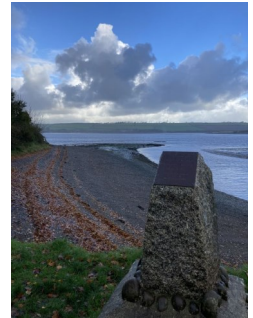


**Location & Access:**

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.



Fremington Quay—Photo: Paul Berry

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

**Description:**

This article focuses on the second section of the trail (9 miles), from Barnstaple to Bideford along the banks of the rivers Taw and Torridge. The start point for the Tarka Trail at Barnstaple is on the south side of the river Taw. This can be accessed by passing the Barnstaple railway station along Sticklepath Terrace, and then before reaching the bridge ahead, turning right onto the signed cyclepath and continuing under the road. By turning left and going under the road again, you will come to an interpretation board and an example of a cast iron waymarker known as a ‘Millennium Milepost’ (commissioned by Sustrans), which are sited all along the trail. From here, turn left to pick up the trail signed to Fremington and Bideford.

The trail now follows the old railway line from Barnstaple to Bideford, a passenger line that was lost in the Beeching cuts of the 1960s. Leaving the buildings of Barnstaple behind, the trail first passes through the oak, ash, cherry and whitebeam trees of the Anchor Wood County Wildlife Site, offering some shelter before the path opens out onto the exposed estuary.



Fremington Station—Photo: Paul Berry

The trail soon approaches the salt marshes of Penhill, which have been reclaimed for stock grazing. This area is carefully managed under an agricultural environment scheme with the absence of chemical fertilisers, adoption of low-density grazing, and the creation of new salt marsh and scrapes.

A car park and picnic area soon come into view, followed by the welcoming Fremington café, very popular with cyclists and walkers. This is housed in part of the old Fremington railway station, which closed in 1960. As part of

*(continued overleaf)*

**Curiosity Questions:**

- # Charles Kingsley wrote a famous book that led to the creation of a new seaside resort near Bideford. What was the book called?
- # A famous international cricket umpire (now deceased) lived most of his life at Instow. What was his name?
- # The passenger and supply ship for Lundy Island is based at Bideford. What is its name?

**Further information:**

[www.tarkatrail.org.uk](http://www.tarkatrail.org.uk)  
[www.tarkatrailguide.co.uk](http://www.tarkatrailguide.co.uk)  
[www.northdevonbiosphere.org.uk/shared-use.html](http://www.northdevonbiosphere.org.uk/shared-use.html)

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the small heritage centre next door, opened in 2001, there is a viewing tower that offers an excellent panorama of the estuary. Just past the café, an iron bridge crosses the Fremington Pill, a tributary of the river Taw. This marks the location of the now defunct Fremington Quay, which actually played a major part in the growth of Barnstaple. There is little evidence today to suggest how important this industrial area was in the middle of the nineteenth century, but at this time, Fremington was said to be the second busiest port in the country. A deepwater quay was built here in the 1840s when silting of the river Taw prevented larger ships sailing into Barnstaple, and the main exports were ball clay from nearby Peters Marland, and the main imports coal and limestone (for use in local lime kilns) from South Wales. Exports of clay continued from Fremington until the early twentieth century, but the railway closed in 1960s, and the quay was taken out of use in 1969.



Millennium Milepost at Fremington Quay—Photo: Paul Berry

The trail crosses the tributary pill (a local name for a small tidal creek or inlet) on an iron bridge, and at the far end is another example of a Millennium Milepost. A footpath offering a short detour leads away to the right after the bridge, passing a monument to local fisherman, Dinger Bell, who lost his life here. This footpath allows access to the foreshore at low tide, and passes a well-preserved lime kiln that would have benefitted from the imports at the quay. The path eventually loops around to rejoin the main trail again.

With the busy Fremington area now behind, the trail continues along the shores of the estuary. It soon approaches an entrance to Home Farm Marsh, run by the Gaia Trust who acquired the 71 hectare site in 2002. This was formerly an intensive dairy farm but has been restored to its former status as a wetland through low intensity farming. Right next door is the salt marsh of Isley Marsh, an RSPB Reserve and a key bird roosting site in the estuary.

As the path meets a minor road, to the right is the site of the old East Yelland coal-fired power station. This was built in 1955 but demolished in 1984 after almost 30 years of use. A deep-water jetty that facilitated the delivery of coal for the station still exists. From this part of the trail, a good view can be enjoyed across the river to Braunton Burrows, the core of the North Devon International Biosphere Reserve designated by UNESCO in 2002. This is the largest sand dune systems in England, covering five and a quarter square miles. The squat metal tower of the solar powered Crow Point lighthouse can also be identified from here.

