geography southwest

Places To Walk

Boscastle Circular Walk, North Cornwall

Location & Access:

Boscastle is a small village on the north Cornwall coast, with Bude 15 miles to the north and Tintagel 4 miles to the south.

Boscastle is accessed via the B3263 road which leads to the village from the A39 Atlantic Highway.

There is a large car park close to the centre of the village, located at SX 100 912.

The 95 bus service from Bude to Wadebridge calls at Boscastle.



Boscastle harbour entrance

Key Geography: Coastal scenery, a blowhole, cliff waterfall, steep river valleys, ancient field strip system, 2004 major flood event.

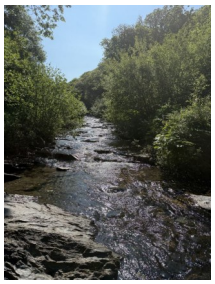
Description:

WALK ROUTE: Length: 5.5 miles with some steep climbs and a short stretch by steep cliffs. (See attached map)

1. The walk starts in the Cobweb car park (SX 100 912) off the B3263 road. Around 130 vehicles were parked here on August 16th, 2004, when a flash flood hit Boscastle. The deluge of water swept over 100 of them through the village into the harbour, and some out to sea. A visitor centre once stood where the car park is found today, and was in direct line of the flood water. 12 people were airlifted by helicopter from its roof as part of the rescue operation before the building was destroyed.

2. Begin the walk by taking the path that leads away from extreme far end of the long stay car park, signed to New Mills.

3. Follow the flat path through the valley alongside the River Valency which rises four miles away on Otterham Downs on the edge of Bodmin Moor. Although the Valency might appear to be a fairly small river, it carried the majority of the floodwater that hit the village on that fateful day in 2004.



River Valency

4. Continue on the path past the stepping stones and through Minster Wood. Pass through a gate by a stone seat and carry on until you arrive at a footbridge. Cross the river Valency here, following the sign to Minster church.

5. The path continues to the right, past a National Trust sign for Peter's Wood and then steeply uphill. The river Valency now flows to your right. At a fork in the path, take the lower right-hand path signed to Minster Church. Immediately after the kissing gate that leads into the churchyard,

(continued overleaf)

Curiosity Questions:

There are Bronze Age burial mounds on Willapark. When was the Bronze Age? # For every 2 tons of limestone burnt in a kiln, how much lime was produced? # Sir Richard Grenville built the new quay in Boscastle. What was the name of his ship, commemorated in a poem by Alfred Tennyson? # Locally mined manganese was exported from Boscastle. Why was it mixed with iron and steel?

Further information:

https://www.metlink.org/resource/case-study-boscastle-floods/

https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/blog/2024/20-years-on-from-boscastle-how-would-things-be-different

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



Hidden grave of Joan Wytte

look into the undergrowth on the left hand side to discover the grave of a young woman called Joan Wytte who was accused of being a witch. Known as the 'Fighting Fairy Woman of Bodmin', she died in Bodmin Gaol of pneumonia in 1813, and her skeleton was put on display in the Museum of Witchcraft (which you will pass later in this walk) until she was laid to rest here in 1998. Efforts to have the skeleton buried in the churchyard were blocked by the church because of her reputation as a witch, so she was laid to rest in Minster Wood instead, just outside the church boundary. The final words on her headstone state: 'No longer abused'.

Minster church soon appears between the trees, dedicated to the fifth century Welsh princess St Materiana. She and her son St Ceidio are believed to have converted the local population to Christianity, and Minster church is is thought to have been built on the site of a hermitage she established here. There was a monastery at Minster in the eighth century, and in the twelfth century, a small priory was established around the early church after it was given to them by the Lord of Boscastle at the time, William of Bottreaux. If you call into the church, you can see the oldest parts dating back to Norman times, with some late medieval additions and restoration work carried out in the nineteenth century.

The church and the surrounding ancient oak woodland is home to the largest Great Horseshoe bat colony in Cornwall, and represents about 5% of the entire UK population. Minster church is home to a nationally important roost site, and at dusk, the bats can be seen leaving the church from the louvered slate vents on the tower.

6. After leaving the church, turn right and continue along the road, passing a lane to Minster Farm on the left. Pass the entrance to Home Farm on the right, and continue on the road as it bends to the right at a road junction next to Trecarna Gate House and heads steeply downhill.

