



Walk 5. Ilfracombe, the Slade Valley and Lee Bay.

● 9.1 miles, ascents and descents of 500 metres. 3 hours 40 minutes continuous walking, allow 5-5½ hours.

Terrain: A mix of roads, tracks, and paths, some potentially muddy.

Access: Start at Ilfracombe Quay, next to the Verity statue (SS 526 479, EX34 9EQ). Between March and the end of October parking in the town centre is expensive, so you may prefer to start from the Hillsborough (swimming pool) car park off the A399 on the other side of the harbour (SS 530 478, EX34 9QJ, £; adds 1 mile and 50m of ascent in total), or from Bicclescombe Park (see overleaf). Ilfracombe can be reached by bus from Barnstaple (21 daily and 301 Monday to Saturday), Combe Martin (301) and Woolacombe/Mortehoe (31, daily).

Maps: Croydecycle 06 Ilfracombe and Berrynarbor or OS Explorer 139 Barnstaple & Ilfracombe.

Refreshments: Plenty of choice in Ilfracombe, pub in Lee village.

ILFRACOMBE IS THE LARGEST TOWN ON THE NORTH DEVON COAST, a former fishing village that developed into a holiday resort during the nineteenth century. Its apt motto is 'curious coastal charm'. The harbour area in particular is worth exploring, set among steep-sided hills and with some interesting features including the St. Nicholas chapel on a hill above the quay, an aquarium with themed tanks from hill stream down to the open sea, and since 2012 Damien Hirst's 20-metre high statue, Verity. This walk explores Ilfracombe and the Slade Valley, following the route of the old Ilfracombe to Barnstaple railway line before cutting through fields and woods to Lee and its delightful bay. The final section on the coast path is suitably scenic.

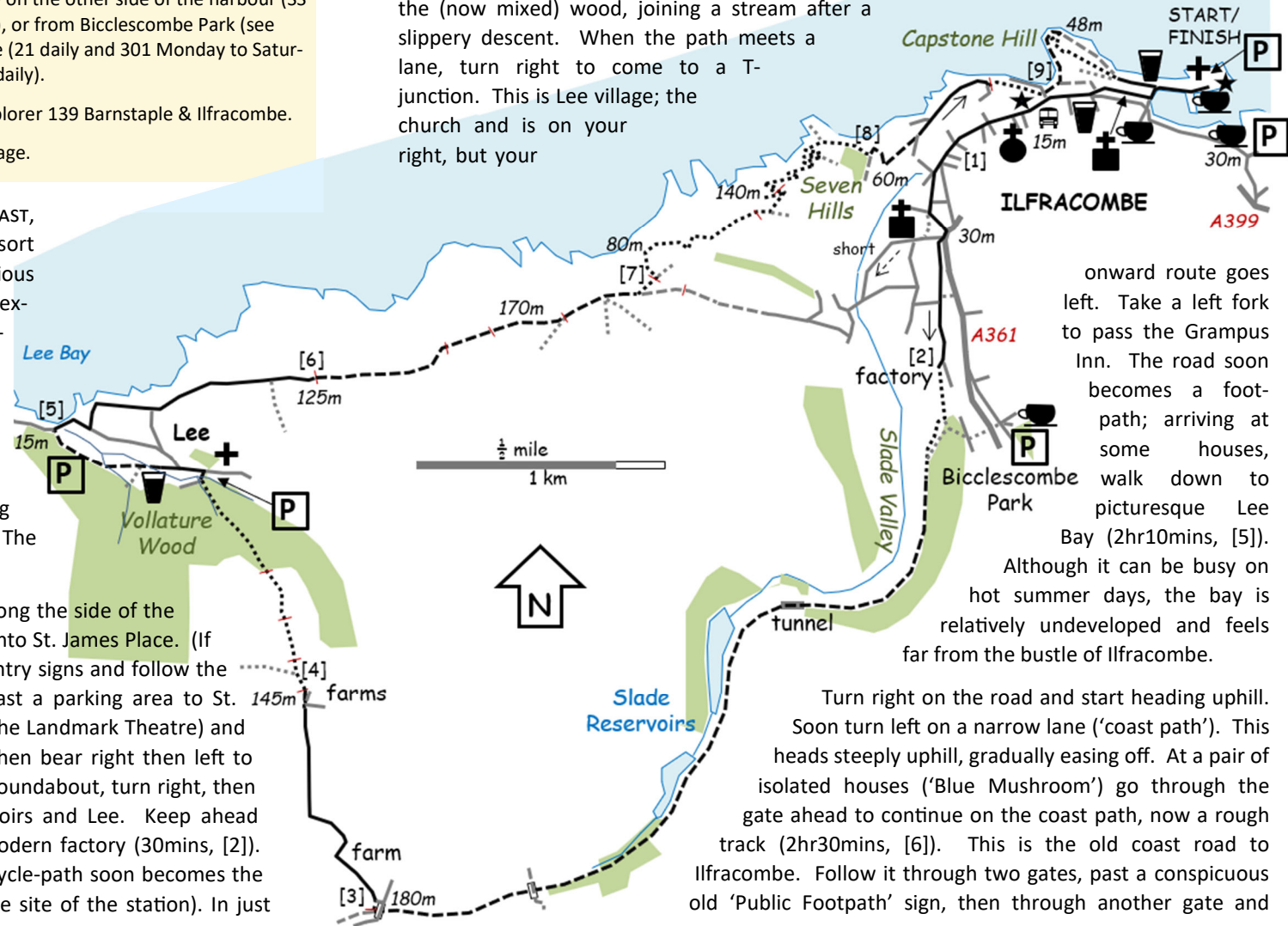
Starting from the quayside car park in Ilfracombe, walk along the side of the harbour, follow the road left then turn immediately right into St. James Place. (If you have parked above the harbour, go through the no entry signs and follow the road downhill alongside the harbour; continue ahead past a parking area to St. James Place). Follow the road past the 'cooling towers' (the Landmark Theatre) and up to some traffic lights (15mins, [1]). Go straight on, then bear right then left to head uphill to a church. Turn left and descend to a mini-roundabout, turn right, then take the right fork (Station Road) towards Slade Reservoirs and Lee. Keep ahead where the road bends right and walk uphill to a large modern factory (30mins, [2]). Join a path alongside its left-hand fence. This foot- and cycle-path soon becomes the line of the old railway to Barnstaple (the factory is on the site of the station). In just