As the path continues towards Instow, it is possible to identify two unusual slatted white structures looking rather like cricket sightscreens - one to left on the hill, and one to the right of the path on a metal tower. These are 'leading lights' and their purpose is to help guide shipping along the twisting navigation channel of the estuary. Instow cricket ground is passed to the right hand side, where its cottage style thatched pavilion has watched over games played here since 1832.

The path arrives at an old level crossing, and you could detour right here to visit the village of Instow, which grew in popularity as a seaside resort following the coming of the railways in the 1850s. The trail continues straight ahead, passing the entrance to the North Devon Yacht Club on the right, and the restored Grade II listed Instow Signal Box on the left, originally built 1874 by the London and South Western Railway. The box is preserved exactly as it was **(continued overleaf)**

**Answers to Curiosity Questions:**

# Charles Kingsley wrote a famous book that led to the creation of a new seaside resort near Bideford. What was the book called? *(Westward Ho!)*

# A famous international cricket umpire (now deceased) lived most of his life at Instow. What was his name? *(David Shepherd)*

# The passenger and supply ship for Lundy Island is based at Bideford. What is its name? *(MS Oldenberg)*

in the days before it closed – with a 16 lever frame which operated the signals and points as well as a large wheel that opened and closed the level crossing gates.

The old platform of Instow Station has been preserved, as has a short length of the old railway track. The railway reached here in 1855, and in its heyday up to 14 trains a day would pass through this station including both passengers and freight (clay from Meeth and milk from Torrington). One of most famous trains was the Atlantic Coast Express that ran between Waterloo and Torrington.

Leaving the old station behind, it is possible to pick out the large grey buildings across the river of the Appledore shipyard, founded in 1855. It has seen numerous owners in its history, and was recently bought by InfraStrata, owners of Belfast's Harland and Wolff

shipyard. The trail itself passes the Royal Marines Arromanches Camp, established in 1939 and used to train troops for the Normandy Landings at Arromanches on Gold Beach in 1944. Now it is used for flat bottomed landing craft training (DUKWS), and amphibian trials, and also more recently for hovercraft & powerboats. Next along the trail is the MOD amphibian training facility at Zeta Berth. Look out for the unusual 'zoo' of furry animals attached to the security fence. By now, the first glimpses of the new Bideford Bridge come into view in the near distance.

Once the trail has passed under the new bridge (opened in 1987), the town of Bideford on the far side of the river Torridge comes into view. The name actually means 'by the ford' and pre-dates the old bridge which will also soon be seen ahead on the trail. This was built in 1286, originally on massive timbers, but replaced by a stone structure 1474. The bridge has 24 pointed arches, each made to a different width – which has given rise to numerous legends and myths. Some stories tell that the arches were paid for by different donors and their width depended on their wealth, while others claim the variations result from the fact that it was built on naturally existing stone platforms on the river bed suitable for the foundations of the new stone structure.

The historic town of Bideford was granted a market charter in 1272, and was described by Charles Kingsley as 'the 'Little White Town that slopes upward from its broad river tide'. It is well worth a detour if time allows. Bideford has been an important port town since the thirteenth century, and by the end of the seventeenth century it vied with London and Bristol as the leading port in the country. Trade was largely with Newfoundland, specialising in tobacco and salt cod. Famous sea captain Richard Grenville came from the town, and it is said that his cousin, Sir Walter Raleigh, landed his first shipment of tobacco here (although he was not the first person to bring it to Britain). In 1646, 229 Bidefordians were killed by plague, probably brought to the town by a Spanish vessel laden with wool and spread by children who had sneaked onboard to play amongst the cargo. The town is also famous for holding a witch trial in 1682, that involved Temperance Lloyd, Mary Trembles and Susannah Edwards. This ended in one of last hangings for witchcraft in England.

This section of the trail finishes at the old Bideford Railway Station, situated in East-of-the-Water. The railway system reached here in 1855, with the extension to Torrington opened in 1870. The Torrington section closed to passengers in 1965, but continued to be used as a freight line up until 1982. Bideford Station has been well preserved, and the main building that remains was originally one of the waiting rooms, with a canopy over the platform. A plaque on the wall records the official opening of the Tarka Trail in 1992 by the Prince of Wales. As the trail enters the station, it is possible to pick out the additional platform that was constructed to enable first class passengers to step out of their carriage and straight into the rear of the neighbouring Royal Hotel, rather than disembark and walk the short distance along the road around to the hotel's front entrance. On the platform across the tracks is a faithful replica of the old signal box - the original version was demolished in 1970 along with waiting room that stood beside it. From the station, it is only a short walk to the old bridge that would lead you across the river into the main town of Bideford, should you intend to extend your walk or cycle.



Instow Signal Box—Photo: Paul Berry