7. As the road bends to the left, cross the slate stile on the right (signed to Boscastle) and take the footpath that crosses the middle of a sloping field and bears towards the bottom left-hand corner. Cross another two stiles, and keeping to the left, go through a kissing gate where a wooden stake indicates the route to Boscastle. Bear right to pass a small footbridge leading to private land that crosses the stream of Treforna Water and continue past the stone cottage called Trebutts. The path continues through private gardens before reaching Butts Lane. Follow Butts Lane until it reaches Fore Street, then turn right.

8. Boscastle effectively consists of two settlements, 'Top Town' up the hill and 'Quay Town' around the bridge and the harbour. Continue along Fore Street (which is part of 'Top Town'), passing a village hall on the left and then a Methodist church on the right. Like the rest of Cornwall, Boscastle was a stronghold for Methodism in the nineteenth century. A Primary School is soon found on the left, designed by Silvanus Trevail, perhaps Cornwall's most famous architect responsible for around 60 schools in the county. The next buildings of note are Tinkers and Smugglers cottages on the left, once a row of three buildings that date back to the 1300s, making them possibly the oldest in Boscastle. Just past the cottages on the right hand side of the street, a short path leads to the site of old Bottreaux Castle. Boscastle gets its name from the Bottreaux family who settled here in 1130. There are no ruins to see today, but the flat grassy platform where the castle once stood is still an impressive site. It was probably built between 1130 and 1189, and was a typical motte (man-made hill) and bailey (walled enclosure and keep on top) design.



Tinkers and Smugglers cottage, 'Top Town'

9. After crossing a bridge over the river Jordan, Fore Street becomes Dunn Street and bends around to the right. Take the narrow road to the left that leads up to the B3263 road.

(continued overleaf)

Boscastle Circular Walk, North Cornwall



Forrabury Cross

10. Cross the B3263 road and begin to walk up Forrabury Hill. Opposite the large white building (Melbourne House), take the unmarked lane to a private gate, and then turn hard left to follow a path through the trees marked by a National Trust sign for Forrabury Stitches. As you pass through a kissing gate, a sign points the way to the church. The path continues to the right of the church of St Symphorian, and a gate offers access to the churchyard and the building itself which featured in the BBC TV series 'A Seaside Parish'. The church was first recorded in 1278, but clumsy restoration work in 1868 obliterated many of its early Norman features. However, there is a twelfth century font inside and the porch dates from 1520. The church tower which was rebuilt in 1760, acted as a landmark for passing sailors. By the path that leads to the southern entrance gate, a medieval wayside cross known as the 'Forrabury Cross' can be found. Dating from sometime before the seventeenth century, and although badly worn, it shows a Latin cross on one side and a Maltese cross on the other. It was recovered from a nearby field, and the three holes provide evidence of its use as a gatepost before being relocated near the church.



Forrabury Stitches

11. Continue past the church to Forrabury Common, where to the right are the Forrabury Stitches, evidence of a medieval method of farming that dates back to the fourth century. The long strips or stitches, each of one acre (one furlong by one chain) were individually farmed for crops in the summer and used for grazing in the winter. The ridges of the earth banks that marked the strip boundaries are still visible today, and a slight curvature can be seen, which allowed the ploughing team to turn at each end.

12. Carry on until you reach the South West Coast Path. Turn right, to reach the entrance gate to the white coastguard lookout tower. As you pass through the gate and head towards the lookout tower, you can enjoy a good view of the rugged cliffline to the south. There were numerous small slate quarries along this stretch of cliffs, operational from the 1300s right up to the first world war. Workers here faced great dangers, often suspended on ropes over the cliffs as they lowered blocks of slate to the sea to be exported. Waste material from the dressed blocks was tipped over the cliffs to form 'finger dumps' on the land below.

13. The coastguard lookout stands on Willapark headland, the Cornish words 'whylas' and 'parc' meaning 'lookout field'. This structure was first built in 1827 by Boscastle businessman Thomas Avery who used it as a summer holiday home. In bad weather, Avery stalked the cliffs hoping to spy any shipwrecks so that he could be first to loot any cargo that washed ashore. The tower was used in later years as a lookout by government revenue men watching out for smuggling activity. Their duties later included keeping watch for ships in difficulty on stormy seas, and today it is manned by volunteers from the National Coastwatch Institute. On the headland of Willapark there are traces of an Iron Age cliff castle, around 2,500 years old, consisting of earth ramparts and a ditch built across the neck of the headland to defend a settlement. Nearby are two Bronze Age burial mounds from an even earlier time.

