

**Location & Access:**

The nearby town of Barnstaple acts as a transport hub for the area, and there is a working railway station here that links to Exeter Central and Exeter St Davids. Public buses run from Barnstaple to Braunton (Route 21 to Ilfracombe).

There are numerous car parks in Braunton, and this walk starts from the Caen Street Car Park in the centre of the village (grid ref: SS 487 366).

Other car parks can be found at Velator Quay (grid ref: SS 484 354) and at Broadsands (grid ref: SS 467 327).



Photo: Paul Berry

**Key Geography:** One of only three examples of an open field farm system left in England, Braunton Burrows UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, marshland reclamation scheme, Crow Point spit, theTaw estuary, river management at Velator.

**Description:**

This seven-mile walk over flat relief gives a taste of three imposing landscape features next to the village of Braunton in north Devon. These are: Braunton Marsh, an area of wet pasture reclaimed in the 19th century, Braunton Burrows, one of England's largest areas of sand dunes and the Braunton Great Field, one of only three such examples of open field farming in England surviving from the medieval period.

**The walk starts at the Caen Street Car Park in the centre of Braunton (grid ref: SS 487 366). Leave the car park entrance and turn left, almost immediately crossing the river Caen. Turn left into Caen Field immediately after the river, and continue to the stone bridge.**

**The River Caen has its source to the north of village, and was Braunton's important link to the sea in the early days. It used to be known as Braunton Pill, a local name for a tidal creek or small coastal river or stream. It appears beside the path here as a shallow, swift flowing brook, but it has overtopped its banks many times in recent years, notably in December 2012 when flood defences costing over £1m were put into place.**

**Just a little way past the bridge, the path passes Hordens Mill, a water mill that made use of power from the river. A sign on the wall indicated it was established here in 1254, although the current buildings came much later. Directly after the mill, take a right turn away from the river along Mill Stile, a narrow path between houses.**

**The path meets up with a road (Field Lane), where you need to turn left. Pass the Sea Scouts hut on** (continued overleaf)

**Curiosity Questions:**

# What name did Henry Williamson give Braunton Great Field in his book, 'Tarka the Otter'? # Horsey Island is covered by a first coloniser plant that was burnt in medieval times to yield soda. What industrial use did this have (which also gives away the name of the plant)? # The largest group of workers in the open field system were known as villeins. Their dwelling place gave rise to which word used in our language today?

**Further information:**

[www.northdevonbiosphere.org.uk/braunton-burrows](http://www.northdevonbiosphere.org.uk/braunton-burrows)  
[www.explorebraunton.org/the-open-strip-field-system.aspx](http://www.explorebraunton.org/the-open-strip-field-system.aspx)

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***the right, and a cattery on the left, before turning right to cross a stile onto a public footpath that runs along the edge of the Braunton cricket ground. At the far end of the ground, you get your first view of the Great Field. Turn right, and continue along the edge of the Great Field close by the gardens of some houses. along Second Field Lane, you will soon meet a sign for Second Field Lane, and a public bridleway that takes you to the left into the Great Field itself. Be warned, this path is often wet and muddy in winter!***



Braunton Great Field—Photo: Paul Berry

The Braunton Great Field is an example of open field farming. This was the main system of agriculture that operated throughout Europe during the Middle Ages (or Medieval period), between the fifth century and late fifteenth century. Apart from Braunton, the only other places in England where evidence remains of the open-field system is at the village of Laxton in Nottinghamshire and at the Isle of Axholme in North Lincolnshire.

In this system, individual settlements in England were each surrounded by two or three giant unfenced fields (hence the name ‘open field’) that were divided into blocks or parcels of land known as ‘shotts’. Each block was further divided into long, narrow strips of land that were cultivated by the peasant farmers of the village. These strips measured one furlong (furlow-long) or 220 yards (200 metres) by one chain (22 yards or 20 metres), and created a unit of land known one acre (4840 square yards). This was the amount of land a man with a team of two oxen could plough in a single day. The strips were separated by grassy banks known as ‘balks’ or ‘landsheds’ and at the end of them were placed smooth boulders, known as ‘bond stones’, used to mark their ownership.

