

Helping to support and protect the lower Otter valley

OTTER VALLEY ASSOCIATION

January 2025



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Our Cover Photo

The River Otter - meant to epitomise England's ecologically rich and diverse river habitats. Bad sadly now designated as "Poor" by the Environment Agency.

Chairman's update

Author: Haylor Lass, Chairman

Welcome to another splendid edition of the OVA News – plenty here to inform and inspire you about the wonderful part of the world we are fortunate to inhabit.

The River Otter takes the lead role, understandably, as the river is not in a good way. This year (and it's only half-way through January as I write) I have walked alongside the river on at least three visits – after Christmas with the family, and several hundred others (!), with the Sid Vale Association led walk, both around the estuary, and further north leading the walk from Ottery St Mary, reported on pages 26-28.

To my experienced eye – and, although long-retired, I spent my career in Water Engineering – it certainly doesn't look sparkling, so we have a role with others in applying pressure to both the EA and SWW to spur them into action. There's nothing like hard evidence to make a case, so all the testing we can promote, both chemical and biological, will help raise the concern: the Water Group's article says it all.

Many years ago the OVA produced a leaflet of the flora in the Lower Otter Valley, which is still very good, if you can find one. But since then the activity on the flora and fauna front has waned somewhat, though the interest is very much still there among those I talk to. So I'm pleased that the Flora, Fauna and Fungi Group is coming up with plenty of ideas for gathering, recording and disseminating information – how about joining them?

You could also join some of the walks and gather a wealth of local knowledge and improve your physical and mental fitness.

For the more sedentary, with the talks programme you can here lots more about the local wildlife – in February about Otters, and in March about much of the wildlife on the Otter from our own renowned expert and photographer extraordinary, David White.

All these activities need people. I end with an appeal for volunteers, not only to help with the water quality testing and the flora & fauna identification, but also to strengthen the OVA's 'management' on the Executive Committee. You've a little time to think about it before the AGM in June, but don't leave it too long!

Haylor Lass
Chairman, Otter Valley Association

Water Quality Group Update

Author: Felicity Christie

The River Otter flows from its source in the Blackdown hills just north of Otterford, to the sea at Budleigh Salterton. During its course it is joined by three tributaries, the Tale, the Wolf and the Love. The Otter should epitomise England's ecologically rich and diverse river habitats. Unfortunately, the Middle and Lower sections of the River Otter are both classified by the Environment Agency (EA) as 'Poor Ecological Status'. This puts the River Otter in the worst 20% of the UK's rivers, with significant impacts on plant life, wildlife and fish populations.

So, the OVA setup the water quality group to explore how we can address the significant pollution issues in the river Otter catchment. We currently meet every 6 weeks and have small groups working on water testing, farming, liaison with South West Water (SWW), planning, communications and partnerships.

It is clear from Environment Agency (EA) reports that farming and pollution from sewage spills are the main factors affecting the water quality in the Otter. There is publicly available data regarding the number of hours of sewage spills. This shows that there are several sewage works with a high number of hours of untreated discharge.

Data from South West Water showing sewage discharges into the river Otter Top-5 contributing wastewater treatment works & pumping stations



Comparing FULL year 2023 data with published 2024 data from January – October only

** One of the Honiton sensors is reported to have been working for only 52% of the year

The largest number of raw sewage discharge hours are from the Honiton treatment works, up 63% from 2,820 hrs in 2023 to 4,604 hrs in the first 10 months of 2024. While we are showing here the top-5 in terms of discharges, it is worth noting that along the entire length of the river Otter there are 23 SWW assets – showing a 36% increase in the first 10 months of 2024 compared to the whole of 2023.

There is no requirement for South West water to measure the volume of sewage discharge just the number of hours. Honiton in particular is a large sewage works so we are concerned that very large quantities of untreated sewage is entering the Otter and impacting the ecology of the river. The types of farming along the Otter that are most likely to be negatively affecting the water quality are dairy farming, higher up the catchment and maize growing.

In order to improve the water environment of the river we propose to tackle the issue from several angles:

- Firstly, we want to raise awareness. There are groups campaigning on many rivers around the country, but the pollution in the Otter has been largely unnoticed. Ensuring that local people, councils and politicians throughout the Otter catchment are aware of the problem is essential.
- We then want to demonstrate where on the river the largest rises in pollutants occur and focus our efforts on these areas. To do this we are proposing our own comprehensive testing strategy to provide the robust and informative data that we need. This will include citizen science tests, the use of continuous monitoring devices (Sondes) and ecological testing. We will share our data regularly on our website.
- We are looking carefully at the house building specified in the East Devon local plan so that we can highlight areas where sewage capacity is stretched and try to ensure sewage works are upgraded before new households are added to system
- In all of this we are forming partnerships with those organisations already testing on the river and those with expertise in water management and farming.

