

Location & Access: Blue Anchor Hotel is located in Blue Anchor Bay at ST 034 435. It is accessible via the A35 road from Minehead to the west, and the A35 road from Bridgwater and Watchet to the east.

Blue Anchor has its own station on the West Somerset Railway.

First Bus Somerset runs a regular service (number 28) between Minehead and Taunton.

There are plenty of car park spaces on the sea front in Blue Anchor Bay.



Sea defences below the Blue Anchor Hotel

Key Geography: Cliff failure, coastal management techniques, Jurassic and Triassic geology, fossils.

Description:

The best start point for this walk is the Blue Anchor Hotel, which is located on the sea front at the eastern end of Blue Anchor Bay. The hotel is currently in an extremely precarious position threatened by cliff failure, and has had to close for business recently.

If nothing is done about the current condition of the cliffs, they will soon collapse into the sea below – taking the 16th century hotel along with them. The situation here has become more pressing in recent years following severe spring storms that have caused huge new cracks to appear in the top of the cliffs very close to the hotel buildings.

Costs of defending a coastline can be astronomically high, and outside help has not been forthcoming. Over a number of years, Somerset County Council has set aside resources in order to apply for funding towards coastal protection at Blue Anchor – but a bid to the Environment Agency failed in 2014.

It is possible to gain access to the beach below the hotel either via the old slipway, or from one of the sets of steps from the promenade above the beach. By checking the tide times to visit at low tide, you will have the chance to not only take a good look at the coastal erosion processes threatening the hotel, but also walk along the shoreline eastwards to the village of Watchet – a distance of around 2.75 miles.

The cliffs in this part of Somerset represent a sharp contrast with the higher hog's back cliffs of the Exmoor coast to the west and the low, estuarine mud flats and fringe dunes around the mouth of the river Parrett to the east. *(continued overleaf)*

Curiosity Questions:

It is possible to collect samples of alabaster on the walk to Watchet. What is alabaster?

At Watchet, there is a statue on the harbourside commemorating a famous poem. What is the poem, and who wrote it?

Can you name the stations on the West Somerset Steam Railway between Minehead and Watchet?

Further information:

[www.https://vimeo.com/380476201](https://vimeo.com/380476201)

www.facebook.com/pages/category/Pub/The-Blue-Anchor-1729921563916182/

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The geology here is particularly interesting – and the cliffs can be safely viewed from the wide beach platform exposed at low tide. Just a few hundred metres from the hotel, one of the most obvious fault lines in the country is clearly visible, even to an untrained eye.

This is a normal fault, and to the left as viewed from the beach can be seen blue-grey Jurassic rocks, while to the right there is the sharp contrast of the red Triassic mudstones.

At this fault, the younger Jurassic rocks have been downthrown by tectonic forces as the crust pulled apart to slide down and sit alongside the older Triassic rocks.

There is a continental to marine transition here, with the Jurassic grey rocks being of marine origin, while the soft, crumbly Triassic red rock to the east of the fault are of continental origins.



Normal fault between Jurassic and Triassic rocks

Photograph: Bristol University

The red rocks directly below the hotel are the Keuper Marls of the Mercia Mudstone group, and it is these folded and faulted beds that are the main cause of the hotel's problems – being attacked at the base by the erosive power of the sea at high tides, as well as sub-areal processes (weathering and mass movement) from above. Incidentally, the unusual name for the village comes from the colour of mud residue left on ships' anchors when moored in the bay.

Along the beach walk to Watchet, you will pass some really interesting and unusual cliff formations and also have a chance to collect some fossils. Between Blue Anchor and Watchet, the rocks forming the cliffs contain alabaster – a translucent form of Gypsum. Pink and white seams of varying widths stripe the red marl cliffs and loose blocks on West Beach and in Warren Bay like abstract paintings. It is also possible to find veins of white fibrous gypsum, some which have been deformed by later earth movements, in tension cracks and along fault planes on the beach.