Land use in the three parts of the open field was rotated to allow soils to recover fertility. A typical planting scheme consisted of an area of barley (grown to produce malt for beer making), one of wheat or rye (grown for bread production) and an area left fallow to recover. These land uses were rotated annually from area to area, meaning that each part of the open field would be rested once every three years.

In medieval times, little land was owned outright. Instead, the Lord of the Manor had rights given to him by the king, and the tenant families rented land from the Lord. The Lord would keep about 500 acres for himself, and he then allocated the rest of it according to how he ranked the villagers. The tenants did not have equal holdings of strips of land, and the strips they worked were scattered around the manor so that each family had a ration of both fertile and stony land. The village also had some common land (woodland or pasture) where everyone could graze their livestock through the year. In the Braunton Great Field, this was mainly on the Braunton Marsh.

The Braunton Great Field lies to the south west of the village. It covers around 360 acres of land divided into 18 blocks each with a name to identify them. Examples include Bowstring, Pitlands, Hayditch, and Lime Tree. The names have evolved over the years, but even today they are still used and can be found on maps.

Braunton had not just one but four Manors, each owning strips in various parts of the field. This complicated system of ownership probably helps to explain why it survives as it does today.

***(continued overleaf)***

**Answers to Curiosity Questions:**

- # What name did Henry Williamson give Braunton Great Field in his book, ‘Tarka the Otter’? (*The ‘Great Plain’*)
- # Horsey Island is covered by a first coloniser plant that was burnt in medieval times to yield soda. What industrial use did this have (which also gives away the name of the plant)? (*The glass industry—the plant is called glasswort*)
- # The largest group of workers in the open field system were known as villeins. Their dwelling place gave rise to which word used in our language today? (*‘Village’*)

The Great Field was once farmed by well over 100 families, and in 1840 it was recorded that it was divided into some 600 strips in 60 ownerships. Today, only around 10% of the strips remain, and there are no bond stones to be found. Many strips have been amalgamated and ploughed into one, as in the Lime Tree section. In 1788, this section of the Great Field consisted of 21 narrow strips (with several owners). By 1950, there were just 11 wider strips, and now there is just one owner who cultivates it as one field.

The open field system was gradually replaced over several centuries by private ownership of land, especially after the enclosure system became popular after the fifteenth century. It was finally laid to rest across the country around 1850 after more than 5,000 Acts of Parliament over several centuries had transformed open fields into enclosed properties.

The Braunton Great Field was once below sea level, so is very fertile. The appearance of this special feature owes much to the Ice Ages of the past. The rise and fall of sea levels in Pleistocene times (2.5 million to 12,000 years ago), as the northern ice cap receded or advanced, contributed to the formation of river terraces in the estuary. No fewer than seven have been mapped in the valley of the river Taw, and the Great Field corresponds almost exactly with one of these terraces. The reason there is such an expanse of fine fertile soil here is because river deposition increased following the melting of the ice. This led to a build-up of alluvial silt, clay and peat in the lower reaches of the valley – in some places up to 120 feet thick. When Saxons started to settle in this area in the seventh century, the valleys of the Taw and Torridge would have been heavily forested, so these pioneers would have needed to clear the trees before they were able to start ploughing the land.



*Evidence of old strip system—Photo: Paul Berry*

***The walk route continues right across the Great Field, through some of the blocks of divided land. The bridleway passes Broadpath, Higher, Middle & Lower Thorn, and Gallowell on the left-hand side, and Limetree, Hayditch, and Longhedglands on the right. If there are crops growing at the time of your walk, you may be able to pick out the lines of the ancient strips. Today, Barley (for fodder) is one of the main crops, although cauliflowers, cabbage, potatoes, turnips and other vegetables can also be seen.***

***The bridleway eventually reaches a short length of hedged lane. Unfortunately, this is always covered in water and mud, whatever the time of year. The lane soon forms a junction with a road – which now places you on Braunton Marsh, which will be encircled by this walk.***

The junction with the road marks the edge of what used to be a river terrace, at the former limit of the tidal range. The hedgerow to left used to protect the Great Field from salt spray and storm tides.

