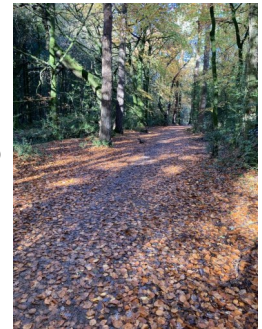


Location & Access:

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.



Wooded section near Meeth —Photo: Paul Berry

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

Description:

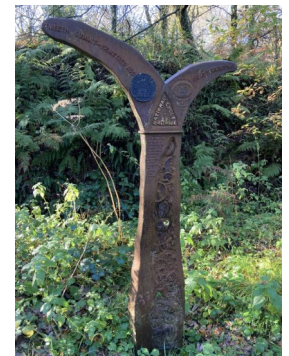


Puffing Billy—Photo: Paul Berry

This article focuses on the final section of the trail (12 miles) that starts at the Puffing Billy café - the old Torrington railway station building. By 1880, a narrow-gauge freight line had been added from Torrington Station to connect to the nearby clay mines and quarries. It took passengers up until 1965, but freight continued to be carried on this line until the early 1980s, when the track was lifted.

The trail takes on a completely different character beyond Torrington, and follows the old railway route through woodland and moorland. This is the least well known but most peaceful and tranquil part of the Tarka Trail, offering some great views of Dartmoor National Park as you journey towards the workings of 'clay country'. This is the only section of the Tarka Trail that is open to horse-riders.

Before continuing the journey from the Puffing Billy, you may wish to take a detour along the road into the historic town of Great Torrington. The town is well-known for the Battle of Great Torrington which took place in 1646, and marked the end of Royalist resistance in the west country in the English Civil War. The old town castle site provides a great vantage point to look over the Torridge valley.



Millennium Milepost —Photo: Paul Berry

From the Puffing Billy, the trail leads under the bridge carrying the road to Great Torrington.

(continued overleaf)

Curiosity Questions:

- # What was the name of the kingfisher in Williamson's 'Tarka the Otter'?
- # Who led the Parliamentarian Army to victory over the Royalists in the Battle of Torrington?
- # What was the name of the lead Otter Hound who fought to the death with Tarka?

Further information:

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

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Immediately to the right is an archway, and through it and to the left is a path leading to the 'Rolle Road' – the old canal which follows the river Torridge to Taddipport. It is possible to take a detour to follow this route, actually walking on the towpath and the bed of the old canal. Remains of the restraining wall that once held the water back are still visible.

The trail almost immediately crosses the river Torridge, and the connection between the river and the path disappears from now on. While crossing the bridge, it is possible to look back northwards to Rolle Bridge that carries the A386 road to Great Torrington, and downstream beyond this, is the Grade II listed fifteenth century Rothern Bridge.



Sculpture Bench —Photo: Paul Berry

The path from here becomes engulfed by Pencleave Wood, with the Langtree Lake Water (a tributary of the Torridge) running alongside the right-hand side of the path. During the summer, wild flowers line the route. Three unique sculpture benches designed by John Butler and constructed from old railway sleepers are spaced out along the trail to the left.

Just before it crosses the B3227 road by a popular car park, the trail reaches the old platform of Watergate Halt, built in 1926. This was last used in 1982 as a freight line to transport Marland clay, but it also provided transport for local people - perhaps workers travelling to and from the Meeth clay pits, or local farmers who delivered their milk churns for the milk train to London in the 1940s.

The trail now embarks on a long climb through the West Ford plantation on its way to Stowford Moor. This is the first gradient of any sort on the trail, and is actually steeper than most railways, so the old steam trains must have struggled a bit here. After passing a decorative post marking the entrance to Smytham Manor, the trail crosses a narrow country road, before passing a mosaic sculpture seat made by children from the nearby Marland Primary School. Opposite the seat is a Millennium Milepost, indicating the summit of the trail at 136m.

The trail pushes on to the row of Yarde cottages, and crosses a minor road at Yarde Halt, which originally served the local clay works. An excellent café opens here during the busy summer months. Another old platform is passed at Dunsbeare Halt, which was also a stop on the line for local clay works. Shortly after, another mosaic decorates the trail, in the form of a bench shaped as trio of giant birds.



Dunsbeare Halt —Photo: Paul Berry

The trail crosses a couple of quiet country roads as it reaches Marland Moor, one of them providing access to the buildings of the old North Devon Clay Works, now owned by Sibelco. At its peak, thousands of tons of clay left this area by rail, and more recently by lorry. The trail continues on through the Bury Moors plantation, with the large Westbear quarry hidden amongst trees.

