

Location & Access:

The Tarka Trail is a long distance footpath / cycleway in north Devon. The town of Barnstaple acts as a transport hub for the trail, and there is a working railway station here that links to Exeter Central and Exeter St Davids. Public buses run from Barnstaple to Braunton (Route 21 to Ilfracombe); Barnstaple to Bideford (Route 21); and Barnstaple to Torrington (Route 71). It is also possible to connect by bus from Barnstaple to Meeth (via Torrington), but the service is not regular, and some planning would be required.



Taw Estuary —Photo: Paul Berry

Key Geography: Stunning views of the rivers Taw and the Taw-Torridge Estuary. Salt marshes, mud flats, historic towns, abundant wildlife & birdlife, literary connections with Henry Williamson’s ‘Tarka the Otter’.

Description:

This article focuses on the first section of the trail (5 miles) from Braunton to Barnstaple along the banks of the river Taw. The trail begins in Braunton, which has often made claim to be the largest village in England. The settlement features prominently in Henry Williamson’s classic novel ‘Tarka the Otter’ which was the original inspiration for the creation of the trail. Braunton is flanked by three imposing landscape features - Braunton Marsh, an area of wet pasture reclaimed in the 19th century, Braunton Burrows, one of England’s largest areas of sand dunes and Braunton Great Field, one of only three such open fields in England surviving from the medieval period. Each of these are worthy of a diversion from the main route.

The start point for this section of the trail is the site of the old Braunton railway station, which was closed in 1965. The station served passengers travelling on the Ilfracombe to Barnstaple line, which was opened in 1874, and continued in use until the last train ran in 1970. There used to be a level crossing here, along with two platforms and sidings, but the course of the old railway line now runs beneath houses and concrete, and the land is currently occupied by a car park. However, a large goods shed is still visible - now used as a base for the British Surfing Museum. To make a start on the trail, you need to pass this building into an overflow parking area, continue right to end, and then leave the car park next to the police station. A left turn is then required, before taking direction from a signpost indicating Cycleway 27.

After crossing one of the few remnants of the original rail track, turn right along Station Road, pass Otter cycle hire on the left, and then turn right into Station Close then almost immediately left. With the river Caen flowing to the right of the path, continue along the path until it meets a road with a roundabout. If you continue straight across the **(continued overleaf)**

Curiosity Questions:

- # The Taw-Torridge Estuary is a designated as an SSSI. What does this mean?
- # Braunton Burrows is a UNESCO Biosphere Site. What do the UNESCO letters represent?
- # In what year did Henry Williamson publish his famous book ‘Tarka the Otter’?

Further information:

www.tarkatrail.org.uk
www.tarkatrailguide.co.uk
www.northdevonbiosphere.org.uk/shared-use.html

Reviewer: Paul Berry B Ed (hons) M Sc FRGS

Former Assistant Vice Principal and Head of Geography at South Molton Community College with 35 years of classroom experience. Now an Iceland Field Studies Tutor with Rayburn Tours.
 Blog: www.devongeography.wordpress.com Twitter: @unicorn4275

road, you can pick up a path slightly to the right – and you are now on the Tarka Trail proper.

The well-surfaced path soon takes you past the Velator Wetland, opened to the public in 2004. Boardwalks extend out from the trail to viewing platforms overlooking large sheltered pools.

At the gate that marks the junction with Wrafton Road, it is possible to turn left to detour to the excellent Williams Arms thatched pub. If you avoid the temptation and continue on the trail, face the old Wrafton station (which has an old railway signal standing in the garden), cross the road and continue on the path as it passes the old signal post.



Velator Wetland —Photo: Paul Berry

The trail now runs alongside the long wire security fence of RMB Chivenor – originally opened as a civil airfield in the 1930s, taken over by the RAF in May 1940, and used after the war for training. Search and Rescue helicopters operated from Chivenor for many years, but the RAF left in 1994, and in 1995 the airfield was handed over to the Royal Marines, used primarily by 3 Commando Brigade. After reaching the roundabout at the entrance to the Chivenor base, cross the road and pick up the path again. Chivenor business park soon appears to the right of the path, and away to the left on the hillside are views of Heanton church. Dedicated to St Augustine, the church was built by Richard Punchardon (owner of Heanton Estate) after his return from the Crusades in 1290. The village formerly Heanton (Saxon Hantona – High Town) took on his name from that time, to become Heanton Punchardon. Edward Capern, the postman-poet of the mid nineteenth century – also known as the ‘Devonshire Burns’ - is buried at the church.



Taw Estuary —Photo: Paul Berry

The trail passes a number of houseboats moored on the river Taw, which (especially at high tide) now runs right next to the path. Stunning panoramic views open up of the Taw estuary, which has a tidal range of over six metres. The estuary supports a number of saltmarsh communities, with plants such as glasswort, sea aster, sea purslane, and sea rush all present. However, it is the large areas of mudflats and sandbanks revealed at low tide that provide the major interest. Mud acts as a food larder for birds - containing ragworms, mud snails, cockles and the like. Together with the saltmarsh, these mudflats provide a rich source of food for overwintering and migratory waders, including important numbers of curlew, golden plover and lapwing, with other species such as

redshank and oystercatcher also abundant. The total number of waders present at any one time in the estuary can easily reach over 20,000 birds. The Taw estuary features prominently in Henry Williamson’s famous ‘Tarka the Otter’, and Tarka spent a good deal of time hunting and fishing in and around the water of the estuary.

