

Ayrmer Cove, South Devon

The sunshine and blue sky that I had left behind at home turned to blankets of cloud and then fine drizzle. In the lea of Dartmoor heavy rain fell and cast doubt over my plans to walk a new stretch of the South Devon coast from Ayrmer Cove. I considered abandoning the idea and driving all the way up to the north coast to escape the rain, but I carried on anyway. At Ugborough the rain stopped and the sky gradually paled to a soft grey.

In the tiny village of Ringmore, I took a wrong turning and found myself in a narrow No Through Road pitching downhill and with no turning space. I had to reverse uphill between stone walls and then past a parked vehicle. I repeated the error down a second lane which also led nowhere. With a long-standing painful knee too, I was beginning to think I had made a mistake in coming out. When I finally chose the through route towards Challaborough, a friendly local old lady with her tiny dog directed me to the National Trust Car Park. After the number of cars squeezing past each other on the lanes through the South Hams, I was surprised that the car park was empty. I set off down the hedge-lined path towards the coast with the first patches of blue sky overhead and then the sun broke through intermittently. The beach at Ayrmer Cove was also completely empty and there was no-one in sight on the SW Coast Path. And this in July! I stood looking at awesome rectangular slabs of slate at the western end of the beach and the dramatic cliffs behind. The coarse silver sand was obviously derived from the rocks which shimmered like mirrors even in the weak sunshine. As I walked west the sky cleared and the sun brought a constant flickering of Ringlet butterflies from the grasses. Blue scabious and flax dotted the carpet of yellow and white flowers.

I prayed regularly for strength in my right knee, especially at Westcombe Beach where the steep 100 metre climb up Hoist Point confirmed the guide book's assessment of the route as strenuous. In the bright light, threatening angular rocks cast black shadows onto the silver cliffs. Large areas of tall thistles fringed the cliff edges on Scobbiscombe Farm, painful to walk through in shorts but providing the reward of flocks of goldfinches. A peregrine flew past me, the blue of its back clear in the sun, and landed on the sheer cliffs. By now the sun was fierce and breezes blew unseasonably from the north east. I regretted having forgotten my cap for my bald head, but I couldn't stop thanking God for his wonderful opportunity to walk in stunning landscape in blazing sun with a fresh breeze with the sea quietly twinkling below my feet, and then giving thanks just for the ability to walk.

Many people walk the Coast Path without exploring the beaches and promontories along the route. The path is like a motorway encouraging walkers to press on up the next climb or round the curve to the next landmark. I dropped down to each cove where small streams had worn access points in the cliffs and I veered off the path onto each small promontory to look down onto the rocks, watch the white waves or catch spectacular views into the next bay. I got my come-uppance, however, when my left leg disappeared down a hole up to my knee. The guide book had warned about "holes made by animals". I pulled my leg out and thanked God that I had no injuries.

This stretch of coast has a feeling of remoteness. Between Ayrmer Cove and the mouth of the River Erme there is no sign of a house or a road, not even a telegraph wire or a look-out point. In the four miles and two hours of walking I met only two couples on the path and I waved to a farmer ploughing a field. I was strangely pleased when he waved back. A jackdaw drifted out across the beach below me.

I lunched at Muxham Point, perched on a white rock above where the River Erme met the sea. Below me razorbills flew in and gentle curves of the sea rippled towards the sands. There were no waves but the offshore breezes blew flecks of white off the back edges of the ripples. From my vantage point I had uninterrupted views across the river to Mothecombe Beach and along the coast to distant Stoke Point. I could look straight up the River Erme with its sandbanks revealed by the low tide. There was no-one in sight on Mothecombe Beach and no-one walked past on the path. As I sat, I could feel the heat of the sun stinging my bare head and I had to use my pullover as a headscarf.

I walked downhill to Wonwell Beach. The only two occupants of the broad stretch of sand were a solitary gull and a strapping youth damming a streamlet with a child's bright plastic spade. This was the furthest point of my walk. I retraced my steps, ditching my original plan to make a circular walk following lanes and field paths inland. I talked with a couple who shared my sentiments that circular walks are generally better than 'there and back' routes but they agreed that coastal and river landscapes look so different walking in opposite directions that there is no need for a circuit.

