

Location & Access:

The Tarka Trail is a long distance footpath / cycleway in north Devon. The town of Barnstaple acts as a transport hub for the trail, 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); Barnstaple to Bideford (Route 21); and Barnstaple to Torrington (Route 71). It is also possible to connect by bus from Barnstaple to Meeth (via Torrington), but the service is not regular, and some planning would be required.



Lime kilns at Iron Bridge —Photo: Paul Berry

Key Geography: Stunning views of the river Torridge. Salt marshes, mud flats, historic towns, industrial archaeology, abundant wildlife & birdlife, literary connections with Henry Williamson's 'Tarka the Otter'.

Description:

This article focuses on the third section of the trail (6 miles), from Bideford to Torrington along the banks of the river Torridge. The start point for this section of the Tarka Trail is the site of the old Bideford railway station. The trail follows the line of the old railway system which reached here in 1855, with the extension to Torrington opened in 1870. The Torrington section closed to passengers in 1965, but continued to be used as a freight line up until 1982. Bideford Station has been well preserved, and the main building that remains was originally one of the waiting rooms, with a canopy over the platform. A plaque on the wall records the official opening of the Tarka Trail in 1992 by the Prince of Wales. As the trail enters the station, it is possible to pick out the additional platform that was constructed to enable first class passengers to step out of their carriage and straight into the rear of the neighbouring Royal Hotel, rather than disembark and walk the short distance around to the hotel's front entrance. On the platform across the tracks is a faithful replica of the old signal box. The original version was demolished in 1970 along with waiting room that stood beside it. To continue along the Tarka trail, cross the tracks in front of the old level crossing gates.



Bideford Station—Photo: Paul Berry

As the path leaves the station, the first views open out to the waters of the river Torridge. A memorial plaque on a low stone plinth is passed on the left, commemorating the sad events of 7th March, 1945, when soon after take-off, an aircraft departing from the Chivenor air base crashed nearby. Three of the Royal Canadian Air Force crew of six sadly

(continued overleaf)

Curiosity Questions:

- # A unique pigment for artists is made from a local rock and named after a local town. What is it?
- # Dogs leave footprints with four toes. How many toes are evident in an otter's print?
- # What is the correct name for an otter's faeces?

Further information:

www.tarkatrail.org.uk
www.tarkatrailguide.co.uk
www.northdevonbiosphere.org.uk/shared-use.html

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died. The path then comes to the Kynoch's Local Nature Reserve, established in 2011. Here, 39 Hectares of estuarine salt marsh, mudflats, foreshore and reed beds have been protected for the benefit of local wildlife.

The first of a number of river crossings soon meets the trail. The Landcross viaduct, known locally as the 'Iron Bridge', stands at the confluence of the river Yeo with the Torridge. The bridge overlooks the 'Pool of the 6 Herons' described in Henry Williamson's famous book 'Tarka the Otter'.

On the opposite bank of the river Torridge here stands a fine example of a limekiln, the likes of which that played such an important part in local social and industrial history. Kilns like this used to burn coal with limestone imported from south Wales to make a fertiliser that could be used to improve local acidic soils. The limestone fertiliser was carried to the field by packhorses, although the railways certainly helped when they arrived.

The route continues through the Landcross Tunnel – the longest on the trail at 180 metres. It is slightly curved in shape, and the exit cannot be seen as you enter. The nearby village of Landcross - the smallest parish in Devon bounded by a huge loop of the rivers Torridge and Yeo – was the home of Henry Williamson's bride. The couple married here 1925.

After exiting the tunnel, away to left of path, a short detour could take you to Halfpenny Bridge, mentioned frequently in Williamson's book, and so named because it used to charge a halfpenny toll. At the western end of the bridge is the well-preserved Annery lime kiln. Following this on the trail, the village of Weare Giffard can be glimpsed away to the left. The settlement possesses a fourteenth century church and fifteenth century manor house, and was named after the Giffard family (once Lords of the Manor), and marks the tidal limit of the waters of the river Torridge.



