A Walk To Investigate the Events of the 1952 Lynmouth Flood Disaster

1. Start in the Lower Lyndale public car park at SS 724 494. This was the site of the Lyndale Hotel, which used to stand above the East Lyn River that was much narrower than today. It was one of the many buildings badly damaged by the Lynmouth Flood of August, 1952, and had to be demolished. The name 'Lyn' is derived from an old Saxon word 'lynne' meaning 'torrent'.

2. Walk past the church of St John the Baptist which was built in 1870 and flooded in 1952 but left relatively free from damage. A new vestry was built after the flood by the American Air Force as a memorial to those who died in the disaster, their names inscribed on the wall. Continue past the coastguard station, and then follow the riverside path away from the village to the white metal footbridge. Looking upstream along the East Lyn River from here, a line of cottages and a hydro-electric power station once stood on the right-hand river bank before the flood. The power station was one of the first in the UK and was operated by Charles Geen of the Devon Electric Light Company. It started generating power in April, 1890, and provided electric lamps for Lynmouth's residents at a time when most British cities were still being lit by gas. The power station was housed in three cottages, with turbines supplied with water via a leat cut from the river. To increase capacity, a pump-storage system (perhaps the first in the world) was added with a reservoir on Summer House Hill, but the station could only supply power for a few hours a day. The buildings survived the 1952 flood, but were later demolished to allow for the river to be widened as part of the flood relief scheme. Cross the East Lyn River using the footbridge, and then turn right.

3. Continue along Tors Road with the river now on your right-hand side. Pass a row of terraced houses (many used as holiday lets), and follow the path close to the river. A sign by the path points out the Middleham Memorial Gardens on the far side of the river. The flood washed away a hamlet of ten cottages that stood on land now occupied by the river. All that is left now is the old schoolhouse and the gardens, which are well maintained to remember those who died. Amazingly, the school closed just a month before the flood hit. The path leads into Wester Wood (mainly sessile oak), where there is a sign pointing to Watersmeet (1.75 miles) and Countisbury (1.5 miles).

4. After passing a log full of coins (left for good luck), the path rises high above the river, and you begin to get a feeling of the depth of the East Lyn gorge that over several hundred years has cut 200 metres through the local sandstones and slates. The river has an interesting life story, once flowing across a coastal plateau high above where it runs now. The East Lyn presently runs nearly parallel to the coastline and in the past (around 125,000 years ago), it flowed further on to reach the sea well to the west of Lynmouth. As the sea eroded the cliffs, the valley was eventually breached and 'captured' (cut off), forcing the river to cascade into the Bristol Channel at Lynmouth, where it is joined by the West Lyn River. The sharp gradient at the point of capture initiated rapid downcutting to create steep valleys so prone to flooding. The old channel of the East Lyn is now 'dry', but can be easily traced as it runs beyond Lynton through the Valley of Rocks further to the west.

As you pass through the woodland you will notice evidence of damage caused by severe storm Darragh in the winter of 2024/5, with numerous trees uprooted or completely snapped by the strong winds. At a finger post, follow the lower path and cross the river via a footbridge.

5. The path rises above the river again, and soon joins another path. Keep your eyes open for dippers, grey wagtails, and grey herons searching for food amongst the giant boulders in the river shifted by the great flood. At another footbridge, don't re-cross the river but continue to reach the natural spring of the Lynrock Fountain. This was once the site of the Lynrock Mineral Water Company, built in 1911 but destroyed in the 1952 flood. It was set up by the Attree brothers to exploit the natural spring that emerges from the rock face here, whose water is supposed to help cure gout, rheumatism, liver complaints and anaemia. The company enjoyed a boom in the 1920s, and also supplied ginger beer and lemonade, but closed down in 1939. An old fireplace and a beer bottle set into the rock face are all that remain.

6. The path continues through the private grounds of Myrtleberry Cottage, built in 1832 as a home for the estate water bailiff. Its location inside a meander in the East Lyn River helped it survive the flood of 1952. The East Lyn is one of the best salmon rivers in the country, and in winter adults return from their feeding grounds (perhaps in the Faroe Islands or SW Greenland) to leap upstream to spawn. The biggest specimen caught here weighed in at 33 pounds. Just after the house, the path joins a lane.