14. Retrace your steps to the gate and turn left to follow the coast path once more which will take you to Boscastle harbour. A wooden sign marks a junction in the path, and although both routes will take you to the village, our walk opts for the left hand branch of the path signed to the harbour. Before continuing, look across to the far side of the river mouth where if the tide conditions are favourable, you will be able to watch a blowhole in action. Waves crashing through an underground cave tunnel in the headland of Penally Point make a loud booming sound and can spout towers of foam. This is known locally as the 'Devil's Bellows', and is active for an hour or so before and after low tide. Some say the tunnel is man-made, carved in the cliff in an attempt to create an opening for boats to pass safely through the headland, but it is more likely the result of a fault line that has been enlarged by the action of the sea.

(continued overleaf)

Boscastle Circular Walk, North Cornwall

15. As you continue along the path, you get a good view of the entrance to Boscastle's port. This is the only sheltered harbour along some twenty miles of the north Cornwall coast, but even so, its mouth is narrow and difficult to access. The harbour dates back to early Elizabethan times, with a new quay being built by adventurer and explorer Sir Richard Grenville in 1584. The harbour walls were constructed of vertically-aligned slates with no mortar used to bind them in order to better absorb the pressure of the incoming waves. Some repairs were made in 1740, but the original structure is largely intact. Breakwater walls have been constructed to deal with the harsh sea conditions that sometimes prevail. The outer breakwater was constructed in 1820, but damaged in 1941 by a drifting sea mine. A severe storm in 1947 destroyed the structure, and the present breakwater was built by the National Trust in 1962.



Boscastle harbour entrance

It is likely that trade took place at Boscastle in very early days, the port being a possible landing place for Phoenician tin traders in prehistoric times some 4,000 years ago. The peak years for the harbour were during the mid-nineteenth century, when up to 300 vessels visited the port each year. During these years, Boscastle was busy with imports of limestone, coal, salt, bricks and beer, as well as exports of corn, bark for tanning, locally quarried slates, and for a while, manganese ore. Up until the end of the 1800's, Boscastle was also a fishing village, with pilchards being pressed and preserved in local buildings. However, the port eventually fell into decline following the arrival of the North Cornwall railway at Camelford in 1893.



Boscastle harbour

16. Continue over the polished slate rocks and down some steps, passing the inner breakwater before reaching the harbourside. Continue along the path which now runs close to the banks of the river Valency in front of Harbour Terrace, the Harbour Lights Shop, and the Boathouse. It is clear to see how the river channel has been widened and deepened to cope with any future flood events.

17. When you reach the main road, turn left and cross the bridge which replaced the ford that once existed here. Take note of the Island Cottages (now 'Otherworld') that stand below the level of the road at the original ground level. Another cottage once stood on the far bank, demolished when the bridge was built in the 1960s. During the 2004 flood, material built up behind the bridge which acted like a dam causing flood water to back up and inundate the surrounding properties.

18. Immediately after the bridge, turn left to walk along the north bank of the river. There are a number of tourist-related shops on the corner, including 'Boscastle Rocks', once a coal store and Boscastle's first petrol station, and 'Cornish Rambler' (once the Manor Office) which collapsed when it was hit by the torrent of cars carried by the floodwater, but managed to re-open on the first anniversary of the disaster.

19. Continuing along the north bank of the river, you can see the buildings of Valency Row set back from the path. These are now private houses, but at one time two inns, 'The Robin' and 'The Ship' traded here, along with a malthouse. In 1877, the landlord of The Ship was fined for adding salt to his beer to promote thirst in his customers. Valency House (at the western end of the row) was once the home of Thomas Avery, the merchant and ship owner who built the coastguard lookout tower we passed earlier. After the houses, look out for the Old Forge, where Bill Gent was the last blacksmith to work here up to the 1940's. It is now an artist's studio.

