

Bodigga Cliff, east of Millandreath, to Portwrinkle, Cornwall

This walk was defined by the eastern limit of a previous walk from Polperro and the western end of a walk from Cremyll to the top of the hill above Portwrinkle. The coast walk itself was broken up by a detour around a cliff fall and by a bus ride. The cliff fall near the Monkey Sanctuary above Keverall Beach has resulted in the closure of 1¼ miles of the South West Coast Path, most of the detour being along a road. Boring!

To avoid the road I walked along the cliff-top from Bodigga Cliff where I had parked my car on the roadside. I reached the point where the wooded cliff was at its lowest point. I had discovered this by zooming in on Google Earth and it had looked to me as though it would be possible to reach the beach here. It is not part of the SWCP but as I pressed in through the undergrowth I found that someone had created a path with steps and handrails on the steeper slopes through the woods, leading to a sturdy wooden ladder. At the bottom of the ladder is a thick knotted rope to facilitate a descent down a shaley slide. Brilliant! When I had looked at Google Earth and the map, I had misjudged just how high the land was above the beach and without the steps and rope I would have had to return to the road.

I had left home in Mid Devon very early in the morning and it was still only 8.45am when I stood on the beach. It was deserted apart from a solitary fisherman out on a flat rocky platform. I had timed my arrival to match low tide and it was still going out. You can walk from here at ebb tide for over 3 miles to Seaton and Downderry. The shoreline is interesting but not pretty and certainly more of a coast path than the official route. The unstable shale that caused the cliff fall has produced a grey, gritty, slaty sort of beach with patches of low rocks. The sea was a flat calm and also grey and I couldn't detect where it joined the sky. Apart from gentle movement around the rocks the water appeared still. It was vaguely surreal and a little disturbing, as if the sea was breathing. The only colour was provided by small fragments of red, pink, orange and lime green seaweed.

At Seaton, I planned to catch a bus to Portwrinkle and then walk back. I sat in the bus shelter and waited for the bus. It was only 9.50 but I ate my lunch. I listened to a lady who has a pink kitchen and a husband who has had a leg amputated. They told me that the bus service is due to be axed next month. Seaton was otherwise almost deserted.

At Portwrinkle, I turned temporarily east and scaled the hill to the cliff-top golf course to link up with the previous walk from Cremyll. Then I descended to Finnygook Beach and turned back westwards. More grey. The shore looked untidy at low tide and the little harbour was a bit tumbledown, but the flat calm provided perfect conditions for a group of paddlers in canoes and inflatables.

Then, mercifully, the path took off at right angles to the sea, steeply climbing up to the top of the sloping cliffs, passing between sloe and gorse, bramble and bracken. There is a distinct smell to the end-of-season bracken, hard to define and not unpleasant. August indeed bears the mark of Autumn; hedges and banks have a taint of brown about them. Below, a series of gritty beaches ran under the cliffs. One place was called Portwrinkle Cut Off: the risk of being cut off by rising tides if you strayed this far west.

And then down into Donderry; a steep, winding descent into a linear development of houses. I escaped walking between the homes by dropping down to the beach again. The tide was still low enough to walk all the way back to Seaton. Transformation! Between 10.30 and 2pm the car parks had filled up, the beach café was busy with eaters and the beach was dotted with people of all ages. The last bit of the walk is the least satisfying. A climb up Looe Hill, a road that was originally a through route along the cliffs to Looe but which now ends above Millandreath at Bodigga Cliff. After ½ mile, the path enters private woods and passes stands of larches, then crosses slopes of dry grasses. It had just started to feel like a proper cliff path again when a fence with three official notices and a map announced a detour back to the road; the eastern end of the cliff fall I had encountered before.

More trudging on tarmac, but an unexpected bonus about ¼ mile from my car: plums and a marrow for sale at a farm gate—just right for chutney making.