7. The Chiselcombe stone bridge soon comes into view. This was built from public subscription in 1956 to replace two bridges destroyed in the flood. It is made in concrete, but tastefully faced with local stone. It was designed with high arches

to prevent a blockage of trees and boulders that built up at the old bridges, acting as a dam to the trap flood water which eventually burst through as an explosive torrent. Take a moment to enjoy the view upstream and downstream from the bridge, but don't cross the river here.

8. Continue on the path signed to Watersmeet, and cross two wooden bridges to gain access to the tea room at Watersmeet House. The bridges mark the confluence of the East Lyn River and a tributary called Hoar Oak Water, and a waterfall can be seen if you look upstream from the second bridge. Watersmeet House is a former fishing lodge erected in 1832 by the Reverend Walter Halliday, Lord of the Manor of Glenthorne. He brought his father's wealth to north Devon from Scotland in order to establish a country estate as required by the terms of his inheritance. Around Watersmeet, he (largely unsuccessfully) attempted to mine iron ore, established quarries for building stone, and constructed lime kilns to produce fertiliser. The house is prone to flooding, and in 1978, all staff had to be evacuated. There has been a tea garden here since 1901, run by the National Trust who purchased the property in 1934.

9. If you want to extend your walk a little further (an additional 2 km), you can continue upstream to Hillsford Bridge before turning back to Watersmeet. At the second bridge, continue on the riverside path that follows the Hoar Oak River upstream. You will pass waterfalls along the way. At Hillsford Bridge, cross the river to follow the old packhorse trail used by the lime and timber industries through woodland (with the river on your right) back to Watersmeet House.

10. After enjoying your cream tea (remember, you are in Devon, so cream on first), it's time to return to Lynmouth. Exit at the bottom of the tea garden and keeping the river on your left, follow the path into Horner's Neck Wood. Pass Chiselcombe Bridge on the left, and then a couple of large scree slopes of grey, shattered rock on the right, the result of frost shattering at the end of the last Ice Age. The path soon rises high above the river, and in places the drop to the river is sheer. After passing a stone enclosure with a picnic bench, you will come to a finger post indicating a path to the right to Countisbury (0.5 miles).

11. The finger post offers another possible extension (an extra 2.5 km) to your route before it returns to Lynmouth. This takes in a spectacular stretch of the coast path with wonderful views of the cliffs, and also passes an excellent pub if you are looking for refreshments. If you choose to add this section to your route, turn right at the fingerpost to climb a very steep hill through woodland. The path emerges on South Hill Common. Near the top of the hill, you will reach a finger post, where you need to take the permissive path to Countisbury avoiding the road. After passing through a wooden gate and then an iron gate, you will pass Town Farm Cottages on the left, and a National Trust bunkhouse on the right before reaching the 13th century Blue Ball Inn. Follow the lane beyond the pub car park to the church of St John the Evangelist, and walk through the churchyard to meet up with the South West Coast Path. The path to the right leads to Butter Hill and the Foreland Point lighthouse, but to continue our route, turn left to follow the coast path along the vertiginous clifftop. Vertigo sufferers may prefer to walk the final stretch back to Lynmouth along the A39 road. There are fantastic views from the path as you head down Countisbury Hill, and on clear days, it is possible to see right across to Wales. The secluded grey shingle beach of Sillery Sands can be seen beneath the high cliffs, and ahead there are excellent views of Lynmouth village and its beach. The path continues through the site of an old gun battery, marked by two concrete semi-circles. Artillery soldiers trained to fire light field guns here in the 1900s, and the site was used again in the 1940s to practice firing at targets out to sea. The path eventually meets up with the A39 road, and a sign on the opposite side shows the way to Wind Hill. The name 'Countisbury' is thought to derive from a Saxon word meaning 'camp on the headland', and refers to the ramparts of an Iron Age hill fort found at Wind Hill. This is said to be the location for a major battle (Battle of Cynsit) in AD 878, when a Saxon army led by Odda defeated a party of Viking invaders led by Hubba the Dane. The path to Lynmouth continues at the side of the main road, winding its way through shaded woodland. When it reaches the pumping station close to the beach, turn left to arrive in the village close to the Lyndale Bridge car park.

