

Clovelly Cross to Abbotsham, North Devon

11.6 miles; 6 hours.

If this section of the South-West Coast Path were a person, I would apologise for misjudging them. I had only committed to doing this walk for the sake of extending westwards my walks along the path. I assumed that the long sections of woodland would devalue the walk. Not so.

Having parked for free on the roadside in Abbotsham, I caught the 9.15am 319 bus to Clovelly Cross on the A39 and walked into Winklebury Lane. After the village school, the descent to the coast path turned into a narrow green lane between high banks and under overarching trees. The surface changed into a remarkably well-preserved cobbled surface dropping steeply to the top of Clovelly. It is hard to believe now but the steep, slippery wet cobbles once formed the main route out of the fishing village. This would explain the curiously isolated location of the school.

The SWCP led eastwards along the stony Hobby Drive. It was populated with pheasants and crossed regularly by small streams in torrent after heavy rains. Rare gaps in the trees provided views down to Clovelly harbour and westwards along the cliffs to Gallantry Bower. The sun briefly picked out the harbour and then the gold of bracken on the cliffs. Ahead, the coast stretched around Barnstaple Bay past Saunton Sands to Morte Point. After three miles of easy, level walking under trees along the Drive, it was a delight to enter fields with the sky over my head. Pheasants continued to startle me with their sudden squawks followed by the panicky flubberdubberdubber of their wing beats. When they fly, they give the impression of being pulled back by unseen hands.

Then the route enters more woods but quite different in character. Buck's Wood is largely beech. The path twists between aged trunks and under snakey limbs all green with moss. Through the trees the sea was breaking in an unusual line of white waves on a submerged pebble bank stretching half a mile into the sea. The waves looked odd lining up at right angles to the coast.

Buck's Mills is a both a pleasant surprise and a disappointment. The tightly grouped hamlet of stone cottages is perched above a slipway and a stony beach. A dramatic waterfall gushed horizontally from the cliff, powered by the outflow from recent deluges. The disappointment was that the poster's offer of a Roskilly's ice cream could not be fulfilled. The tiny cafe was so closed it looked defunct, though admittedly this was early January and the village was deserted.

The climb from the road up the side of Worthygate Woods is immediate and steep, hairpinning its way up onto cliffs that have no name on the map, despite rising over 160 metres from the sea. Woods define the identities around here: Buck's, Worthygate and Sloo. The descents are a slippery blend of mud, leaf mould and tree roots; everywhere is so saturated that even the wooden steps ooze water underfoot.

At Peppercombe, I thought I had missed the beach because the guide book fails to mark the short descent past a house, but after less than half a mile the path came alongside a pebble ridge, steeply banked at the top of the beach. I clambered down the

shifting stones onto one of the most beautiful beaches I have seen. The sun shone on firm golden sand with pools moating rounded boulders and interspersed with twisted rock strata like exposed ribs. Red sandstone cliffs pointed eastwards towards Morte Point and behind me lay the triangle of Blackstone Rock. The beauty of the beach was emphasised by its surprise: I had not expected anything like this along this coast.

And I had the entire beach to myself. Not even a bird print scarred the sand. The only setback was that, as I climbed back up the pebble ridge close to the outflow of a stream, the stones gave way and I found myself sitting in the water with a painful left knee. I prayed over my body and resumed my climb. Within minutes the pain had left my knee and my ability to walk was back to normal.

The cliff-top walk wound up and down Higher Rowden, Babbacombe Cliff, Westacott Cliff and Greencliff. The landscape was more open with fields, fences and hedges backing up a scruffier coast of pebble beaches and broken cliffs. Somewhere along these cliffs I climbed over a stile and stepped down into a muddy path so slippery that I lurched into barbed wire and impaled my hand. I used a couple of dock leaves to staunch the stream of blood whilst I held my hand elevated and was glad there was no-one else on the path to see this strange creature waving to an empty landscape.

The western end of my walk had been regularly marked with identification plates complete with grid references on almost every available post: 1st gate from Hobby Drive, 2nd gate from Hobby Drive, 3rd and 4th. By contrast the ups and downs east from Peppercombe remained anonymous until I reached Greencliff. Here my route turned inland down lanes back to my car. I was tired by this time and the sun had almost gone down but when I reached a field gate I saw a yellow-gold sunset. Winter can be the best season for walking.