We welcome any input into our plans and of course any expressions of interest to join our group of water testers. Our goal is that by 2028 the ecological status of all sections of the river Otter should be classified 'moderate' or ideally 'good'.

Volunteer Testing Programme

Author: Peter Williams



We invite you to Become a Citizen Science volunteer and help clean up the River Otter.

The Otter should epitomise England's ecologically rich and diverse river habitats. Unfortunately, the Middle and Lower sections of the River Otter are both classified by the Environment Agency (EA) as '**Poor Ecological Status**'. This puts the River Otter in the worst 20% of the UK's rivers, with **significant impacts on plant life, wildlife and fish populations**.

The EA identify the main pollutant types & key sources:

- **Sewage discharges** coming from South West Water's (SWW) sewage systems. This drives high Phosphate levels which is harmful to the marine habitats and wildlife.
- Pollution from '**Agriculture and Land Management**', specifically livestock, soil and nutrient management

The Otter Valley Association are committed to a program of restoring the Otter to its natural habitat

Become a Citizen Science volunteer and help clean our river.

- Join on your own – or make up your own team of 2-4 volunteers
- Commit to ½ to 1 day of testing, every two months, starting March 2025
- All test and safety kit provided to teams
- Free, comprehensive training course – with our other CSI volunteers
- Access to the latest testing data and regular newsletters
- Share your experiences in your local Facebook or social media groups

A credible water-quality data set will enable us to:

- Focus South West Water on quickly addressing five key polluting assets
- Identify sections of river where the most agricultural pollution is occurring and work with partner organisations to help improve land management



Find out more & help clean up our river.
Come along to: Kings Arms, Otterton, 6th Feb @ 6:30pm
Or contact editor@ova.org.uk now



Restoring the Otter – the impact of Weirs & other barriers

Author: Bruce McGlashan (sec@riverottherfisheriesassociation.org)

In my article in the last OVA Newsletter. I highlighted a number of issues that are negatively impacting the ecology of the River Otter. Just a reminder if you needed one, that currently no single stretch of the river is assessed as being of good ecological quality under the Water Framework Directive (WFD) by the Environment Agency (EA) and three of them, the Middle and Lower sections of the main river and the River Wolf one of Otter's main tributaries are assessed as being in poor ecological health.

The EA has published the reason for these failures and you probably won't be surprised to hear that poor water quality is the main one. Peter Williams article in this newsletter explores this further, along with the work being undertaken by OVA's new Water Quality (WQ) Group and other partners to address it.

Important as the WQ improvement work is, it won't unfortunately by itself result in all stretches of the river returning to good ecological health. This is because the WFD assessment considers a number of other criteria in addition to chemical water quality, fish and invertebrate populations being two. In several parts of the river these population are not what they should be, fish populations are for example considered to be poor in the Middle Otter and this consequently is one of the reasons why the overall ecological quality of that section is rated as poor. The reason for the poor fishing population, is you guessed it, partly poor water quality, but also the EA reports the presence of a number physical barriers in the river.



Adult Sea Trout spend much of the lives at sea but return each year to the River Otter to spawn

These barriers, have a number of negative impacts, particularly on fish such as salmon and sea trout and invertebrates' population, but they can also impact a rivers water quality and hydromorphology - the physical features and characteristic of the river.

In this article I will provide a summary of the types of barriers on the Otter and where they can be found, explore in more detail their impacts and then in our next

newsletter I will explain the work that is being carried out by ROFA and other partners to try and either remove the structure or if this not possible improve passage over it.

Types of Barrier on the Otter

First you may ask what the Barriers are I'm referring to, a problem that is far from unique to the Otter. The most obvious ones are dams, which thankfully other than a small one at Otterhead Lakes at the very top of the catchment are not a concern for us. Instead on the Otter the most significant barriers are weirs, often associated with existing or former water mills and water management schemes. There are several examples. Perhaps the most well-known, certainly on the lower river is the large weir serving Otterton Mill dating back to the 19th century. Other examples of large weirs on the river include Tipton Weir, Cadhays Weir and Tracey Weir. A number of less substantial weirs can also be found in the middle sections of the river and its tributaries including the River Tale, Budleigh Brook, The Gissage and the Wolf.