20. The next building of interest is a well-preserved lime kiln that dates back to the mid 1800's. Lime was imported from south Wales and burnt here before being used to sweeten local soils. The lime was also used for building mortar and lime wash. Next to the lime kiln is the Boscastle Visitor Centre and National Trust Shop. Its original purpose was as a fish

(continued overleaf)

Boscastle Circular Walk, North Cornwall



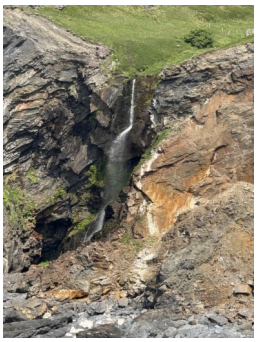
National Trust shop

cellar, and up until the nineteenth century pilchards were salted, pressed and packed here for export to Mediterranean countries. Since then, it has had many different uses, and was converted to its present function in 2006. It is worth calling into the shop to see the plaque on a wall indicating the height the water reached during the 2004 flood.

21. Tucked in around the corner after the National Trust cafe and shop is the intriguing Museum of Witchcraft. This building was formerly a smoke house and store, but currently holds the world's largest collection of witchcraft-related artefacts. It suffered badly in 2004 with many artefacts being lost in the flood.

22. Continue to the 'Harbour Lights' tea garden, and check out the crazy wavy roof. The original structure dates back to the 1500's, and was converted into a gift shop known as the pixie shop - 1 of 4 businesses to be washed away in 2004. A time capsule that had been secreted in one of the walls around 1956 was found washed up on Woolacombe beach in north Devon (some 60 miles away) after the flood. The path forks by the tea garden, and our route takes us up the hill to the right, signed to Pentargon.

23. The path eventually reaches the houses of Penally Terrace, cottages that were originally part of a fish cellar, active up until 1842. Just past the houses, our route follows some steps that lead away to the right, but you may first want to continue on to the viewpoint on Penally Point. This headland is formed from slates, siltstones and sandstones of the Boscastle Formation, laid down in the Carboniferous Period (from 360 million year ago) and then deformed by the pressures of great Earth movements. The rocks near the viewpoint are striped with veins of white quartz. The headland offers a great view looking back to the breakwater and the harbour, and to the island of Meachard out to sea, home to numerous sea bird colonies in summer.



Pentargon waterfall

24. Return to the steps, and make the steep climb to follow the coast path northwards over Penally Hill. The path reaches a gate with a turning to the left to a marker mast before continuing along the cliffline.

25. After a kilometre or so, a view opens up to a small coastal waterfall at Pentargon. This is a good example of a hanging valley, where a stream has cut deeply into the hard rock before it reaches the cliff. There are a number of these along the north Cornwall and Devon coastline. This waterfall drops 37 metres (120 feet) and can be quite spectacular after heavy rainfall.

26. At a stone stile, the path takes a sharp right-angled turn inland, indicated by a finger post. This leads to the B3263 road, where a permissive path to the right takes you parallel to the road to avoid traffic. There is a good view from here of the village, and it is clear to see how Boscastle has grown around the meeting point of two deep valleys created by the rivers Valency (on the left) and the Jordan on the right. It was this geography of course, that led to the great flood of 2004 when two million tonnes of water engulfed the village.

27. The path emerges at the entrance to Penally House, believed once to have been associated with smugglers with rumours of underground tunnels connecting it to the cliffs and shoreline. The route continues for a short stretch along the road down Penally Hill to the car park where the walk began. Opposite the entrance to the car park is the Cobweb Inn, which dates back to the 1700s. The lower course of the exterior stonework is thought to be slag, imported to Boscastle as ships' ballast. The inn's bar was once covered in cobwebs (hence the name), a fact dating back to its days as a warehouse when it was thought that spiders helped to keep flies away from the stored goods.

(continued overleaf)

The 2004 Boscastle Flood

The Boscastle flood disaster took place on August 16th, 2004, and made headlines throughout the world. It was a 'flash flood', a rare event in the UK, that directed 2 million tonnes of water (440 million gallons) towards the village, affecting more than 1,000 locals and visitors.