Within half a mile of leaving them, I changed my mind again, tempted by a permissive path leading inland from Fernycombe Point through fields and looping back to Hoist Point. I am so glad I did. From the 100-metre high slopes, broad vistas of the coast heightened the sense of open space and quietness. In the foreground, ripe golden wheat fields dotted with poppies moved in the wind like waves of the sea. A cock pheasant squawked and ran as I rounded a hedge and it melted like magic into a pale green field of oats. High above me a skylark sang, too high for me to see. There was no-one else in sight and, remembering the grey and rainy start that had cleared away, I again thanked God like a small boy excited at Christmas time.

Back at the cliff edge, a kestrel rose near me and I watched it soar, hover and land a few hundred metres ahead of me. I kept my eye fixed on its landing place and located a reddish brown patch between the wild flowers. Then it rose and drifted out over the sea. On my head, I repositioned my pullover with sleeves hanging down like plaits and wondered what people would think. I met an older couple and apologised for my headgear, feeling the need to explain that I had left my cap in the car. The husband, who was a yard or two behind his wife, stopped and said, "Yes, but it was cloudy this morning," as if to excuse my forgetfulness. How gracious.

The climb to the summit of Hoist Point from the west side was not so strenuous but at the top I prayed again over my knee for the strength to make the steep descent. I made it. At the foot of the slope, the low-tide expanse of Westcombe Beach demanded a proper exploration. I descended onto the coarse sand. No-one, not even a footprint. The only signs of man was plastic flotsam pushed by the tides against the foot of the cliffs. With the tide out, channels between lines of rock opened out, leading me eastwards across the beach. I dumped my bag and pullover and roamed

the beach. The high sun moving west cast deep shadows but the smooth faces of shiny slate tilted to reflect light dazzlingly, turning the landscape black and white. Each set of rocks led to a further area for exploration and, as I climbed up a rock face, a bird made a regular thin call. Looking up to the skyline, I saw a little Rock Pipit outlined against the blue, insistently pipping its alarm. It prompted me to descend and I was pleased I hadn't climbed any higher as some of the rocks had loose thin layers that I could pull out like playing cards from a pack.

Then a crack opened before me in the projecting cliff. What I had thought was a shadowy recess revealed a line of daylight when I moved my head. It was a narrow natural arch. I walked through, crunching on wet grit, into a different world. Behind me and above my head was the dramatic, rather intimidating, monochrome landscape of giant bare rocks. Now I stood on a wave-cut platform covered with bright green seaweed and dotted with rockpools. The sea was almost silent and it was as if I had stepped into a private world, like the wardrobe door into Narnia. Overhead, airborne kittiwakes started to shriek because I had invaded their territory, soaring above their nests hidden on the top of the rock slab. I felt as if I had trespassed, so I walked back through the arch and picked up my belongings.

I climbed away from the beach, grateful for the bonus of discovering such an amazing place. From the cliff-top I looked down onto Ayrmer Cove and the inland path back to the car park. I was reluctant to abandon the coast. Beyond was the steep ascent up Toby's Point offering me an alternative route via Challaborough and a lane. A man was running up and down the 80-metre slope as if he was on the flat. He passed me when I was half way up and he wasn't even breathing heavily. Just a flicker of judgment on my pullover headgear flashed on his face and was gone. The summit gave stunning views down onto Burgh Island and the golden sandy causeway that links it to the mainland at low tide. The gold was a contrast to the silver coves. At the water's edges was a fringe of tiny people being holidaymakers. Below me lay Challaborough and its holiday park but even the path down to the caravans was quiet.

A solitary Pyramidal Orchid bloomed at the side of the path. It is supposed to grow on chalk and its surprising appearance was like being given a sweetie to compensate for the anticlimax of descending into the world of caravans and tarmac. Amongst the caravans was a network of access roads and this provided the only navigational challenge of my 8-mile walk: finding the public road out! From here it was only a $\frac{3}{4}$ mile walk up a narrow, deep lane back to the car park, and a further opportunity to thank God for the strength to walk and for a magical walk in the sun.