Up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, this area was made up of brackish salt marshes, and villagers grazed livestock on poor vegetation. The area was also dangerous as it was subject to flooding during high storm tides. To improve conditions, a plan was made to enclose the marshes and drain them. In 1808, the area was visited by Charles Vancouver, who was preparing a report for the Board of Agriculture. He estimated that in its current state, the marshes were worth as little as £10, but if they were reclaimed from the sea, they could fetch up to £3 per acre. So, by 1811, a drainage scheme was put in place. Work was carried out by three Marsh Commissioners and County Engineer James Green (who also designed the Bude Canal) using techniques pioneered in Holland. By 1815, the first phase of reclamation had been completed, and the responsibilities of Marsh Commissioners were transferred to local Marsh Inspectors. The drainage ditches of the new reclamation scheme provided drinking water and helped to keep stock enclosed - but they also had to be maintained. The Marsh Inspectors were given free accommodation in return for their duties of managing the ditches by controlling water levels, cutting weed, and clearing drains. They also collected tolls from non-marsh owners, controlled vermin (rats and moles could undermine the banks), and were paid extra by farmers to tend livestock. In 1843, the Marsh Inspectors gained ownership of the White

***(continued overleaf)***

House – which you will pass later in the walk. Braunton Marsh was an important location for Henry Williamson’s ‘Tarka the Otter’.

***The walk continues straight ahead along the road. Away in the distance to the right, it is possible to make out the headland of Saunton Down, and the prominent white building of Saunton Sands Hotel that overlooks Saunton Beach. Also, the peaks of the dune system of Braunton Burrows can be seen straight ahead. The route crosses a stone bridge over Sir Arthur’s Pill, one of the marshes many drainage channels. It then passes one of the marsh barns, called linhays, that are dotted across marsh. No two are the same in appearance, and many of these were built between 1815-20 soon after the marsh was finally reclaimed. They are used as cattle shelters and feed stores, although a number have now fallen into disrepair. Continuing along the road, Saunton Sands Farm Holiday Cottages are passed on right, and then Marsh Side bungalow on left, before the road forms a ‘T’ junction with Sandy Lane. The route turns left here, and continue along the lane, with Braunton Burrows rising to the right. It soon arrives at Sandy Lane Car Park.***

Braunton Burrows forms the core of Britain’s first UNESCO International Biosphere Reserve, designated in 2002 due to its environmental and scientific importance. It lies at the entrance to the Taw-Torridge Estuary, and is the largest sand dune system in England. The site covers 1,357 Hectares (5.24 square miles) and measures 5 km from north to south, and is up to 1½ km wide. The Reserve is currently used as an Army training area, and the Ministry of Defence leases 600 Hectares of the Burrows from the owners, the Christie Estate. It then subleases land to the Nature Conservancy Council. The Burrows supports a wide variety of habitats including wind-blown sand dunes, flooded dune slacks or pans (wind scoured wet areas of freshwater), flower-rich grassland, and scrub. These habitats are home to a huge range of plant and animal species, supporting over 400 flowering plants including 11 different orchids. It is especially good for insects, with 33 species of butterflies having been recorded, and birds, including wintering waterfowl. The dunes nearest the sea reach around 100 feet (over 30m) in height, and the whole dune system is moving slowly inland - in some places by as much as 3 metres a year.



Photo: Paul Berry

At the Sandy Lane Car Park, a large Information board describes the numerous short detour walks that could be taken from here into the dunes of the Burrows and leading onto Saunton beach. To continue the walk, carry on past the car park and through the gate with a ‘no unauthorised vehicles sign’. The path here is known locally as the ‘American Road’, and continues along the edge of the Burrows. This area has a history of military use dating back to World War Two, and this road was built by American troops in order to give access to the Taw estuary while training here for the Normandy Landings. Signs along the road indicate different labelled zones, and there are many stiles that provide access points for the public. However, it must be remembered that this still a Military Range, and a red flag is flown when live firing is in progress.