12. If you choose to return directly to Lynmouth, continue on the path through Myrtleberry Wood. You will pass another coin log sitting beside the path before reaching a finger post marked as 'Arnold's Linhay' (an old cattle shelter) indicating another route to Countisbury. Ignore the next footbridge you pass and continue to the white footbridge where you can cross the river to return the car park. Alternatively, remain on the same side of the river and continue through the wooden gate and park to Lyndale Bridge, and then to the car park.

13. If you have time, you can cross the road at Lyndale Bridge to explore the village of Lynmouth and the story of the 1952 flood.

14. Across the road towards the village is Prospect Corner Bridge, rebuilt after the flood to twice the width of the original. It marks the confluence of the two rivers.

From here, you can spot the water cannons that mark the Glen Lyn Gorge created by the West Lyn River. The West Lyn River

carried more water during the flood than the East Lyn, flowing down a steep gradient of 1:5 in places. A marker in the gorge shows where the water level reached a point 50 feet above normal level - no wonder the huge torrent transported huge boulders towards Lynmouth during the 1952 flood. For a £10 entry fee, tourists can access the Glen Lyn Gorge today to visit the working hydro-electric power station along with the 'Power of Water' exhibition. A network of footpaths run through the woodlands of the gorge, passing a number of waterfalls.

15. Our route continues through Lynmouth town along Riverside Road. This was built as a buffer between the river and the houses on left which before 1952 directly overlooked the river.

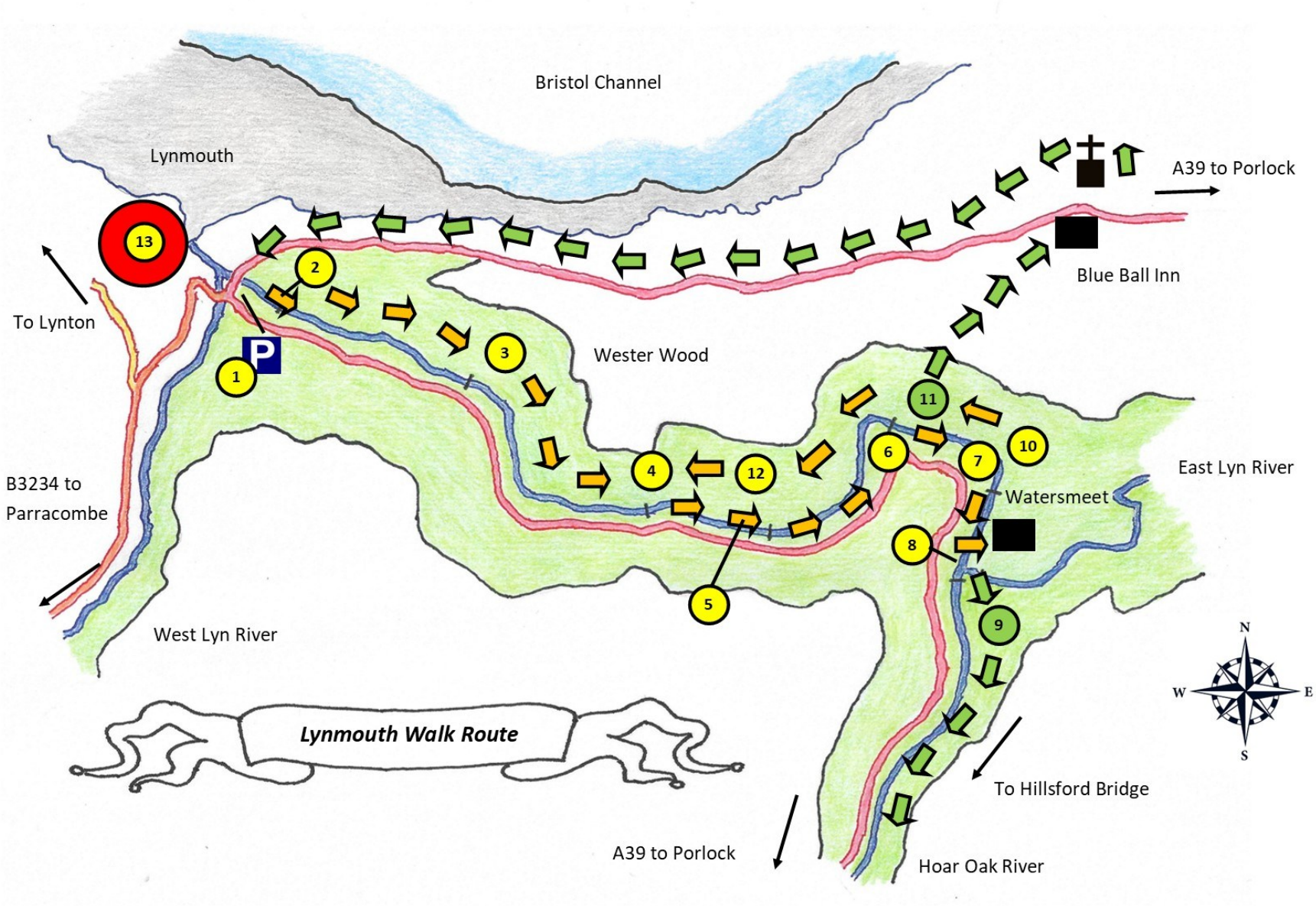
It is clear to see from here how the river has been widened and deepened (with high protective walls) to control future flooding. An overflow area now exists on the opposite bank known as 'Sunny Side' extending into parkland, tennis courts and a putting green.

