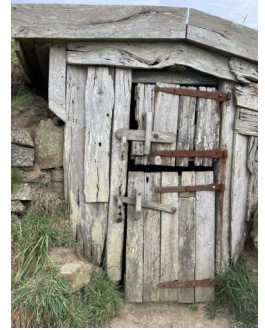


**Location & Access:**

Hawker's Hut is located alongside the South West Coast Path, close to the Cornish village of Morwenstow.

It can be accessed via the A39 Bideford to Bude road (Atlantic Highway).

The hut itself is just a short stroll from a convenient car park, but the path does run alongside some very high cliffs, so vertigo sufferers be aware.



Hawker's writing hut — photo: Paul Berry

**Key Geography:** Stunning sea cliffs, nineteenth century writing hut, cream teas!

**Description:**

Hawker's writing hut — photo:  
Paul Berry

To reach Hawker's Hut, it is just a short stroll from the car park at Rectory Farm in Morwenstow, one of the nicest tea rooms in the south west. To reach the tea rooms, follow the A39 Bideford to Bude road (Atlantic Highway) southwards, and pass the Westcountry Inn, Welcombe Cross, and also a turning signed to Woolley. After taking the next right turn signed to Morwenstow (Bush Inn), you will soon get a view of GCHQ Morwenstow, a satellite ground station and eavesdropping centre, located on part of former World War Two airfield, RAF Cleave. It was opened 1974, and activities within are classified – important high tech digital security and intelligence operations, helping to prevent terrorism and combat organised crime.

Pass through Crosstown (where the Bush Inn is located), then the road bends to right and is signed to the tearooms. Rectory farm (and its car park) is found at map reference SS 205 152. From here, it is an easy short circular walk of 1.2 miles, taking in a visit to Robert Hawker's Hut. However, it passes by some very steep (and unfenced) cliffs, especially at the hut itself. Vertigo sufferers be warned!

On leaving the car park, follow the signed track in front of the church which takes you through a gate. This continues along the top of a field, passing through a couple more gateways.

At the third gate, you meet the South West Coast Path at the edge of Vicarage Cliffs, which rise to 137 *(continued overleaf)*

**Curiosity Questions:**

- # Part of this walking route follows the South West Coast Path. How long is this footpath in total?
- # Hawker's Hut is the smallest property managed by the National Trust. What is the emblem of this body?
- # What is the name of the major river that has its source in the parish of Morwenstow?
- # What famous two writers are said to have spent time with Hawker in his writing hut?

**Further information:**

- # <https://wordpress.com/post/devongeography.wordpress.com/9101>
- # [www.southwestcoastpath.org.uk/walksdb/682/](http://www.southwestcoastpath.org.uk/walksdb/682/)

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

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metres / 450 feet. Views from here are stunning, both to Higher Sharpnose Point in the distance, and Cotton Beach below. Turn left here, following the coast path sign to Stenbury. After a couple of hundred metres along the cliff top, you will see the slate sign indicating the location of Hawker's Hut. Some steep slate steps take you the final few metres down to the hut itself, nestled into the top of the cliffs.

Hawker's Hut is owned by the National Trust – and is the smallest property they manage. It was constructed from driftwood dragged up from the beach by the Reverend Robert Stephen Hawker, and used as his writing refuge. Hawker was the Vicar of Morwenstow from 1835 to 1874, and was a delightfully eccentric character, who spent many hours here meditating, writing poetry and sermons, and smoking pipes of opium. Hawker is perhaps best-known for writing the 'Song of the Western Men', claimed as the unofficial anthem of Cornwall with its rousing chorus:



Hawker's hut — photo: Paul Berry

***And shall Trelawny live?  
Or shall Trelawny die?  
Here's twenty thousand Cornish men  
Will know the reason why!***



Slate marker indicating location of Hawker's hut — photo: Paul Berry

This stirring ballad dedicated to the royalist leader, Sir Jonathan Trelawny, is sung in pubs and at rugby matches with such vigour by Cornish folk, but was actually written by a Devonian. Although Hawker spent much of his life in Cornwall, he was born at Charles Cross church in Plymouth.