***The walk follows the American Road to its end where it broadens out into an open space. There are often soldiers gathered here while taking part in training exercises. A boardwalk entering from the right. Ignore a signed path to the left for the time being, and continue straight on to reach the access point to the estuary, marked by a number of boulders that prevent vehicular access.***

Stop for a while to enjoy the view across the estuary. The river Taw flows from the left, and across the river, you should be able to pick out the village of Instow, the old Yelland power station jetty, and directly opposite, the Zeta Berth jetty used for amphibious vehicle training. On the near side of the river to the right is Crow Point, a sand spit constructed in the mouth of the estuary. Behind it, you will catch glimpses of the river Torridge and on the far bank, the village of

*(continued overleaf)*



Appledore. At low tide, you can take a short detour towards Crow Point to get a better view of the confluence point of the rivers Taw and Torridge.

In 'Tarka the Otter', Henry Williamson refers to Crow Point as 'Crow Island'. Although today Crow is connected to the mainland, in the 1920s it certainly was separated as an island. Geographers speculate whether it might revert to this state again – it probably has been an island intermittently for centuries. Beyond the sandy mounds of Crow Point is a small tubular steel lighthouse, only 5 metres high. Its light flashes every 2.5 seconds and can be seen from a distance of six nautical miles. It was originally powered by acetylene gas, but was converted to solar power in 1987.

***After enjoying the estuary view, retrace steps to the signpost passed earlier, and pick up the path leading away to the right (as you approach from the estuary). This will take you to Broadsands car park, the entrance being marked by an information board and giant otter totem pole. Continue on the path straight ahead towards the building known as the 'White House' for obvious reasons.***

The White House is a prominent landmark that can even be identified from the far side of the estuary. It was earlier the Ferry House, the slipway alongside being the site of the old ferry to Appledore which fell into disuse in the 19th century. Nearby was the site of St. Anne's Chapel, now lost in the dunes. In 1843, the Marsh Inspectors gained ownership of the White House, and in 1942 it was requisitioned by the war department and used for storage of ammunition and land mines which were placed on the beach from the estuary to Saunton.

***There is a choice of two paths from here, both of which run along embankments on opposite edges of the reclaimed marshland area of Horsey Island. Option one involves turning right in front of the White House, and picking up part of the South West Coast Path along the outer embankment right next to estuary. However, on my last visit, this path was closed for maintenance work. The second option follows a path that runs to the left of the White House, alongside the road. It follows the Great Sea Wall that was built between 1811 and 1815, with the main area of Braunton Marsh to the left, and Horsey Island (reclaimed by a later embankment) to the left.***



Taw Estuary —Photo: Paul Berry

The Great Sea Bank that was constructed during the period 1811-15 to hold back high tides and flood waters. A series of gravity-fed drainage channels and sluice gates were installed to control the flow of water. Livestock were banned from the sea wall embankment to begin with, in case they caused it to subside. Pigs were a particular concern, and anyone who allowed their animals to roam on the bank was fined 10 shillings per animal. Later when grass became established, sheep were used to keep it short. They are still used for this purpose today. The embankment path passes over the Great Sluice which is the only point of exit for water into estuary. The sluice doors on

outer side are pushed open by the force of water flowing out of the marsh, but are pushed shut by incoming high tide which prevents salt water entering the marsh drainage dykes.

The newly reclaimed fertile lands were considered to be some of best beef fattening lands in the west country, and as you continue along the path, it should be possible to spot some fine examples of Devon Red cattle grazing the lush pastures. Apart from its practical purpose, the network of drainage channels has created a rich ecosystem that supports dragonflies, frogs and toads, fish, eels, birds like moorhen, coot, swans, herons, and kingfishers, as well as mammals like stoats and otters.

The path to the right runs along the younger outer embankment that was constructed between 1850 and 1857 to reclaim the area of Horsey Island -so called because it is separated from the mainland by a tidal creek that follows the former channel of the river Caen. A large numbers of over-wintering bird species rely on this area for

***(continued overleaf)***

feeding, and curlew, oystercatchers, dunlin, ringed plovers, and shelduck can usually be seen. As the path gets closer to the estuary, phragmites reed beds and a collection of ponds can be seen – providing added attractions for wildlife.