The natural geography of the area made the village vulnerable to flooding. Three rivers, the Valency, Jordan, and Paradise (a tributary of Jordan), meet at Boscastle, and their steep and narrow valleys acted like a giant funnel directing the flood water through the village. During the summer of 2004, a number of unusual weather conditions combined. It had already been a wet summer (the fifth wettest August on record) and the ground was saturated. On August 16th, a bank of thunder clouds developed as a consequence of the remains of Hurricane Alex that had moved across the Atlantic. These clouds remained stationery over north Cornwall due to converging winds blowing across the south west peninsula, resulting in extreme localised rainfall. Throughout the afternoon, an unprecedented amount of rain fell around Boscastle, estimated to be over 1,400 million litres in just 2 hours (that's nearly 200,000 litres a second!) The catchment area of the rivers Valency and Jordan is small (about 23 square kilometres) and includes the relatively impermeable upland of Bodmin Moor. This meant the rain quickly found its way into the river valleys, which were utilised as farmland with little woodland cover to intercept the water. River levels rose rapidly as they flowed towards Boscastle.

Boscastle Flood Timeline - 16th August (2004)

12.15 pm: Although it was dry in Boscastle, dark clouds were visible nearby

12.30: Heavy rain begins to fall

12.39: Flood-watch issued

14.00: Manholes in the village begin to shudder

15.00: First of many power cuts caused by lightning

15.30: Rivers Valency and Jordan overtop their banks and begins to flood

15.45: Rivers recorded to rise by 2 metres in one hour

15.53: Local fire brigades mobilised

16.00: All access roads to village closed

16.30: A 3 metre high wall of water flows through Boscastle at 64 kph

17.00: Flood reaches peak flow - cars swept away and buildings destroyed

17.00: 'Clovelly Clothing' building collapses

17.10: Major incident declared - RAF Search & Rescue alerted

18.00: People gather in the village hall and a helicopter winches people from rooftops

Boscastle had been affected by minor flooding before 2004, but was unprepared for what it was about to face on that day of August 16th. The unique flash flood resulted from 75 mm of rain falling in just two hours (the equivalent to an average August total rainfall. At its peak, the storm dumped 25mm of rain in 15 minutes. After the Valency burst its banks, a three-metre high wave of water swept down the main street at 40 mph. The harbour breakwaters prevented the flood water from escaping quickly to the sea, and a high tide at the time did not help matters. The flood

(continued overleaf)

deposited 20 years of mud and debris in that single day.

What followed the flood was the largest peacetime rescue in the history of mainland England. Seven rescue helicopters were deployed from RAF Chivenor, RAF St Mawgan, RN Culdrose and the Portland Coastguard Station, and 91 people were airlifted to safety. 29 out of 31 Cornwall's fire brigades attended the scene, and remained in Boscastle for 7 days. 1850 tonnes of mud and debris were shifted, but the most remarkable fact was that no fatalities were recorded. The only reported casualty suffered a broken thumb.

Boscastle relies on tourism for 90% of its income and the fact that the disaster took place during the holiday season when the village population was doubled by visiting tourists made matters even worse than they might have been. At peak flow, some buildings were submerged under 9 feet of water. 58 properties were flooded, and 4 of them were totally destroyed. Both bridges in the village were destroyed, after blocking cars and trees to form a dam which eventually burst to flood nearby properties. Roads, water, power and telephone services were damaged and infrastructure repairs would later cost the North Cornwall District Council £2 million. Wrecked cars bobbed along the flooded rivers like a duck race of dinky toys, and 84 vehicles were recovered from the harbour and the streets, with 32 washed out to sea. Marker buoys were later used to indicate the location of submerged vehicles found by divers, but they were eventually all removed by tides and currents. All boats in the harbour were destroyed. Despite the shocking damage caused by the flood, the village displayed amazing resilience to quickly bounced back. It wasn't long before it was 'business as usual' again in Boscastle.

There was no specific flood plan in place before the 2004 disaster, but a modern Flood Defence Scheme costing £4.6 million was soon instigated to reduce flood risk and preserve the character and amenities of the river area. The river Valency was widened by 3 metres and deepened by 1 metre, doubling its capacity to move flood water through the village. Slipways were modified, bridges replaced with a new raised-arch design, and a gauge station established on the river to monitor water levels. The village car park was shifted over 30 feet from the river bank and raised by 3 feet, with bollards placed around the edge to act as 'car catchers'. A run off area was established upstream to allow flood water to deposit sediment away from the village, and tree management was also carried out to restore the habitats damaged in the Valency valley.