This weir on the River Wolf Acts acts as a complete barrier to fish trying to access the middle and upper river



View of the apron of Fenny Bridge which acts as a partial barrier to fish

Other barriers present on the Otter include bridges, or more specifically the apron/sill on which they sit. In other cases it is the way the bridge designers have chosen to allow water to pass under it. For example, low lying Irish Bridges, of which there are number on the river. These frequently use a series of low diameter pipe for this purpose, rather than a single channel. Fish are unfortunately reluctant /find it difficult to swim up these pipes and the bridge therefore act as barrier to fish movement upstream of it.



As example of Irish Bridge with water channelled through a series of fish unfriendly pipes on the R Love.



This weir in middle Otter one of a series of four in quick succession acts a partial barrier to fish particularly in low flow condition.

Another type of barrier and an ironic one given the EA responsibilities to improve fisheries, are several EA structures associated with flow monitoring gauging stations.

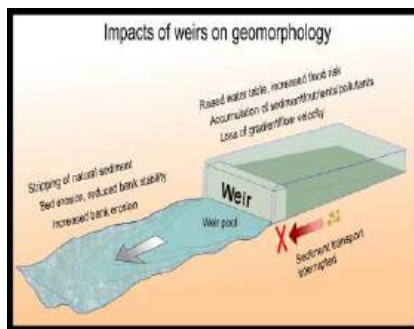
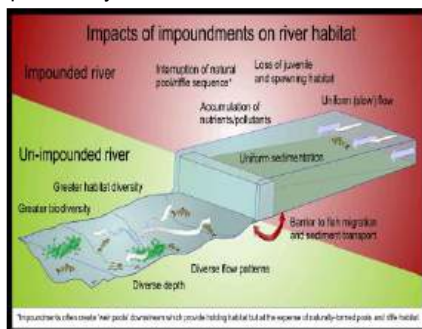
It is important to highlight that although some of the barriers on the Otter act as complete barriers to fish, most act as partial barriers and are passable to fish, but only if river conditions are suitable, an example being when river levels are elevated after heavy rainfall. Other barriers even though passable most of the time, require considerable energy from the fish to get over them. Individually this is not necessarily a problem, but the cumulative/ effect of a series of such barriers as is found on the Otter can be. Think of an obstacle course and the combined impact of scaling a number of obstacles on that course, one after another and you'll understand why.

One other type of barrier, that is now appearing on many rivers particularly on the Otter is a more natural one. Namely Beaver dams. This however is a subject - an often contentious one at that – and one I will return to that in another article.

Impacts of Weirs on Fish and Aquatic Ecosystems

Having highlighted the types of barriers present on the river, I also wanted to explain here what the impact of these barriers is to amphibian life:

- **Disrupted Fish Migration** – with the most significant impact being on migratory fish species (both upstream and downstream) such as Atlantic salmon and sea trout and some less know species such as lampreys and potentially Shad. All these species require open rivers between the sea where they spend much of their adult lives and their spawning grounds which are often found far upstream in the headwaters of rivers. Although the most significant impact is on anadromous fish, - species that spends portions of their life cycle in both fresh and salt waters, barriers can also impact species such as our native brown trout that spend their whole lives in freshwater. This because brown trout if allowed will move considerable distances up and down stream, in search of suitable spawning gravels and feeding territories.
- **Increased Predation** – since fish delayed by weirs and other barriers often congregate in upstream pools or below the barrier until river conditions become more favourable to migration. This makes them easy prey for predators such as otters, herons, goosander and particularly cormorants.



- **Impact on Spawning Gravel** - Salmonids, (Salmon and Trout) and many other fish species, require clean, oxygen-rich gravel beds for spawning. Weirs disrupt sediment transport, causing gravel to accumulate upstream while starving downstream habitats. This leads to degraded spawning areas and reduced juvenile survival rates.

- **Altered River Hydromorphology** - since weirs modify the physical characteristics of rivers, resulting in both upstream sediment accumulation, as well as channel incision and disconnection from the river flood plain. This then results in upstream sediment accumulation, and downstream channel incision and disconnection from the rivers floodplain.
- **Impacts on Water Quality** - since the shallow slow flowing water found above weir is far much more susceptible to variations in air temperature and the effects of sunshine. This can result in water temperatures that are too low or high as for fish and invertebrates' survival and/or reduce dissolved oxygen levels on which these creatures depend
- **Broader Ecosystem Effects** - by fragmenting habitats, weirs and other barriers also reduce connectivity between aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. This fragmentation limits the movement of not only fish but also invertebrates and nutrients, diminishing biodiversity throughout the river

Removing barriers, the obstacles involved and current best practice

In my next article, I will discuss how weirs were constructed, and the acknowledged best practices for their removal. Unfortunately, removal is not always an option and even if its often not a straight forward task. Where removal of the weir is not possible, various options exist to mitigate their impact. I will explore all this next time.