***The two paths meet together again at the north end of Horsey Island, where they reach the river Caen – the same river passed at the beginning of the walk. The path now continues along the embankment, passing the Inner Marsh Pill, one of the original salt marsh creeks incorporated into the new drainage system which criss-crosses the marsh in a network of water channels. The path soon reaches the Toll House.***

The Toll House was built to collect tolls from people travelling on the private road to the White House. Modern barriers are still in use today, with a £2 charge to pay for road users. The walking route meets the river Caen here, and it is clear to see how it has been straightened to enable larger ships to reach further upstream. The old meandering course of the river can be seen away to the right, now isolated as a 'u' shaped shallow lake, largely overgrown with reedbeds. An old jetty seen to the right is an extension to the Royal Marines Base at Chivenor, enabling runway lights to extend to their required distance.



Velator Quay—Photo: Paul Berry

***By continuing along the embankment from the Toll House, the path soon reaches Velator Quay.***

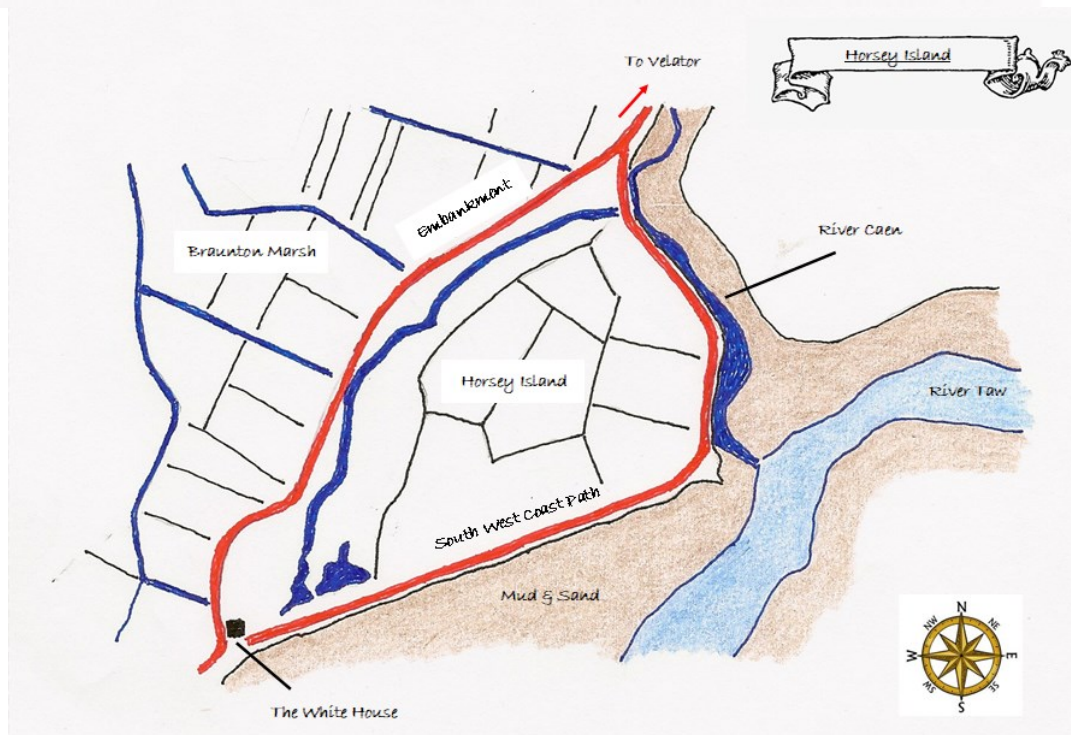
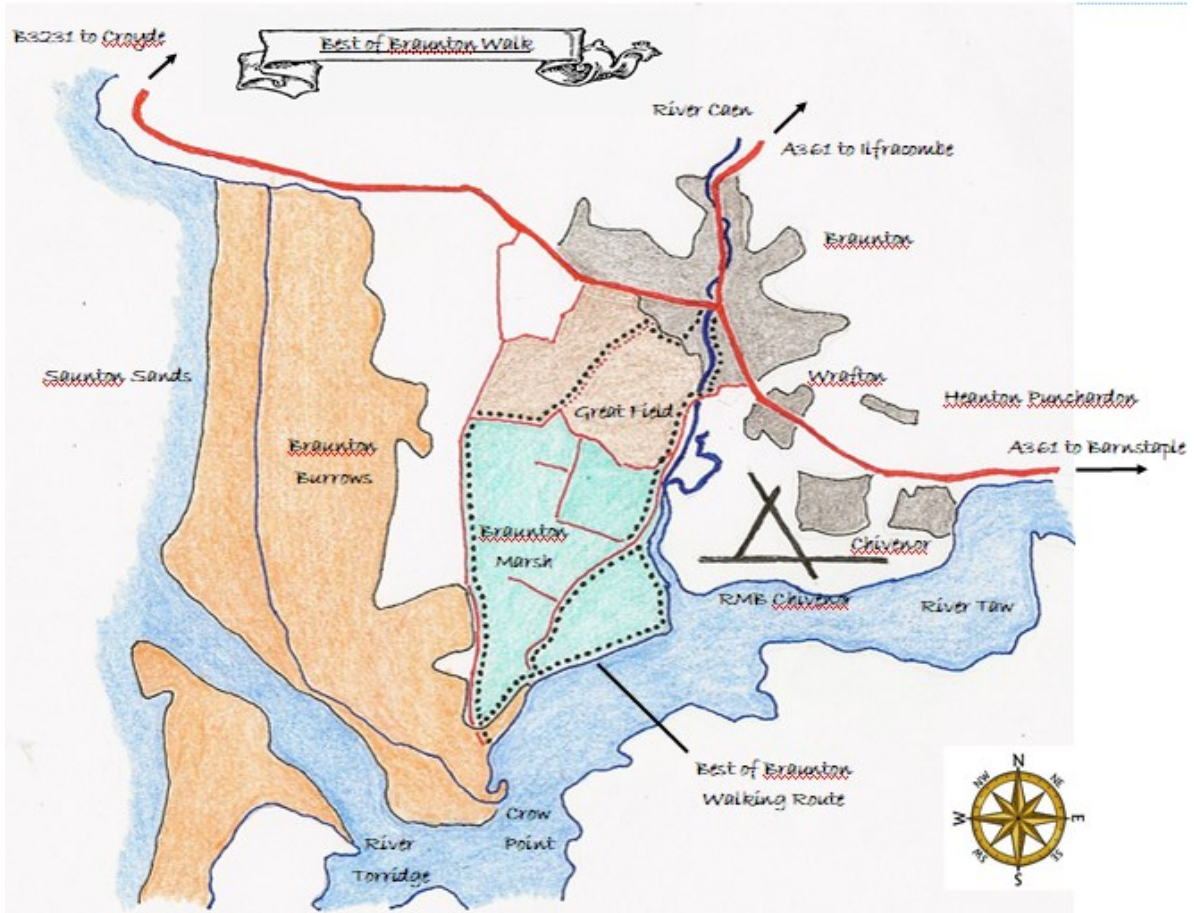
Before the advent of motorised road transport, the most efficient way of transporting produce from the village (and, notably, the Great Field) to markets in towns around the country was by sea. The river Caen became Braunton's link to the sea in the early days, and until the 1850s, a quay serving Braunton was situated at Wrafton. However, the shallow winding channel of the river Caen to this point was soon found to be unsuitable, so the river was straightened for part of its course to allow larger vessels to reach Velator, further upstream. Velator was opened in 1870 and soon became a thriving, bustling, noisy port for Braunton - a vastly different place to that which we see today. Ketches from south Wales and Bristol Channel ports brought coal,