Hawker is also credited with bringing back the mediaeval custom of harvest festival into the church. The 1840s in England became known as the 'hungry forties', but the year of 1843 saw a good harvest. Hawker asked parishioners to come to church on the 1st Sunday in October in that year to give thanks, bring food produce, and help to distribute it to the poor and needy of the area. Other churches later followed suit, so Hawker was responsible for the modern harvest festival celebration as we now know it.



Interior of Hawker's hut — photo: Paul Berry

Hawker spent many hours in his remote cliff-top shelter, scanning the sea for ships in trouble, and he displayed great compassion towards shipwrecked sailors. When he arrived at Morwenstow, the area already had a strong reputation for smugglers and wreckers. After all, this was an extremely dangerous coastline, with coastmen having a famous saying:

***"From Padstowe Point to Lundy Light, Is a watery grave by day or night."***

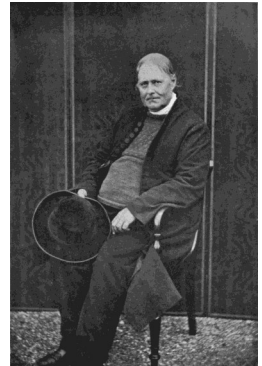
Beached cargo from shipwrecks could often provide some relief for local residents from their everyday lives of grinding poverty. Unfortunately, any surviving sailors were sometimes murdered – the so-called 'Cornish custom' - to ensure there were no witnesses to the illegal looting. The new vicar certainly had his work cut out. But he was a man of influence, and he soon put a stop to this practice. Hawker was often the first to reach the cliffs when there was a shipwreck, and he organised the gathering of the corpses of drowned sailors, laying them out in a mortuary next to the lych-gate of his church. He made sure that no cargo was touched until all dead seamen had received a proper burial, and it is reckoned that he provided a Christian grave for over forty seamen in the course of his lifetime. Previously, the drowned sailors were either buried on the beach without Christian rites, or just left for the sea to take them.

***(continued overleaf)***

Hawker was witness to a number of shipwrecks on the shores of his parish:

***"So stern and pitiless is the iron-bound coast of north Cornwall that within the memory of one man, upward of eighty wrecks have happened within a range of fifteen miles with only the recue here and there of a single living person."***

Hawker's eccentric ways reached a new level when he officially ex-communicated one of his cats after finding it had caught, killed, and eaten a mouse on a Sunday. It was never allowed in church again. However, his most bizarre eccentric act was carried out at the tender age of twenty-two, when he frightened the superstitious people of nearby Bude by dressing as a mermaid and wailing from a rock. At one full moon in the July of 1825 or 1826, Hawker swam or rowed out to a rock some distance from the shore, and clad himself in a flowing wig of seaweed that hung like streamers halfway down his back. He wrapped his legs in oilskin, and Hawker the mermaid was born. People walking on the cliffs were soon to notice flashes of light (Hawker was using a small hand mirror to reflect moonlight) and hear wild singing and wailing from the mysterious creature on the isolated rock. But no sooner was the mermaid spotted, 'she' slipped off the rock into the night water and disappeared.



Robert Hawker— photo:  
Wikipedia

Crowds gathered the next day after word of a fish-tailed mermaid sitting on a rock combing her hair and singing got around the town. They were duly rewarded with the flashing light show and the mer-songs, and the performances continued for several more nights. The size of the audience continued to grow, but Hawker was getting bored with his prank. He was becoming hoarse from all the singing and fed up with squatting near-naked in the cold night after night. He was also worried about the danger he potentially faced, after a local farmer peppered the rock with his shotgun one night in protest to the growing crowds and eerie noises. Hawker wound up his performance with a rendering of 'God save the King' before disappearing into the water one last time. The mermaid was never to visit the shores of Bude again.



View from Hawker's hut— photo: Paul Berry

The short path approaching Hawker's Hut is very narrow, and the sheer drop to the beach below is quite breathtaking. Vertigo sufferers be warned. The turf-roofed writing refuge is quite small, with space inside for no more than three or four people. It is always left open, so it is possible to sit inside and spend a few Hawker-like minutes gazing out over the sea below. The driftwood walls are covered with graffiti from many generations of visitors.

When you are ready to climb back up to the clifftop, continue along the path to a kissing gate, which is now precariously close to the cliff's edge. Steel yourself to negotiate the gate (best not look down if you are not good with heights), and then turn sharp left to follow a path inland along a hedgerow. Eventually, you pass through a gate onto a track which leads back to Crosstown and the Bush Inn public house.