Find out more & help clean up our river

**Come along to: Kings Arms, Otterton, 6th
February @ 6:30pm**

Or email editor@ova.org.uk



A beautiful misty morning on the Otter Estuary Nature Reserve. Credit Dave Thornburn

Flora, Fauna & Fungi Group Update

Author: Dr. Chris Boorman

We live in an amazing area within incredible habitats, and a range of Flora, Fauna and Fungi. Hence, setting up a group to focus on this was straight-forward. We now have a vibrant group of volunteers who are focused on how we can protect and enhance the wildlife in the area. We setup a chart to help direct our efforts as shown below:

Charter of the Flora, Fauna & Fungi OVA Group

The Group will comprise members with a broad range of skills and backgrounds. Regular updates will be made to the OVA executive committee and partner organisations (as and when relevant). We will provide OVA members and the wider community with regular updates relating to the work of the group.

Documentation

We will attempt to document (locating and identifying) the range of flora, fauna and fungi in the valley - focusing on residents, aliens, rare or unusual species. We will showcase a simple but powerful and pragmatic representation of the Flora, Fauna and Fungi on the OVA website.

Publications

We will review current publications and then to produce / publish materials to help with the well-being of insects, birds, animals and plants in our area (e.g.: leaflets, booklets, web-pages etc).

Engagement

We will encourage participation of adults and children in enjoying the flora, fauna and fungi (walks, talks, school engagements, photography competitions etc).

Protect & Enhance

We will help protect and enhance our flora, fauna and fungi where necessary - planting trees, protecting hedgerows, protecting rare examples, etc.

Partnerships

We will work with partners to help protect the habitat (such as identifying and helping remove invasive species etc).

Work has started on our web presence – please do check it out by going to the OVA website and navigating to the “[Nat Environ](#)” menu. This is being updated weekly with pictures of the flora, fauna and fungi that YOU can see in our area. This is NOT meant to be a replacement for sites such as the RSPB – instead, we want it to be a pragmatic guide to what is seen here ... using photographs from local people.

!! Calling all local photographers !!






We are looking for photographs that YOU have taken when you walk around the villages, or through the fields, along the beaches or up the Otter Estuary Nature Reserve. Please also join our facebook group (details on back page) and share YOUR photograph. We'd love to see them – and post some of them onto our web-site.

Ducks on the Otter Estuary

Author: David R. White, Naturalist

It goes without saying that ducks are seen in the Otter Valley. But, the variety of duck is quite profound. Here David R. White has collated 12 species that he has observed and photographed in, or near, the Otter Estuary Nature Reserve. Other species of ducks can be seen in different parts of Devon, particularly near the coast. It seems likely that more species may be seen as the new reserve matures. A further complication with duck identification is that sometimes a vagrant species turns up. It may decide to stay & perhaps even hybridise with one of our more common species!

Please do let us know if you see any other species as you walk or travel through the Otter Valley. Please also check the OVA website where these and many other pictures are being shared with the community.

	<p><u>Mallard</u> ducks are common residents, present in large numbers, & can be seen all year round. They are prolific breeders, but many ducklings fall prey to predators. these include peregrine falcon, heron, large gulls, otters stoats etc.. It s possible that the large numbers of potential prey on the new reserve, may attract a raptor like marsh harriers.</p>
	<p><u>Teal</u> our smallest duck that spends the winter with us & is currently the most numerous duck species on the reserve. A recent count confirmed around 500 being present. In winter they can sometimes be seen feeding at night.</p>
	<p><u>Wigeon</u>, another duck, smaller than a mallard, which spends the winter with us. Currently over 200 of these ducks are present on the new reserve. In flight, wigeon show white bellies, & the drakes have large white wing patches.</p>
	<p><u>Shelduck</u>, this is the UK s second largest duck & both sexes have a bright red bill. Numbers are increasing on the new reserve,& I suspect that 2024 was their most successful breeding year, with probably over 20 juveniles successfully fledging. The female lacks cryptic plumage seen on most female ducks. She chooses to breed in old rabbit burrows, under a bramble bush or similar spot where camouflage is not really necessary.</p>
	<p><u>Goosander</u> these ducks show a strong preference for fresh water, as found in the river otter. They are one of three species of so called ' saw billed ducks '. This adaption allows the bird to grip slippery fish which it its main food source. They will also eat molluscs crustaceans worms small mammals & even small birds. Their attractively marked ducklings can sometimes be seen in the river accompanied by their concerned mum.</p>