The platform of Petrockstow Station (spelt without the 'e' of the village with the same name throughout its life) is the next railway landmark to be passed. The railway here carried passengers from 1925 to 1965, and freight (mainly clay) from the

Answers to Curiosity Questions:

- # What was the name of the kingfisher in Williamson's 'Tarka the Otter'? (*Halcyon*)
- # Who led the Parliamentarian Army to victory over the Royalists in the Battle of Torrington? (*Sir Thomas Fairfax*)
- # What was the name of the lead Otter Hound who fought to the death with Tarka? (*Deadlock*)

nearby quarries and mines up until 1982. This is the centre of ‘clay country’, where deposits of white ‘ball clay’ laid down 30 million years ago by lakes and rivers have been mined since the eighteenth century. The clay found here has unique qualities – being kaolinitic, it fires to a white colour, and its plastic quality makes it easily moulded into shapes that are maintained when it dries. It is used in the manufacture of ceramic whiteware (sanitary ware, wall and floor tiles), and also to make the distinctive white bricks seen in local houses. The unusual name of ball clay comes from the methods of extraction used in the eighteenth century, when it was dug out of the ground in lumps known as ‘balls’, measuring 9-10 inches square, and weighing 30-35 pounds. Apart from Petrockstowe, there are only two other areas in Britain blessed with this type of ball clay – the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset, and the Bovey Basin in south Devon.



Three Birds Bench —Photo: Paul Berry

A short while after the station, the trail takes a 90 degree turn, not something that might be expected of a railway line. At the corner of the turn, a pedestrian-only path runs 4 miles to Dolton. The reason for the sharp turn is a recent diversion from the original course of railway to allow the trail to skirt around 370 acres of Meeth ball clay quarries and pits. Although fairly recently closed to production, extraction of the soft, white tacky clay deposited here has left numerous abandoned clay pits as shallow swampy lakes and ponds hidden amongst the trees. The trail now follows water again, this time the Little Mere river that meanders gently through mature trees. The clay pits of this part of the trail provided the home to the old dog otter called ‘Marland Jimmy’ in Williamson’s book.

“They crossed the railway track near a tall dark chimney that rose out of buildings and came to a deep reed-fringed pond ... The pond was an old pit from which white clay had been dug. Round the edge grew reed-maces. Mother and cubs roved about in the water for a while and were joined by an old dog otter whose wandering years being over now dwelled amongst the reeds and rushes of the White Clay Pits ... His great joy was to play in and out of a rusted, weed grown engine that had lain for years half-buried in the clayey ooze. For three years he had lived on the frogs and eels and wildfowl of the ponds. The clay-diggers often saw him as they went home in the trucks, they called him Marland Jimmy.”

An interpretation board to the right of the path marks an access point to the Ash Moor Nature Reserve – a network of meadows, ponds and wetlands. This is a very special habitat called culm grassland (acidic clay soils supporting boggy grassland and heath) which is only found in the south west of England, Wales and south west Scotland. This site was chosen in the foot and mouth crisis of 2001 to be used as a giant burial site for culled livestock. It was hollowed out in preparation, but fortunately never used. Wildlife now benefits from these circumstances.

The path now crosses 2 fords before climbing (only briefly) the steepest hill of journey. The trail meets a gate at a road, where you have an opportunity to turn left on the road and detour to the Devon Wildlife Trust Meeth Quarry Nature Reserve. The reserve can also be accessed directly from the Tarka Trail, and some routes around the reserve are accessible to cyclists as well as walkers. This area has been shaped by its industrial past, and for a hundred years was a series of busy clay pits. Now there are two enormous lakes and a range of sparse open areas on piles of dumped waste material supporting a widely diverse wildlife population. This is a wonderful place to see butterflies and dragonflies up close during spring, summer and autumn, with 14 species of dragonfly and damselfly recorded here. In winter, brown hares can be spotted on the grassy slopes of the old spoil heaps, and geese and ducks can be seen on the lakes.

If you decide to stick to the trail, at the gate you have the choice of turning right along an unmade path or turning right along the road. The destination is the same for both. The road leads you to a large car park, but if you choose the unmade path, you will pass the overgrown platform, station name sign, and waiting room of Meeth Halt – which marks the end of trail. If you turn left onto the busy road at Meeth Halt, you can climb the 200 metres to Meeth village, where you can celebrate the completion of your walk at the sixteenth century inn, the ‘Bull and Dragon’. Enjoy!