Before you reach Crosstown and the Bush Inn, there is a stile to the left of the path which is signed as a route back to the Rectory Farm tea rooms and the car park.

The tea rooms are well-worth a visit. Rectory Farm was owned from 1290 by an order of monks until the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII in 1537. The interior boasts a range of antique furnishings, has worn oak beams salvaged from local shipwrecks, and floors of local slate. The tea rooms were opened in 1950, and have since won a number of awards. The small shop sells a range of delightful locally sourced jams and preserves.

Before you leave, take time to visit the church of St John the Baptist and St Morwenna next to the car ***(continued overleaf)***



Morwenstow church— photo: Paul Berry

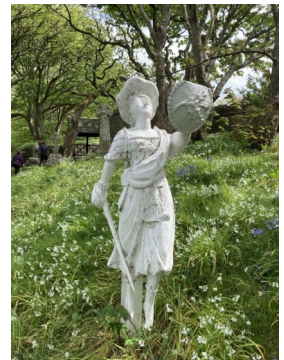
park. The building is today of the Norman period, but it is believed a Saxon church once stood on this site. The ancient church was dedicated originally to just St Morwenna, but St John was added as a dedication around 1285, when the church was gifted to the Hospital of St John the Baptist in Bridgewater. St Morwenna was an early sixth century saint from Ireland, and said to be one of many children of the Celtic king Brychan, who although born in Ireland, ruled over Breconshire in south Wales, and was viewed as father of the Celtic saints. St Morwenna settled in Morwenstow, while her brother St Nectan lived at Hartland. The Saxon king Ethelwolf appointed Morwenna as tutor to his daughters, and in return, Morwenna was given land to build her church. She is buried here, and many images of her are can be found in the stained-glass windows of the church.



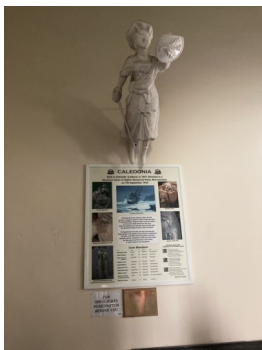
Morwenstow churchyard  
— photo: Paul Berry

As you approach the church door through the cemetery, look out for the white monument marking the grave of five of the crew of the 'Caledonia', a 200-ton Scottish brig that met its end at Higher Sharpstone Point in a sudden and violent storm on September 7th, 1842. The ship was transporting grain from Odessa to Gloucester, via Falmouth, and the captain had no warning of the foul weather, the ship's boy having broken the barometer just a day before.

From the crew of nine, only one sailor survived – a Jersey man by the name of Edward Le Dain. The monument in the churchyard was actually the ship's figurehead, depicting Caledonia holding a drawn sword and shield, and was pretty much all that was left of the stricken vessel. Hawker added a suitable verse:

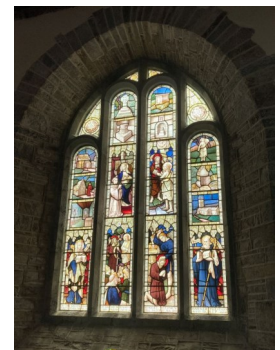


Monument to the Caledonia  
— photo: Paul Berry



Monument to the Caledonia  
inside the church— photo:  
Paul Berry

***"And there, the relic of the storm,  
We fixed fair Scotland's figured form.  
She watches by her bold, her brave,  
Her shield towards the fatal sea:  
Their cherished Lady of the wave  
Is guardian of their memory."***