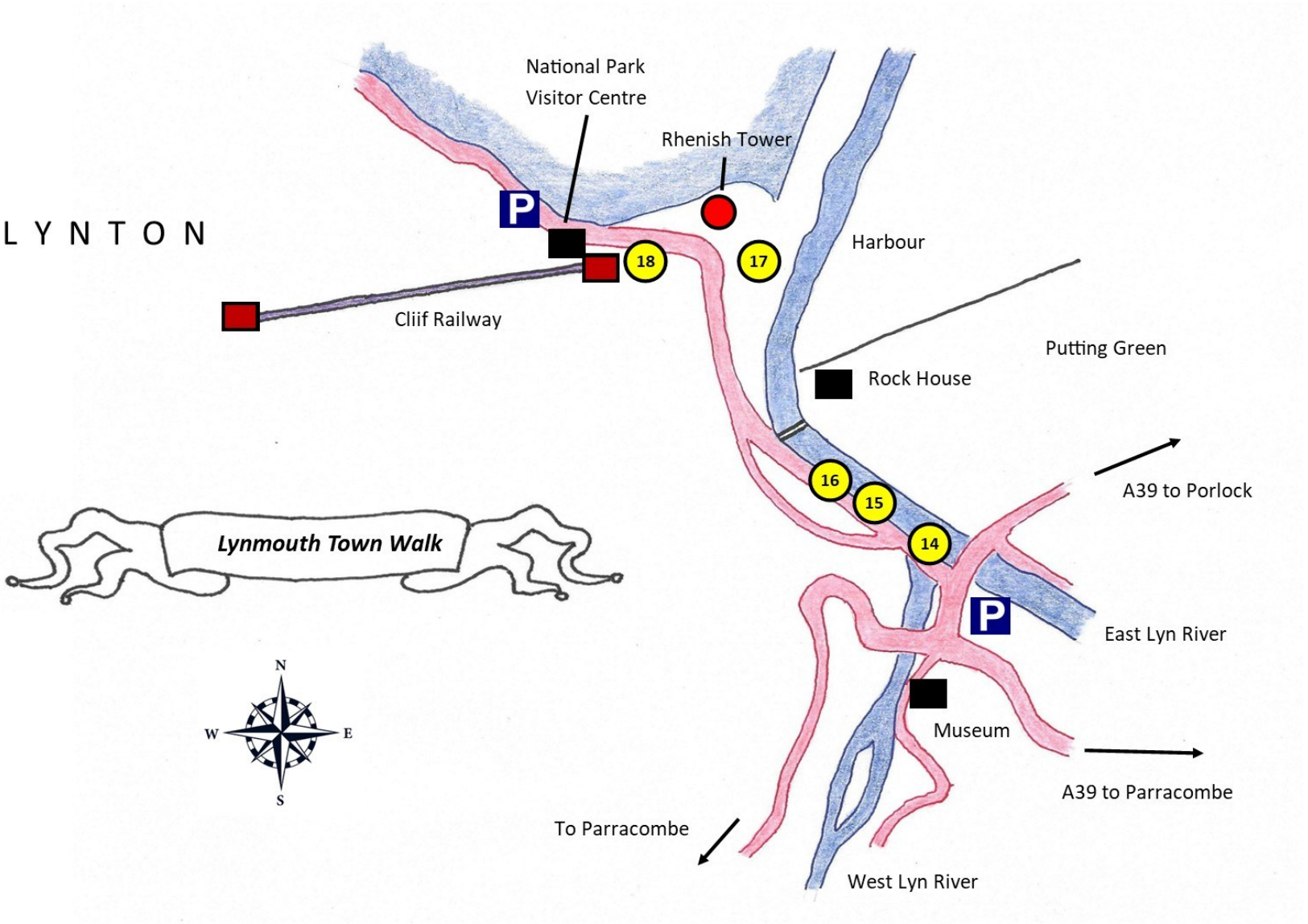
16. Halfway along Riverside Road is the Flood Memorial Hall, occupying the site of the old lifeboat station destroyed by the flood. It houses an excellent free exhibition containing photographs, film, newspaper cuttings, and a model of Lynmouth as it was before the event of 1952. A plaque commemorating the 34 dead can be found on the wall of a small garden area next door.