limestone, salt, bricks, flour and fertiliser to Velator, and returned with clay, potatoes, apples and cider. In years gone by, sometimes as many as a hundred vessels would have been moored here at one time. Probably most famous Braunton ship to moor at Velator was 'The Result', said in her heyday to be the finest sailing vessel around. She was a 122 tonnes schooner, and served as a Q-ship during World War One. On February 17th, 1917, she caused significant damage to a German U45 submarine. Now, there are picnic tables and seats, and a few small leisure boats and some house boats to be found here.

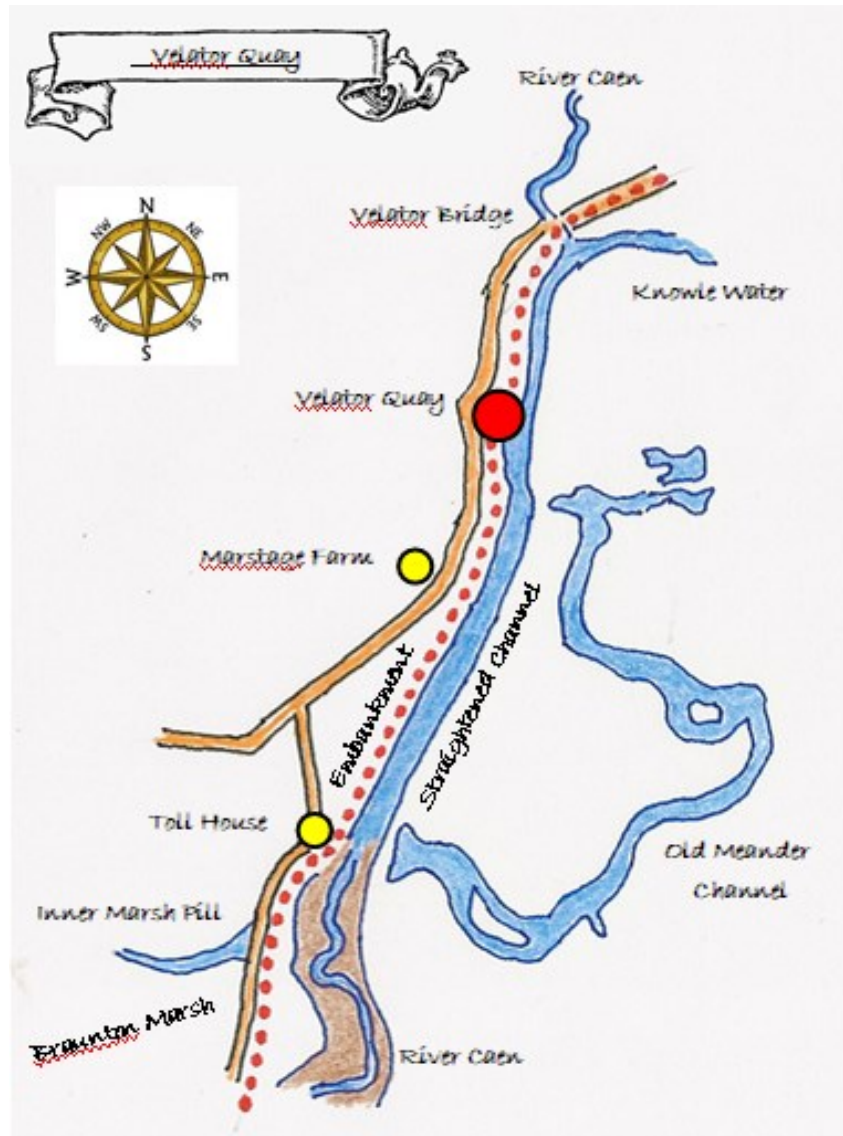
***After the Quay, the path continues along the grassy embankment to reach Velator Bridge, (built in 1815 by James Green) at the confluence of the river Caen and Knowle Water. It crosses the bridge and follows the road to a roundabout, passing the Quay Café. It turns left here, and reaches a pedestrian crossing. After crossing the road, the route can be continued by following the Tarka Trail sign, along a wooded path that follows the course of the old Braunton to Ilfracombe railway line.***

The Braunton to Ilfracombe line was built in 1874 by the London and South Western Railway as a single track, but was quickly doubled. By the turn of the nineteenth century, both the LSWR and Great Western Railway were operating the line. In 1926, it gained mainline status, and at its height just before World War Two, 24 passenger trains travelled in both directions to and from seaside resort of Ilfracombe. The line was eventually closed in 1970.

***Continue along the railway line path passing a footbridge to the Tesco Superstore. At the gate marking the end of the path, the route meets up with a road (Station Close). Turn right towards the old railway signal and then immediately left into Station Road. Continue past Otter Cycle Hire on the right, until you reach a road junction to left. Cross the old railway tracks, and branch right past the police station to return to the main car park and the original start point of the walk.***







House boats at Velator Quay—Photo: Paul Berry



River Caen near Velator Quay—Photo: Paul Berry