to take passengers and supplies to the island of **Lundy** on routes from **Ilfracombe** and **Bideford**.

Lundy Island, a granite outcrop measuring some three miles long, is wonderfully peaceful and unspoilt. Whether on a day trip or a stay, you will enjoy the indigenous plants and animals, outdoor activities, or simply absorb the scenery.



Lundy Island



As you walk round the pier your eyes will constantly return to the twenty metre high bronze sculpture **Verity** by **Damien Hirst**, installed in 2012. It features a pregnant woman with sword held aloft holding scales behind her back and standing on a plinth of books. The sculpture is considered to be a modern allegory of truth and justice. Other Damien Hirst pregnant woman sculptures can be found in New York and Monaco.

5 Leaving the head of the harbour go left immediately on **Old Quay Head**, the jetty that divides the inner from the outer harbour. Thread your way past lobster pots and fishing tackle to find at the end a plaque on the left. Finally, turn back and return to the **Royal Britannia Inn**.



This old pier is used by smaller working fishing boats and by pleasure craft. The plaque near the end records the works ordered by the **Bourchier Wrey** family to build the pier, and extend it in 1760 and 1824. The Bourchier Wrey dynasty, who were preeminent in Ilfracombe as Lords of the Manor for over two hundred years, built the Manor House, the large red brick mansion clearly visible on the other side of the harbour. Difficulty in collecting

harbour dues caused them to raise an act of parliament to help bring obstreperous ship owners to heel.

6 At the **Royal Britannia** turn left into **Broad Street**, noting the large panels depicting old Ilfracombe scenes. Turn left to reach the harbour slip-way. Here turn right to walk along the narrow passage beside the **Lifeboat Station** to reach the start of **Fore Street** stretching ahead of you. Continue up Fore Street.



On **Broad Street** these large fibre-glass panels once graced the Market Arches near High Street. They depict views of the **Bath House** and of the **harbour seen from Hillsborough**, set in different past times. The name panel above "Crang" refers to the **timber yard** that occupied the buildings behind for a time.



As you pass the **Lifeboat Station** it is worth thinking about how the large off-shore lifeboat "The Barry and Peggy High Foundation" can be launched, even at low tide when the sea recedes some 400 yards. The answer is to use a track-laying bogie as seen in the picture to spread the load, manoeuvred by a track-laying tug which passes easily over the sandy surface and into the sea. For much more on the RNLI, if the station is open, feel free to enter, look around and talk to staff.

7 Ascend **Fore Street** to its top and, just before entering **High Street**, turn right down a walkway (**The Candar**). Shortly, just past the library, turn left along an alley (**The Lanes**). After walking 70 yds, take the first alley on the right. This leads down to your starting point.

As you begin the ascent of **Fore Street** you pass the **Prince of Wales** and **George and Dragon**, two of the oldest pubs in Ilfracombe (see in Trail 2). Not only is **Fore Street** one of Ilfracombe's most picturesque streets, more than any other it exudes a feeling of past times, its looks having changed little in 150 years. Records show a total of 25 listed buildings. Look for a house named **Beverley** on the right, the town police station until 1926, its downstairs toilets still recognisable as the cells.



Fore Street. The old police station to the left

In **The Candar**, the new development that includes the library is built on the site of the Candar Hotel, sadly lost to fire in 1983.

On entering **The Lanes** you will be struck by the sight of mosaics adorning the walls, put up by the Civic Society in 1993 to brighten up this part of town.