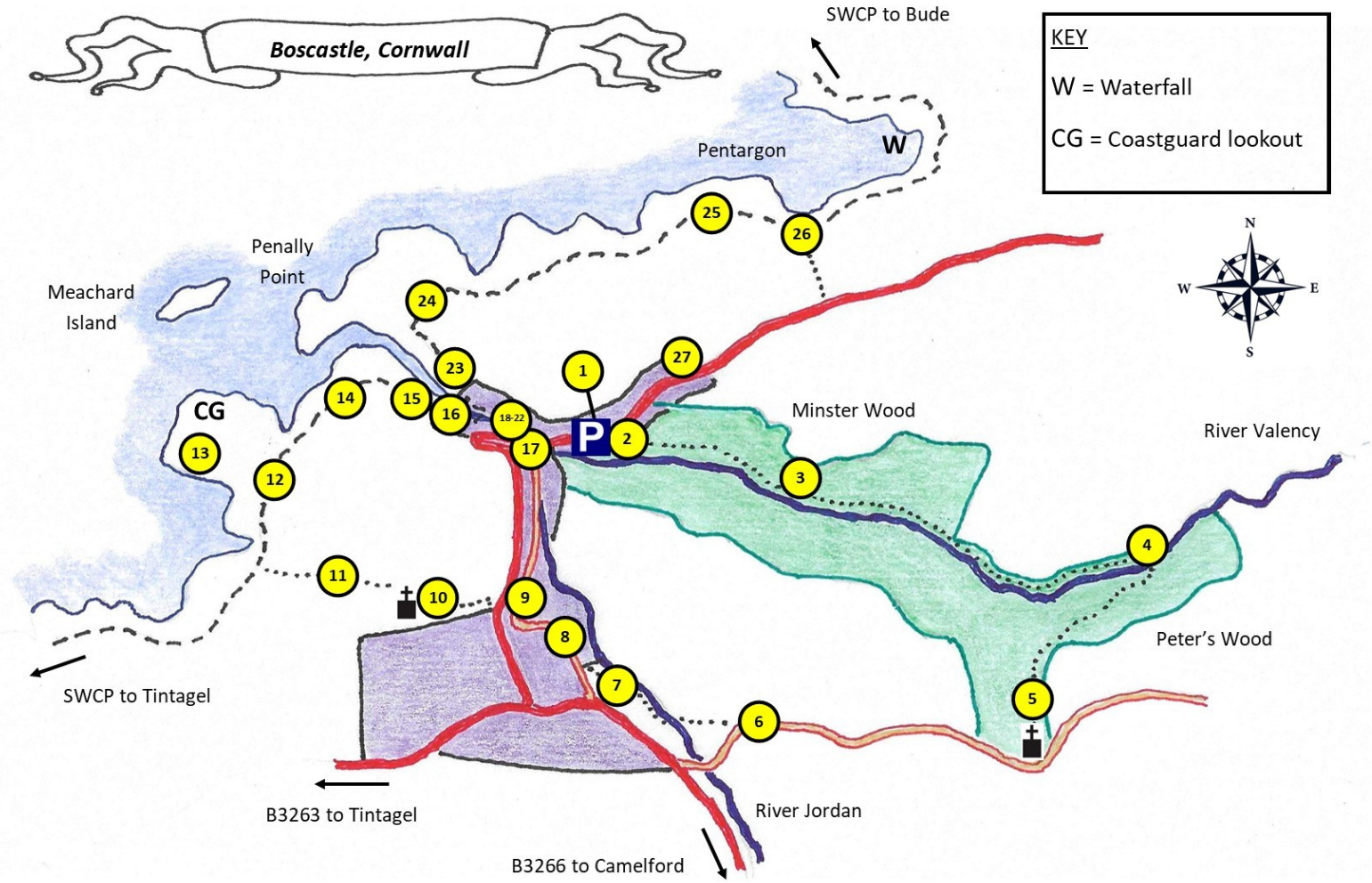
Image: BBC



Image: HM Coastguard

Answers to Curiosity Questions:

There are Bronze Age burial mounds on Willapark. When was the Bronze Age? *(3300 BC - 1200 BC)*
For every 2 tons of limestone burnt in a kiln, how much lime was produced? *(1 ton)*
Sir Richard Grenville built the new quay in Boscastle. What was the name of his famous ship, commemorated in a poem by Alfred Tennyson? *('The Revenge')*
Locally mined manganese was exported from Boscastle. Why was it mixed with iron and steel? *(To prevent rust)*



geography southwest

Places To Walk

Boscastle Circular Walk, North Cornwall