over 20 minutes go through a short tunnel, then the first of the two Slade reservoirs appears on your right. After the end of the second reservoir pass a concrete hut and, a little later, go under a bridge. In under ten minutes come to another bridge, and immediately beyond it go through a gate on the right. Follow a narrow path to a road junction (1hr30mins, [3]), turning left. Turn left again on a surfaced lane with signs for several farms. Several bends will bring you to the farms. Go through a gate on the left-hand fork, a rough track with a confirming footpath sign (1hr40mins, [4]). Head uphill past a barn. You will soon have a distant view of the sea.

Continue on a rough track across the field; at the corner go over a stile (or through the gate). Immediately go through a second field gate in front of it and keep to the left-hand side of the field. Enter a conifer wood through a pedestrian gate, and follow the path downhill through the (now mixed) wood, joining a stream after a slippery descent. When the path meets a lane, turn right to come to a T-junction. This is Lee village; the church and is on your right, but your

onward route goes left. Take a left fork to pass the Grampus Inn. The road soon becomes a foot-path; arriving at some houses, walk down to picturesque Lee Bay (2hr10mins, [5]). Although it can be busy on hot summer days, the bay is relatively undeveloped and feels far from the bustle of Ilfracombe.

Turn right on the road and start heading uphill. Soon turn left on a narrow lane ('coast path'). This heads steeply uphill, gradually easing off. At a pair of isolated houses ('Blue Mushroom') go through the gate ahead to continue on the coast path, now a rough track (2hr30mins, [6]). This is the old coast road to Ilfracombe. Follow it through two gates, past a conspicuous old 'Public Footpath' sign, then through another gate and

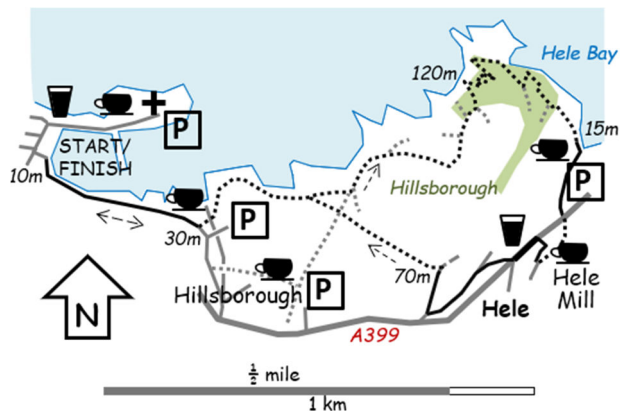


down through a cutting on slippery bedrock. Soon afterwards take a left turn on the signposted coast path, crossing a field to go through a wooden gate and turn sharply left (2hr55mins, [7]). Follow the path above a cliff; when it turns inland and gives way to grass continue ahead to an (initially hidden) National Trust marker post, then through a gap in a wall. Go through a kissing gate and continue uphill to a seat; to the left is a mini-turret with a toposcope.

