

## *Plymouth Stonehouse to Heybrook*

In the process of walking the South West Coast Path over a period of about two years, there are certain sections of the path that I have viewed with disdain. I carved my decision in granite to leave them untrod: urban sections, inland sections and lengthy tarmac stretches. I think the word is 'eschewed' them.

When I walked the SWCP in south east Cornwall, I had viewed Plymouth from across the Tamar at Cremyll and felt that was quite close enough. Last year when I walked the Devon cliffs past Wembury towards Heybrook Bay I had convinced myself that the few miles towards Plymouth would not be worth making a special trip just to fill the gap.

In 37 years of living in Devon our two experiences of Plymouth had been limited to taking our daughter to the ice rink and to pulling off the A38 into Sainsbury's to buy an emergency bucket to be sick into. We did nearly enter the city whilst holidaying on Dartmoor but road chaos caused by a cycle race caused us to retreat to the countryside. Regular negative reports on the local news helped to cement my opinion that Plymouth was El Dumpo.

The SWCP National Trail Guide that I had inherited had been published in 1998 but written in 1995, so was 20 years out of date. The author wrote, "At the time of writing there is no recognised route through Plymouth for the walker." So how could the SWCP be considered a continuous 630 mile route? The guide even excluded Plymouth from its maps apart from the east and west fringes that sneaked onto the maps of the Cornwall and Devon coast. When I researched the current route I was further put off by tedious tramps along urban roads on the more recently established Waterside Walk, including a 5 mile detour up the Plym estuary to share a bridge with an A-road and then back through industrial estates and urban streets. Not only that but another detour round the back of the ferry terminal and Stonehouse Barracks. Coast path? You can't fool me.

Then my curiosity was aroused by a more recent description of a flight of steps built over a fortress wall to open up a new section of the SWCP around Devil's Point in south-west Plymouth. I had been planning to drive to Mevagissey in Cornwall to walk but this was August with its promise of hold-ups on trunk roads and narrow lanes alike. So, having discovered a bus from Heybrook to downtown Plymouth, I decided to set all my prejudices aside and drive to Heybrook instead.

The timing was perfect. I parked in the last remaining free space above the beach, and found out from three residents at the bus stop that this already limited service was likely to cease at the end of the month. Viewing Plymouth from the front seat of the top deck, I was surprised by the imaginative modern architecture dotted around. However, there's not much royal about Royal Parade where the buses terminate. My walk through a mile of grotty streets to Admiral's Hard, where the SWCP enters the city from the banks of the Tamar, was self-inflicted: I hadn't thought it was worth waiting for a second bus. Naming some of the streets seemed to have been considered an unnecessary expense; a ploy to confuse invaders? There is now a recognised route for walkers but it is not always apparent.

When I finally stood at the water's edge on Admiral's Hard, I was ready to be underwhelmed by the walk ahead. Then little things caught my attention: a bus shelter for passengers waiting for the ferry to Cremyll, a bright shiny blue and white cafe that tempted me in but I needed to get some miles under my belt, the sign for the first pub in Devon, and the biggest charmer of the lot, the mid-morning sun dazzling on the water.

Nothing though really prepared me for the delight of the walk through King William Yard, twisting around massive old buildings and in and out of wharfs. I could spend a day here, especially with the bakery that offered as much toast as you can eat, and especially the climb up 63 steel steps (I counted) to mount the aforementioned fortress wall. All the time the sparkling waters were crossed by yachts, launches, ferries, fishing boats and even a Royal Navy destroyer. The seaward view from Devil's Point embraces the Cornish coast towards Rame Head to the west, and the Devon coast that I was heading towards in the east. In addition to the craft I have listed, there were windsurfers and canoeists and fishermen. There was even a man doing a handstand on his floating paddleboard. Two ladies warned me that the inviting walkway to the east was a dead end, though it had been a through route past Stonehouse Barracks until the era of IRA attacks.

There is no way of disguising the disappointment of the reluctant trudge away from the water, around the back of the barracks and around the back of Millbay docks, hidden from view by a stone wall (unless you are taller than me). This part of the walk is neither coastal nor a path but even here is a surprise. Above the lengthy stone wall is a set of rather classy railings, each rail seemingly crimped in two places for decorative effect. Suddenly I noticed a letter, then a word. It was so subtle that I could only read a section by standing at the correct angle. I read SERVE GOD. Then I stepped backward and read GOD DAILY. I walked back further, amazed. The message, all shaped in the metal, read, SERVE GOD DAILY, LOVE ONE ANOTHER, PRESERVE YOUR VICTUALS, BEWARE OF FIRE AND KEEP GOOD COMPANY. These were Sir John Hawkins' words to his fleet in 1564.

Eventually the pavements led back to the water at West Hoe. Again the Hoe was a surprise, with a line of cafés and restaurants overlooking the sea, virtually all of them inviting. As foreign tourists went past me, I felt proud that, under the sun and blue sky at least, England looked impressive. Nowhere along the front looked cheap and tacky but in this sunshine even a gasometer would look pretty.

I sat on a bench, picnicked and considered buying an icecream. The day demanded it. But most of the sellers were offering Walls and the vans were selling Whippy ice creams. I don't do either. I require proper local ice cream, Devon-made in Devon, Cornish-made in Cornwall. The last van had a sign, Real Devon Ice Cream. Oh yeah! I thought. But it was, and I was glad to see people queuing for the proper stuff. I bought a blackcurrant and cream cornet because it was described as tangy. It was.

Smeaton's Tower stands like a beached ship on The Hoe, an old lighthouse moved from Eddystone Rocks. It was open. The climb with a backpack up the tightly spiralled stone staircase and narrow ladders through the top floors was a challenging squeeze but rewarding. The view to the sea over the Tin Lido, restored to Art Deco elegance, was stunning. In the pool a solitary swimmer had the luxury of the turquoise

water to themselves. In the tower we holidaymakers waited patiently as climbers and descenders cheerfully gave way to each other. At the top, five of us crammed together around the giant candle holder before descending past the box bed of the lamp's guardian and the iron stove that had kept him warm.

At the Barbican and Sutton Harbour the place was buzzing. People walking, people eating, people drinking, people watching, people queuing for ferries to a range of destinations. Again the restaurants and bars, many in converted old portside buildings, looked very inviting.

In the days of my guidebook there was a ferry to Turnchapel on the Devon side of the River Plym. Not any more, but a more recent ferry to Mount Batten has replaced it, linking up more closely to the countryside part of the SWCP. Why would you want to toil 5 miles around the urban river on streets and largely out of sight of the sea, when a ferry, a bright yellow ferry, takes you across the estuary for a mere £1.50. That is the genuine route of the coastal path for me, just as when you reach the tidal rias of Devon and Cornwall you only labour inland if there is no ferry.

After climbing out of Mount Batten, the path enters woodland, crosses green slopes and curves around coves as you would expect on a coast path. There is also an hilarious steel plate laid on the path for those heading in the opposite direction: 'Welcome to Plymouth. Please wipe your feet.' From most of this stretch there is a broad view across the whole expanse of water that is Plymouth Sound to the city behind and to the cliffs of east Cornwall. It all looked great. So I can say, "Sorry Plymouth. I largely got it wrong." Only largely, but actually it is worth the effort to walk from Admiral's Hard around Plymouth to the Barbican to the ferry that links you up to a more conventional Devon cliff path.