

Location & Access:

Hartland Point lighthouse is accessible via the A39 road from Bideford.

The turning along the B3248 road leads to Hartland village, and the route along narrow country lanes to the lighthouse is signed from here.

There is a car park very close to the lighthouse at map reference SS 234 274.



Hartland Point lighthouse — photo: Paul Berry

Key Geography: Steep cliffs, Hartland Point headland, Hartland Point lighthouse.

Description:

From the car park, it is a short and easy walk to visit the lighthouse. It can be completed directly at a distance of just 2km (1.3 miles), or turned into a short circular walk of 3 km (2 miles).

From the car park, walk past the interpretation board and follow the South West Coast Path westwards towards the lighthouse.



Hartland Point lighthouse
— photo: Paul Berry

Hartland Point is still a working (automated) lighthouse run by Trinity House, although access is currently prohibited, as the property has recently been purchased by a developer. The lighthouse is a Grade II listed building, built in 1874. It was once manned by four keepers, who lived with their families in homes since demolished to make way for the helipad. The light was decommissioned in 2012 and replaced with a lighted LED beacon in front of the lighthouse tower. This stands 20.5m above high water, and its light flashes six times every fifteen seconds – visible across the sea for eight nautical miles. Since its construction, constant wave action has threatened to undermine the lighthouse. A thick sea wall was built 1925 to protect it, and this can be seen to right of lighthouse when viewed from the cliff top.

Archaeologists believe there may have been a Roman station or villa located here, and also an iron age fort in earlier years. However, there is no trace left today, any evidence probably lost in time to the sea.

(continued overleaf)

Curiosity Questions:

- # Lundy Island is visible from Hartland Point. How long is the island from north to south?
- # Hartland Point Lighthouse is managed by Trinity House. When was this body founded?
- # Nearby Hartland Abbey is the stately home of which family?
- # How many lighthouses are there on Lundy Island?

Further information:

- # <https://wordpress.com/post/devongeography.wordpress.com/8830>
- # www.hartlandpeninsula.co.uk

Reviewer: Paul Berry B Ed (hons) M Sc FRGS

Former Assistant Vice Principal and Head of Geography at South Molton Community College with 35 years of classroom experience. Now an Iceland Field Studies Tutor with Rayburn Tours. Blog: www.devongeography.wordpress.com Twitter: @unicorn4275

Turn left at the lighthouse gates, and follow the coast path to climb some concrete steps which will lead you towards the coastguard lookout (at 95 metres above sea level). If you walk around the side of the lookout fence you will come to a viewpoint which provides a great panorama of the lighthouse and the quay below. At the base of the cliffs are the scattered remains of the MS Johanna, a Panamanian flagged Dutch coaster wrecked in gales here on December 31st, 1982. She was carrying wheat from the Netherlands to Cardiff when she was driven aground less quarter mile from the lighthouse. Four crewmen were rescued by a helicopter from RAF Chivenor, and three others were taken off by the Clovelly Lifeboat. The wreck initially attracted a number of curious visitors, and by 1983, the body of the ship had split into two. The sea has gradually broken up the remains of the wreckage, leaving very little visible today.

If it is a clear day, away in the distance you can pick out the outline of the granite mass of Lundy Island which stands eleven miles offshore. The island was the eighteenth-century home to Thomas Benson, one time MP for Barnstaple, and a notorious Devon smuggler. After gaining a contract to convey convicts to America, Benson cunningly took them only as far as Lundy, where he kept them to work as slaves for his smuggling operations, which including a tobacco processing plant. His nefarious schemes only came to light when fourteen convicts managed to escape. In order to pay the fines that followed, Benson loaded a ship with expensive linen and pewter, and landed these expensive goods at Lundy before scuttling the ship and claiming the insurance. Sadly, for the smuggler, crew members ratted on him to the authorities. The unfortunate ship's captain was hanged, but Benson managed to escaped to Portugal, where he built up a successful trading business.



Memorial to the Glenart Castle —
photo: Paul Berry

If you return to the coast path and head southwards, you will soon come across a memorial stone dedicated to the Glenart Castle steamship. This vessel had been requisitioned as a hospital ship during the First World War, and was sailing from Newport in Wales to Brest in France to pick up wounded soldiers. Germany claimed it was carrying arms, and it was hit by a U Boat torpedo in the early hours of February 26th, 1918. Twenty miles west-north-west from this memorial, the Glenart Castle sank in just eight minutes. Around thirty on board were saved, but 162 died, including eight nurses. This was not the only ship sunk during the war by German submarines in this area.

A short distance further along the coast path is Blagdon Cliff, where you will have a great view back towards the steep slopes of Hartland Point and the lighthouse. Hartland Point is the most extreme north west point in Devon, marking the junction of the Bristol Channel and the Atlantic Ocean, and there are many treacherous currents here. With a tidal range of eight metres within Bideford Bay, the tidal race around Hartland point is considerable. Tense Rocks, the submerged reef just off the coast at the lighthouse, has been the cause of many shipwrecks.