Weir at Beam Bridge —Photo: Paul Berry

The trail soon comes to an information board describing the workings of an old sea lock. The restored lock can be seen through the trees from a wooden viewing platform, standing at the point where the tidal waters of the river Torridge met the Rolle Canal (sometimes called the Torrington Canal). This was designed to connect the town of Torrington to the coast, and enable goods to be taken further inland than the tidal river could. Work on the canal started in the 1820s, and a number of paths lead from the Tarka Trail to explore its old route. A basin for sea going boats measuring 26 metres by 6 metres would have existed next to the lock in order to facilitate the transfer of cargo to smaller tub boats to navigate the canal. At its height, this area was a hub of industry with a bustling shipyard (closed in 1875), a saw mill and a large wharf. The largest boat produced here was the Sedwell Jane who at 209 tons, apparently sailed under Bideford Bridge with only an inch and a half to spare.

A little further along the trail, more information is provided concerning the industrial archaeology of the old canal workings. information board to the left of the path marks the location of the giant stone-lined wheel chamber. This would have stood below the upper basin of the canal, and although it is now filled in with soil and rubble, a broken part of the arched chamber roof can still be seen. The wheel chamber was 9 metres deep and around 3 metres wide. It needed to be big enough to house a 7 metre diameter, 2 metre wide water wheel that provided the power to haul **(continued overleaf)**

Answers to Curiosity Questions:

- # A unique pigment for artists is made from a local rock and named after a local town. What is it? (*Bideford Black*)
- # Dogs leave footprints with four toes. How many toes are evident in an otter's print? (*Five*)
- # What is the correct name for an otter's faeces? (*A spraint*)

the tub boats up and down an inclined plane between the water levels of the river and the canal. The wheel was fed via a sluice gate in the canal which was opened on demand.

A little further ahead on to the right of the path, another information board explains the workings of the canal's inclined plane. This was constructed to cope with the difference in water level between the river and the canal. This was the solution employed by engineer James Green (who used a similar system on another of his projects at the nearby Bude Canal), chosen rather than lock gates because it used less water. The inclined plane allowed the barges that came up river to the sea lock to transfer their cargo to flat-bottomed tub boats to be hauled up a slope rising 40 feet from river level. These specially designed vessels were about twenty feet long and five feet wide. The boats were designed with wheels on the underside to enable them to be manoeuvred onto the plane's iron rails and attached to a hauling chain that was wound by a huge overhead pulley wheel powered by the water wheel in the chamber below the upper basin. The plane had 'up' and 'down' lanes with the weight of the descending boat helping the other to ascend. At the higher level of the canal they continued their journey pulled by horses in strings of three or four boats linked together. Just a little further along from the information boards, two lines of bricks are set across trail at an angle. These mark the exact location of the inclined plane where the barges were hoisted up to the sea lock. The lock walls and embankments still there, but now silted up and overgrown.

The trail continues to cross a bridge over the river Torridge again, with an impressive aqueduct bridge to be seen to the right in the distance. This is the 'Canal Bridge' from Henry Williamson's book. It was here that Tarka was born, at Owlery Holt in the hollow trunk of an oak tree just downstream from the aqueduct.