The trail soon reaches Heanton Court, once a refuge for Royalists in the Civil War when it was the home of Colonel Albert Bassett who fought for the town of Barnstaple - which eventually fell to the Parliamentarians. The outskirts of the town of Barnstaple are now clear in the distance, as the trail passes Ashford Strand and the often flooded Bradiford Water, which offers shelter for abundant bird life, including curlew, ducks and geese. The buildings of Pottington Industrial estate provide the first contact with Barnstaple, and the walker has a decision to make here about how they wish to continue. They can either cross the new Taw Bridge to connect directly to the trail on the other side of the river, or continue under the **(continued overleaf)**

Answers to Curiosity Questions:

The Taw-Torridge Estuary is designated as an SSSI. What does this mean? (*‘Site of Special Scientific Interest’*)

Braunton Burrows is a UNESCO Biosphere Site. What do the UNESCO letters represent? (*‘United Nations Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organisation’*)

In what year did Henry Williamson publish his famous book ‘Tarka the Otter’? (1927)

bridge to explore the town of Barnstaple before picking up the trail again at the town railway station.

To cross the new Taw Bridge (opened in 2007), ignore a signpost leading to Pottington Industrial Estate, but continue almost to the bridge itself before following a sign (next to a sewage pumping station) to Bideford Alternative Route and Cycleways 3 and 27. This will allow you to cross the bridge and head towards a roundabout with impressive steel and slate sculptures known locally as 'Barnhenge' or 'Sticklehenge'. To gain access back onto the Tarka Trail, turn right (opposite the Asda superstore) away from the bridge before reaching the roundabout and follow the signed path. Continue to an underpass marked by an interpretation board and a cast iron waymarker – one of many 'Millennium Mileposts' (commissioned by Sustrans) that can be



New Taw Bridge —Photo: Paul Berry

found along the trail. Ignore turning into the underpass (which leads back to Barnstaple railway station) and continue on the riverside trail signposted to Bideford.

To explore the town of Barnstaple, continue on the path under the new Taw Bridge and cross the swing bridge (designed like a boat) over the River Yeo, a tributary of the Taw. You will soon pass the Civic Centre building on your way to the area of the town known as 'The Strand'. Here, the original port of the Barnstaple developed on a beach (hence the name) by the river outside the town's walls. This is an important part of the industrial heritage of the town, and you will pass the old railway station before reaching what was once the centre of the town's port activities.

By the middle of the sixteenth century, stone quays had been built to replace the old beach port in order to accommodate the growth in trade. The Heritage Centre, with its statue of Queen Anne, is the old merchants' building. It overlooks the old dock basin of Great Quay, once bustling with ocean going ships loading and unloading cargo from Ireland, Spain and Newfoundland. Trade here included the import of tobacco, wines and spices, while wool and pottery was exported. Evidence of the old port trade exists today through the Tome Stone that stands here in front of the Heritage Centre (it was originally placed closer to the waterfront). Merchants negotiated trade deals across this stone in the presence of a witness to be legally binding. This gave rise to the phrase 'cash on the nail' that is still in general use today.

It is only a short walk from here to the centre of this old market town (granted a charter in 930 AD), where there is much to explore. There is an ancient castle mound, and a Victorian Pannier Market and nearby Butcher's Row, featuring many traditional, local, family businesses selling local produce. All well worth a visit.

To reconnect with the Tarka Trail on the other side of the river, the route takes you across the old Barnstaple Long Bridge. Records show there to be a bridge here in the twelfth century, but the present structure, with its fifteen stone arches, dates from the sixteenth century. At the roundabout on the far side of the bridge, follow the sign to the railway station. This station remains open between Barnstaple and Exeter, and is branded as 'The Tarka Line' for marketing purposes. Barnstaple might now be seen as a remote terminus, but at one time, the town was the centre of a rail hub of four busy stations – Torrington, Exeter, Taunton, and Ilfracombe (plus smaller lines to Lynton and Westward Ho!). The railway first came to Barnstaple from Exeter in 1854, and a year later the tracks were extended to Bideford. The town's rail connection to Ilfracombe arrived in 1874, with the line crossing the Taw on an iron viaduct which has since been demolished. The Ilfracombe rail link finally closed in 1970.

To get back to the riverside Tarka Trail, continue straight ahead past the railway station along the road (Sticklepath Terrace), and before reaching the bridge, turn right onto the signed cyclepath. Continue under the road, turn left, and go under the road again. There is an Interpretation board here, and also an example of a cast iron waymarker known as a 'Millennium Milepost' (commissioned by Sustrans). More of these will be encountered further on the trail. Turn left here for the Tarka Trail to Fremington & Bideford.