At the seat turn right and start heading down the far side of the hill, then turn left through a gate. The path appears to double back on itself, but it soon zigzags down the hill. Ignore a right turn to the National Trust car park; continue zigzagging, then level out to approach Ilfracombe. Soon after some steps come to a path junction and turn left on the coast path towards the town centre. Next turn right on an unmade residential road, which soon swings around to the left (3hr20mins, [8]). Keep left at a hard road. This takes you above the coast; look out for the Tunnels Beach below on the left. When the road bends sharply right, go through a metal pedestrian gate on the left, into a small garden. Keep left, then head down steps to the 'cooling towers'. You are nearly back at the start, but there is one more coastal detour before finishing. Walk down to the main road, turn left, and then left again alongside a promenade beneath cliffs (3hr35mins, [9]). As you round the headland turn right to follow a zigzag path; turning always upwards, arrive at the top of Capstone Hill. Little Kate (and her poignant story) provides a contrast with Verity. Leave the hill by heading across the grass towards the harbour; join a hard path then continue ahead on the road, where Henry Williamson (author of *Tarka the Otter*) lived for the latter part of his life. Keep left past the Sandpiper Inn to arrive back at the quay.

Alternative start: Biclescombe Park (● 7 miles, ascents and descents of 375m). Biclescombe Park (SS 518 465, EX34 8DN), off Biclescombe Park Road, has a small car park and a tea room. Almost opposite the (car) park gates, look for a safety barrier and head up the steps behind them to go between houses. Cross the main road and continue up more steps. This brings you to a smaller road; cross diagonally right and join a footpath, taking the right fork to pass a large round house. Continue ahead on the footpath, then go through a gate and drop down through a small nature reserve, soon coming to a wider track. Turn left to join the main walk soon after the 30min point ([2]). Continue almost as far as the 2hr55min point ([7]), but after the cutting keep ahead on the main track to come to a gate. Go through and continue on the now enclosed track. When it becomes a surfaced lane take the right-hand, downward fork. Follow it down to suburban housing and turn left at the T-junction. Turn right at the next T-junction and follow the road to a third T-junction, with a terrace of older houses opposite. Turn right, then left into Richmond Road. Bend left into Station Road, but at the end of the first house on the right take a narrow path to the right. This descends between houses to the A361. Turn right, then take the second left, Biclescombe Park Road. Immediately after the second turn to the left is the entrance to the park.

Short walk 1: Ilfracombe and the Seven Hills (● 4 miles, ascents and descents of 235m). Follow the main walk just past the 15-min point ([1]) to the mini-roundabout. Turn right then right again into Church Hill. Continue ahead with the churchyard on your right; the road becomes Langleigh Road and curves around to the left. At its end turn right into Broad Park Av-



Ilfracombe from Hillsborough

enue then left into Langleigh Park. Take a short path on the right and at its end turn right into Langleigh Lane, the beginning of the old Ilfracombe to Lee road, which rises steeply. Ignore a road coming in from the right. The road soon becomes a track. Go through a gate, continue ahead alongside a bank for two minutes or so, then turn right through a pedestrian gate to rejoin the main walk at the 2hr55min point ([7]).

Short walk 2: Hillsborough and Hele Mill (● 2.5 miles, ascents and descents of 200m). This short walk can also be started from the Hillsborough long-stay car park off the A399, or from Hele. Start from the lifeboat house in the SW corner of the harbour and walk along the southern (fishing) quay. As the road leaves the quayside pass a small garden on the left, then take a path heading down to the left above a café: this is the South West Coast Path, although somewhat confusingly the sign for it appears to point along the road. Cross an access road and walk above Rapparee Cove, a small beach. Turn left where signposted to stay on the Coast Path (if you have started from Hillsborough car park, take the surfaced path past the swimming pool and continue upwards, joining the Coast Path from there). Now follow the main (Coast) path up the side of Hillsborough ('Hele's Barrow'); there are views to the left over Ilfracombe, then at a clifftop viewpoint to the right over Hele Bay and along to the Hangman Hills and Heddon's Mouth. The path now zigzags steeply downhill. Turn left to stay on the Coast Path where signposted, finally descending to the beach at Hele. Follow the road past a café and car park, then at the main road cross over and join a signposted but narrow footpath. This brings you to Hele Mill, a working cornmill with visitor displays and a tearoom. Pass the tearoom, go through the gate and turn right. Turn right again to walk in front of some holiday flats, then turn left on the main road. Cross over, turn left then head up a side road on the right. Walk nearly to the end then turn right along a road with houses on one side. Pass the gateposts at the end, turning sharply left on a footpath to walk beneath trees. The first path on the left takes you to Hillsborough car park, while the second is the Coast Path; retrace your outward route back to the harbour.

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