

Wednesday 25th October 2017

Bootiful Branscombe with Jon Roseway

As there are comprehensive descriptions of this walk in the archives from two previous occasions, I don't intend to dwell on detail. This article is more of an ode to the joy of walking on a sunny autumn day in beautiful scenery (and good company, of course!). The pleasure was made even more piquant by the complete absence of sun in the forecast, so it was an unanticipated luxury to be greeted by clear blue skies at the start.

Nothing is perfect in this life and I have to admit to being disappointed by the lack of autumn colour in the trees that I'd come to expect at that date. Many trees seemed to have dropped their leaves early, so I blamed the winds of Storm Brian, which had passed through a few days earlier. However, it turned out that this autumn the beeches put on their best golden-brown display several weeks later in mid-November. Mother Nature being her unpredictable self, as always.

We looped around behind the main settlements of the village, going up and down the sides of the valleys that converge at Branscombe. We passed through the westernmost hamlet called Street, a picture-perfect collection of thatched cottages and The Fountain Head, one of the most 'original' i.e., least mucked about with, pubs in the county. Heading up onto the coast path at Berry Camp, an Iron-Age hill fort, we stood on the grassy downs and marvelled at the stunning views to the east and west. I can't remember ever seeing the Isle of Portland so clearly.

We followed the coast path down to the Sea Shanty café at Branscombe Mouth for lunch and I was glad to see lots of families with young children on the beach making the most of their half-term holiday and the unseasonably warm

weather. The walk continued eastwards along the coast via the undercliff path. To a geologist (as I am) this area is a classic example of the endless cyclicality of the earth's geological processes. Here, rocks deposited under Jurassic seas were lifted up and eroded away exposing red Triassic strata. Then the land sank again below the sea and was covered in orange sandstones and white chalk of Cretaceous age, only to be pushed up above the sea's surface again, and is now in the process of being ground down once more. The effects of marine erosion at Branscombe are manifest in a spectacular cliff collapse, certainly one of the largest to be found in the UK, that occurred in 1790. An enormous section of the chalk cliff slid seaward but remained as a relatively intact block (Photo 3). The path climbs up through the gash behind the landslide and allows an unusually close inspection of the Greensand and chalk exposed in the cliff on the landward side (Photo 2).

After climbing (not literally) up to the cliff-top path, the rest of the walk consisted of a loop along the cliff path and eventual descent back into Branscombe with more of those superb views along the way. I guess I learned that day not to believe implicitly in the weather forecast - fancy computer modelling doesn't always get it right!

Jon Roseway



Caption 1. Happy walkers taking a brief rest in the surprisingly warm late-October sunshine.



Caption 2. View westward towards Sidmouth showing the Underhooken path that gives good opportunities to examine the excellent exposures of Greensand and chalk in Hooken Cliff.



Caption 3. View westward from Beer Head with the detached block of chalk from the 1790 landslide in the near distance.