The rocks around the village of Watchet are from the Lower Lias – set down 200 – 215 million years ago when the first part of Jurassic period merged with end of Upper Triassic. This is a great place to search for fossils, including gryphaea (Devil's Toe Nails), ammonites, corals, fish, oysters, as well as various plant traces. The small (free) museum in Watchet has some interesting local specimens on show – including a complete ichthyosaur and a plesiosaur rib bone. Beach fossils in this area are regularly refreshed by erosion of the soft local rocks – so can easily be picked up on the beaches without the need for the use of a hammer. Probably the best location for fossil hunting is Helwell Bay – just five minutes east of Watchet harbour. With patience, numerous mineralised specimens can be collected, while many are too large to take away – best photographed and left for others to enjoy.

The village of Watchet is well worth a visit at the end of your walk, and you could finish your day with a train ride on the West Somerset Steam Railway.

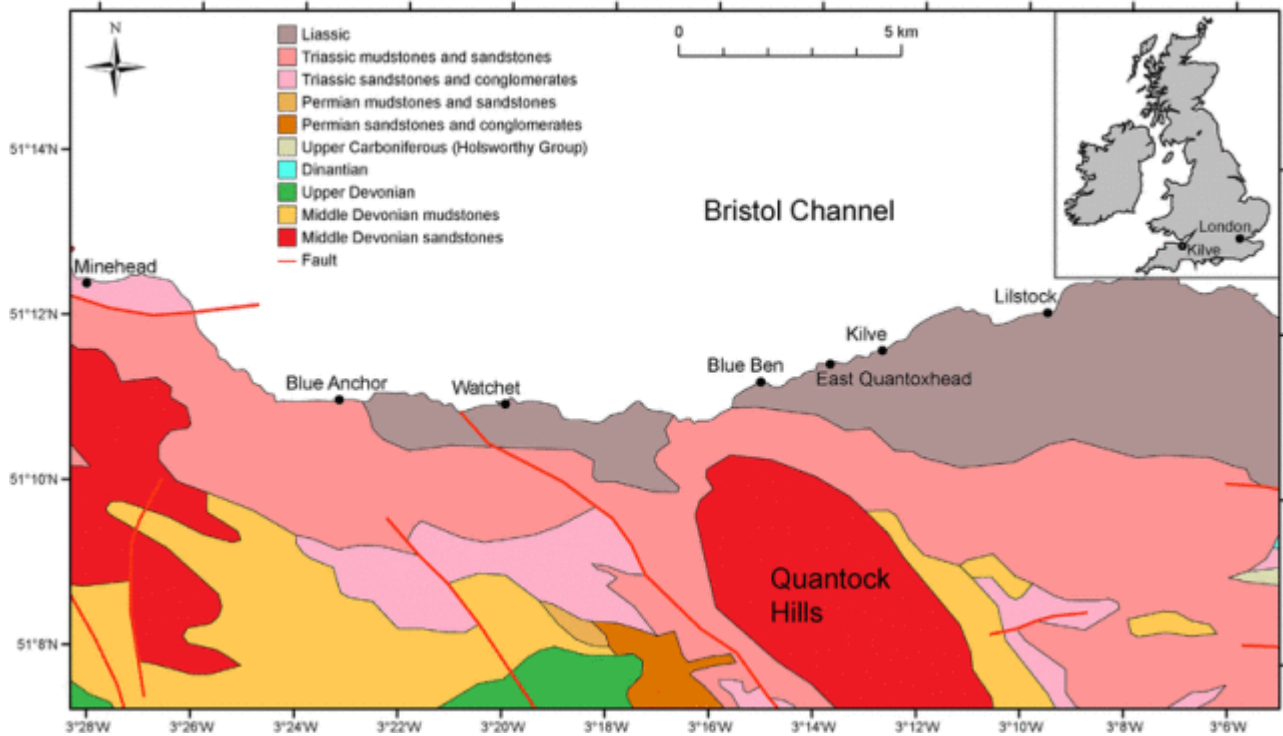
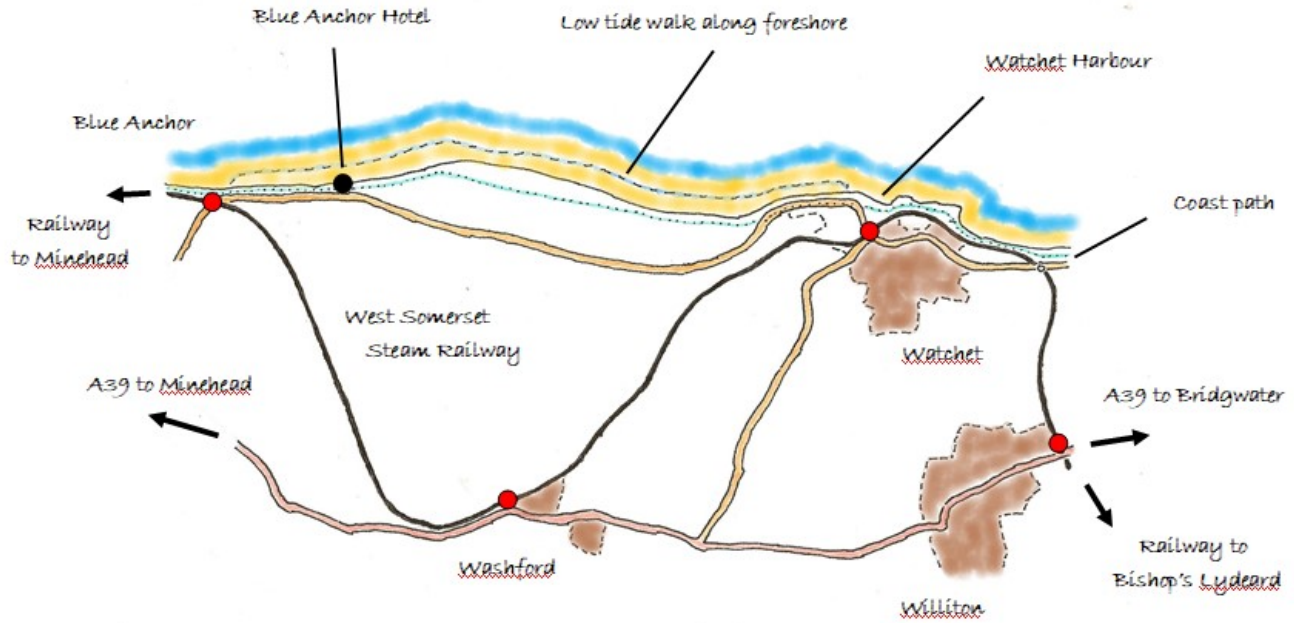
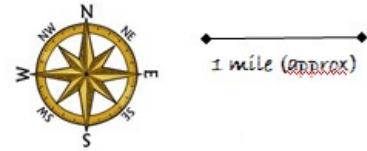
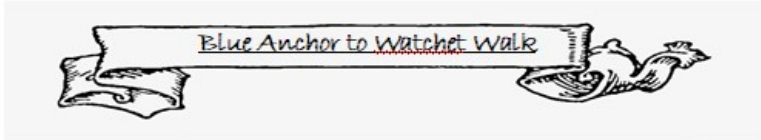
Answers to Curiosity Questions:

It is possible to collect samples of alabaster on the walk to Watchet. What is alabaster? (*It is a form of gypsum that is popularly used for carving, and also processed for plaster powder*).

At Watchet, there is a statue on the harbourside commemorating a famous poem. What is the poem, and who wrote it? (*The poem is the 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', written in this area by Samuel Taylor Coleridge*).

Can you name the stations on the West Somerset Steam Railway between Minehead and Watchet? (*Minehead - Dunster - Blue Anchor - Washford - Watchet*).

Blue Anchor, Somerset



Map from British Geological Society