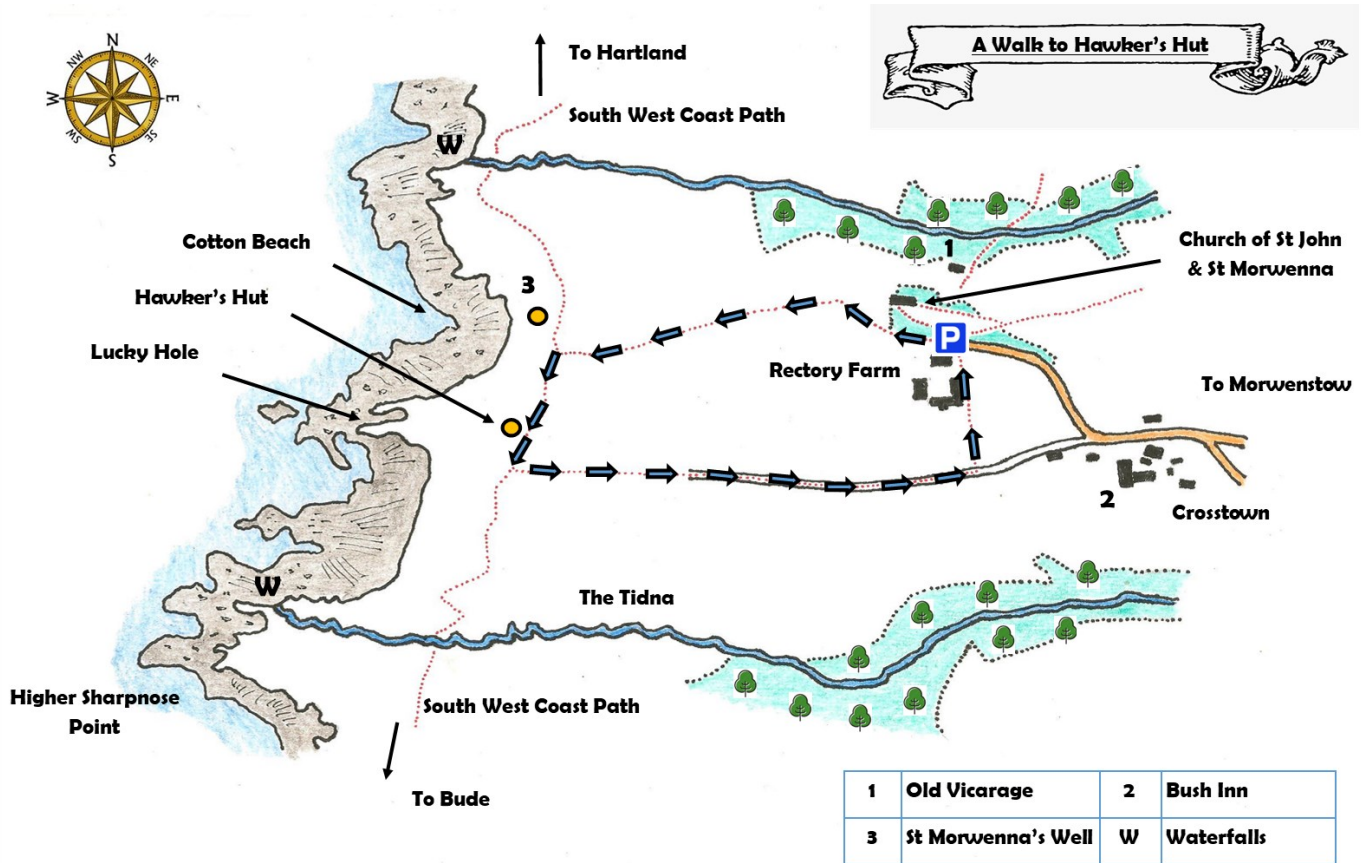


Window dedicated to Robert  
Hawker — photo: Paul Berry

The figurehead remained in place for over 150 years, before being replaced by a replica in 2008. The original figurehead has been restored, and is now in a place of safety inside the church. Also inside, in the south aisle is the Hawker memorial stained-glass window, erected in 1904. It depicts Parson Hawker and his dog, the church and various other features associated with him.

On your way back to the car park, you can catch a glimpse of the vicarage built by Hawker in a secluded spot beside the church. It was constructed in a Victorian-Gothic style in 1837, and the design of the chimney is based on the towers of churches in which Hawker previously served. The vicarage is now in private ownership, and not open for visitors.

Before you leave, the cream teas at Rectory farm come highly recommended!



**Answers to Curiosity Questions:**

- # Part of this walking route follows the South West Coast Path. How long is this footpath in total? (630 miles)
- # Hawker's Hut is the smallest property managed by the National Trust. What is the emblem of this body? (An oak acorn)
- # What is the name of the major river that has its source in the parish of Morwenstow? (The river Tamar)
- # What famous two writers are said to have spent time with Hawker in his writing hut? (Kingsley and Tennyson)