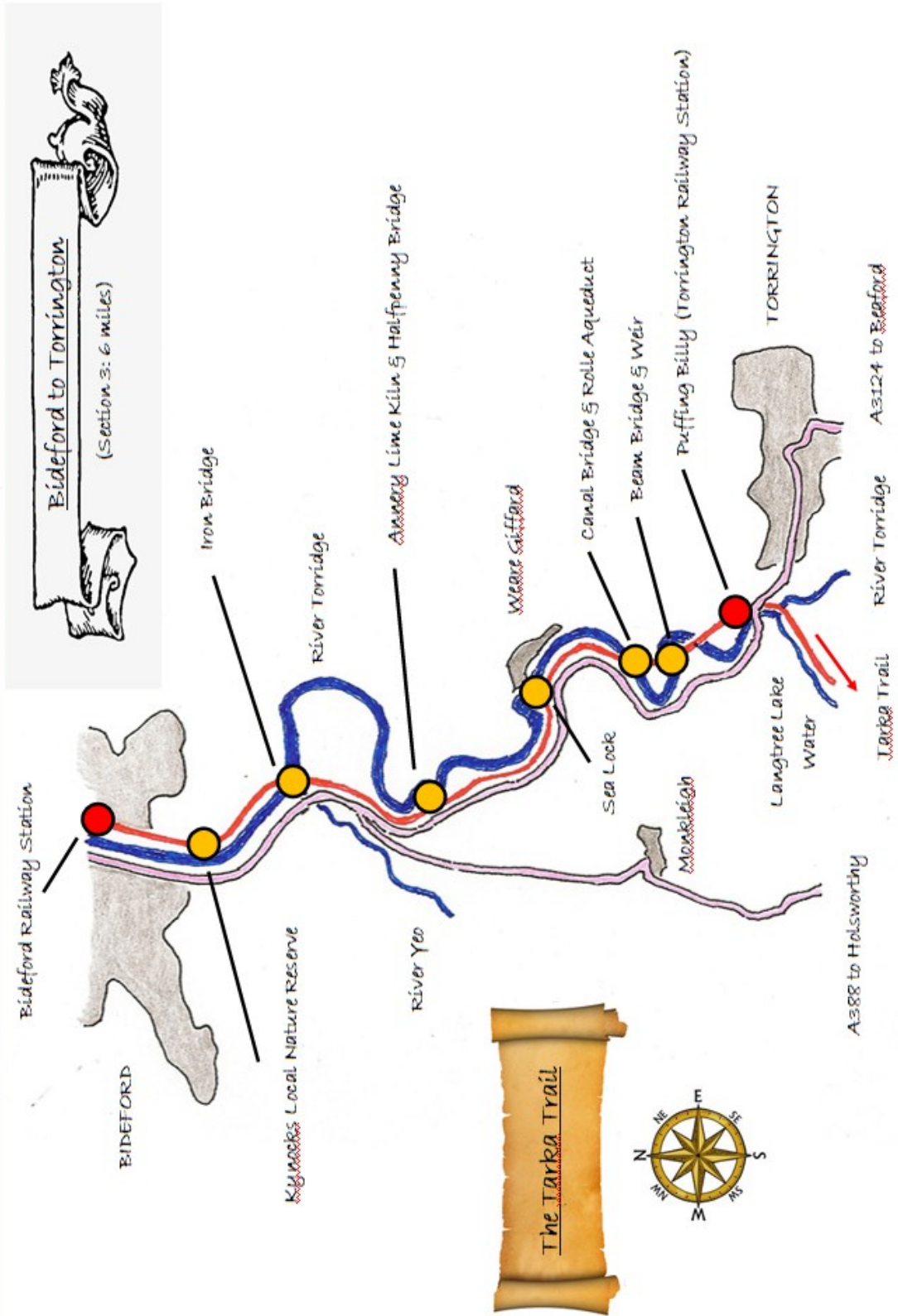
Canal Bridge Aqueduct —Photo: Paul Berry

The aqueduct is supported by five stone arches, and is 82 metres long and 7 metres wide. It was built between 1824 and 1827 to carry the Rolle Canal over the river Torridge, and would have been lined with elm, clay and stone. Later aqueducts built of cast iron did not need to be so wide. It now serves as the private drive for nearby Beam House. The Rolle Canal was named after financier Lord John Rolle, and ran for seven miles from the tidal lock near Weare Giffard to Rosemoor, near Torrington. The roads of the time were very poor, and the canal was designed to link the industrial mills of Torrington to the sea port at Bideford. It allowed the import of limestone and coal from Wales, used to make fertiliser in the lime kilns of the local area. It also facilitated the transport of Marland clay for export from Bideford. The canal eventually closed in 1871 after a short life of only 50 years or so, and was sold to the

London and South Western Railway to form the new line from Bideford to Torrington. This line followed the canal route in several stretches, although the aqueduct itself was not suitable for carrying the new railway over the river. Therefore, the bridge that now carries the trail had to be built – and it was the cost of this, as well as three others between Bideford and Torrington, that nearly meant the railway was not built at all.

The trail soon crosses Beam Bridge with Beam Weir alongside. In years gone by, salmon would be regularly seen jumping here, and it was where Williamson's heron 'Old Nog' became excited at the sight of so many eelers crawling over the edges as part of their migration.

One final river bridge is crossed before the trail arrives at the Puffing Billy café. This is the old Torrington railway station building, and is crammed full with railway memorabilia, including original signs and platform notices. The rail extension from Bideford to Torrington (under the London and South West Railway) opened in July, 1870 and closed in mid 1960s. The 'Atlantic Coast Express' ran from here to London Waterloo. By 1880, a narrow-gauge freight line had been added to connect Torrington Station to the nearby clay mines and quarries. It also took passengers up until 1965, and the freight continued to be carried until the early 1980s, when the track was lifted.



Bideford to Torrington
(Section 3: 6 miles)