Outside what is today the bakery, a large boulder deflected the flood water towards the Rhenish Tower by the harbour. This protected the old buildings that can still be seen today from the boulder to the corner of the street. The rock was too large to be removed after the flood, and remains in place today, underneath the new road.

17. Riverside Road continues to the harbour. Until the 1850s, fishing was the main source of income for Lynmouth. Then the railway arrived in the 1860s and the village became popular with Victorian tourists, and became known as 'Little Switzerland'. paddle steamers were regular visitors from the early 1900s, and hotels grew up by the crowded riverside banks. The iconic Rhenish tower stands proud by the harbour wall, built by General Rawdon in the 1850s to store salt water for indoor baths. It also served as a beacon with a tar barrel flame (later replaced by electric light) to guide sailors and fishermen. It is so named because it is an imitation of towers on the river Rhine, and was damaged in 1952, this being the furthest extent of flood damage in the village. What you see now is a replica of the original rebuilt in 1954.

18. Beyond the Rhenish Tower, Riverside Road becomes the Esplanade (built in 1887), protected from the sea by boulder revetments and a high sea wall. Beyond the wall is a large apron of beach sediment (visible at low tide), including coarse material from previous flood events. Along the Esplanade can be found the excellent Exmoor National Park information centre, which used to be the 'Pavilion', a theatre built in 1932, with an open-fronted lower floor to act as a waiting area for passengers using the steam ferries. Next door are some well-preserved lime kilns that date back to the 1700s. Limestone was imported by sea and burnt in kilns to produce powdered lime to make mortar, and to help sweeten the acidic local soils. These kilns were in use until around 1910, and were then restored by the Exmoor National Park. Also found here is the unique Lynmouth Cliff Railway, the steepest completely water powered railway in the world opened in 1890 and still operating on its original system. It is a 263m long water-driven funicular (using no motors or electricity) that ascends a 1:1.75 gradient to the sister village of Lynton atop the cliffs. This marvel of sustainable Victorian engineering operates using just gravity and water tanks filled from the nearby West Lyn River. One of two cable-connected cars descends while the other ascends the rail tracks on a counterbalance system, as the water drains from the storage tanks. The top of the cliff railway offers a tremendous panoramic view of Lynmouth Bay, the rugged Exmoor coast and right across the Bristol Channel on clear day. If you haven't got a head for heights, you might prefer to explore the Westerway Path, the pedestrian link between Lynmouth and Lynton. It winds its way steeply up the hill from behind the Pavilion, and was the only connection between the communities before the road was built in 1828. It follows the route smugglers would have taken with their contraband as they left Lynmouth.


Bristol Channel
Lynmouth
A39 to Porlock
Blue Ball Inn
To Lynton
Wester Wood
B3234 to
Parracombe
East Lyn River
Watersmeet
West Lyn River
Lynmouth Walk Route
To Hillsford Bridge
A39 to Porlock
Hoar Oak River
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LYNTON
National Park
Visitor Centre
Rhenish Tower
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18
17
Harbour
Cliif Railway
Putting Green
Rock House
16
15
14
A39 to Porlock
Lynmouth Town Walk
P
East Lyn River
N
W
E
S
Museum
A39 to Parracombe
To Parracombe
West Lyn River