The Romans referred to the point as the 'promontory of Hercules' because of the fierce winds and currents experienced here.

Simon Armitage describes the conditions experienced here in his book, 'Walking Away':

"The weather can be exceptionally punishing on this exposed elbow of Devon, here where Atlantic depressions come barreling into the cliffs and where storm fronts that have worked themselves into a frenzy after thousands of unimpeded miles finally unleash their tantrums above the bare land"

Mark Wallington describes this stretch of coastline in his book '500 Mile Walkies':

"Now the sea grew agitated, the wind began to gust and the landscape lost all its finesse. You could feel Hartland Point long before you could see it. On the map the promontory is a right angle, a corner where all the elements meet. In reality, they collide and the friction is frightening. The currents writhe in a vortex of grey water; the monstrous cliffs appear contorted under their own pressure and the waves hit them like trains. Its not a particularly attractive place, there's nothing subtle about it, it just looks mean."

(continued overleaf)

“As we turned the corner and headed south you could see the coastline had changed. The round shoulders of Exmoor had gone; ahead long rugged weather-beaten cliffs of sandstone and shale.”

“I’d never seen cliffs like these before. The bedding planes were folded over each other, twisted and squashed, some were sliced clean and square as a cake, others were sharp as a broken bottle”

Simon Armitage describes the changes in the landscape as the path turns southwards after the lighthouse:

“The coast path sweeps over the headland and sets a new bearing for south, bringing with it a dramatic change in scenery, probably the most dramatic of the journey so far. The cliffs here are the product of fierce geological processes and brutalizing weather. Twisted and mangled seams and layers of rock form a towering, gruesome backdrop to every bay. Down at sea, blackened formations run horizontally out into the water, each shallow platform rutted and fissured, as if some fantastical sea creature had raked its claws through the half-formed, half-set stone. At irregular intervals, groynes of crenulated and craggy stone form a series of gates or traps across each bay, raised serrated ridges like the tails of half-submerged crocs or dragons lazing at the sea’s edge. Some of the darker and more crozzled sections of rock look like they were finished off with a blowtorch or born from a recent fire. Each new cove offers another theatrical staging of raw, naked stone, and at the foot of every sheer drop the debris and spoil from rockfall or landslide lies heaped and scattered ... ”



Radar station and Barley Bay — photo: Paul Berry

From here, you can retrace your route back to the car park. Alternatively, you can carry along the coast path a little further, and follow a circular route to take you back to the start. If you decide to return along the original route, when you pass the entrance to lighthouse once more, take a moment to enjoy the view of Barley Bay, a huge bite in the north-facing coast, before you reach car park. Folding



RAF Hartland Point — photo: Paul Berry

in the sandstone cliffs (resulting from the earth movements of the Variscan Orogeny some 300 million years ago) is clear to see.



Radar station — photo: Paul Berry

Beyond the car park, further east along coast, can be seen the prominent landmark of the mushroom dome of a radar station. This houses the ‘Watchman’ radar system, assisting air traffic control of military and civilian aircraft. Just below is the site of an older radar station which dates back to World War Two. In 1941, Hartland Point was a naval VHF intercept station for the ‘Y’ service, which was a feeder service for the ‘Enigma’ code-breaking operation at Bletchley Park.

Subsequently, it became a ‘Chain Home Low’ radar station - a booster station linked to the main local station on Northam Burrows, which helped plot surface shipping and low flying aircraft. In the 1950s, existing chain home sites became Cold War monitoring station.

(continued overleaf)

If you choose to follow a circular route, continue along the coast path to Upright Cliff. The path descends steeply from here, and as you reach a stream (Titchberry Water), you get a view to the south of Smoothlands, an unusual sea-dissected dry valley.



Smoothlands — photo: Paul Berry

Most rivers enter the sea at right angles, but this is an exception to the rule. Smoothlands is a flat, streamless, valley cut off at the north and south ends by marine erosion. It represents the old valley of Titchberry Water, and now runs roughly north-south and parallel to the sea. Although the steep inland valley sides remain intact, the steep cliffs on the seaward side have been rapidly eroded by the sea.

When you reach the stream, don't cross the footbridge to continue on the coast path, but take the path inland behind the caravan which will lead you towards Blagdon Farm. The path goes past the farm and returns to the car park passing the Lundy helipad.



Coast path sign near Barley Bay — photo: Paul Berry

Answers to Curiosity Questions:

- # Lundy Island is visible from Hartland Point. How long is the island from north to south? (3 miles)
- # Hartland Point Lighthouse is managed by Trinity House. When was this body founded? (1514)
- # Nearby Hartland Abbey is the stately home of which family? (The Stucley Family)
- # How many lighthouses are there on Lundy Island? (Three—North Light, South Light, and now defunct Old Light)

Hartland Point Lighthouse