Much more scarce species that might be seen from time to time include:-

	<p><u>Tufted ducks.</u> These small diving ducks can be found where deep fresh water is present. They can dive for up to 20 seconds & to a depth of over 40 feet. They will dabble too. few pairs do breed in the otter valley, but many of the almost black ducklings are lost to predators.</p>
	<p><u>Pochard.</u> A scarcely seen diving duck which also needs water deep enough to accommodate its diving behaviour in search of food. These can sometimes be found among small flocks of tufted ducks.</p>
	<p><u>Gadwall.</u> Another scarce visitor to the reserve. The drakes show exquisitely fine stripes & speckles o the breast. in flight has an obvious white wing patch & also black & chestnut on the upper wings.</p>
	<p><u>Mandarin ducks.</u> This species shows a really dramatic difference between the male & female. These birds have been known to fly up to 500 miles in a single day! They are regarded by many as the most beautiful duck in the world.</p>
	<p><u>Shoveler ducks.</u> Unmistakeable due to its spatulate bill. In flight its pale blue wing feathers are revealed. The female is a drab mottled brown. similar to a mallard, but easily identified by its bill.</p>
	<p><u>Pintail.</u> A very scarce visitor to the otter valley, but good numbers can be seen on the river Exe; this could well change. This species is slightly larger than a mallard, with a small head & long neck. They have extensive migratory routes & have been spotted on every continent except Antarctica. Both sexes have grey feet & they can fly at up to 65 M P H.</p>
	<p><u>Garganey</u> is a really rare species which overwinters in warm countries like Africa & beyond. Very occasionally one may be seen between March & October</p>

All photo's in this article are credit: David R. White

Butterflies across the commons

Author: Geoff Porter, Naturalist

The Lower Otter Valley is fortunate in having a variety of landscapes from coast, through farmland to pebblebed heaths in a relatively small area. This provides habitats for a range of different butterflies. However, keep your eyes peeled because there is an incredible variety of butterflies that you can spot. As part of our Flora, Fauna & Fungi project, we are enlisting the help of anyone to send through examples of butterflies that they see. To kick-start this project, I have arranged here the commonly observed families as shown below. Please also check the OVA website where you will find these and many more photographs of the butterflies found across the Otter valley.

Skipper Family (Hesperiidae)

There are eight types of Skipper butterfly in the UK. They are called Skippers because of their rapid flight. The six that have orange-brown wings have the habit of partly raising their forewings when at rest; basking in the sun. Two of the family, the Large and Small Skipper can be seen locally. Check out the OVA web for more examples of the Skipper Family of butterflies.



Large Skipper



Small Skipper

White Family (Pieridae):

Butterflies in this family are either white or yellow and all except the Brimstone have black markings. There are seven butterflies in this family in the UK. Five can be seen locally plus the Clouded Yellow which is a regular migratory visitor. The Wood White has been seen in the lower Otter valley but is more usually seen further along the coast to the east. Males and females generally differ in the number and size of black markings and variations in colour. Check out the OVA web for more examples - including Brimstone, Large and Small Whites and Orange Tip butterflies.



Clouded Yellow



Green Veined

Vanessids and Fritillaries: Family Nymphalidae

This family contains 15 resident butterflies plus 3 migrants; 8 may be seen locally. They fall into 2 distinct groups, the multi-coloured vanessids that include the red and white admirals, peacock, painted lady and small tortoiseshell. The mainly orange-brown fritillaries are quite

different in appearance; 2 can be seen locally. A number of the caterpillars in this family have branched spines. Checkout the OVA web for more examples - including White and Red Admirals, Small Tortoiseshells, Peacocks, Comma and Silver-washed Fritillary butterflies.



Painted Lady



Pearl-bordered Fritillary

Brown Family (Satyridae)

In the British Isles, there are 11 butterflies in this family 8 of which could be seen locally. The wings of almost all are combinations of brown with rings and spots. Their caterpillars all eat various grasses so they inhabit grasslands. Checkout the OVA website for more examples – including Grayling, Meadow Brown, Ringlet, Small Heath, Speckled Wood and Wall Brown butterflies.



Marbled White



Gatekeeper

Hairstreaks, Coppers and Blues - Family Lycaenidae:

There are 14 members of these contrasting butterflies in this family 7 of which can be seen locally. They are all small and most are brightly coloured. There are 2, maybe 3 hairstreaks named after the narrow streaks on their underwings. They also have short 'tails' on their lower hindwings and are often hard to see as they inhabit trees and shrubs, 1 copper and 4 blues that are often seen on the ground. Their caterpillars feed on a wide range of trees and plants. Checkout the OVA website for more examples – including Green & Purple Hairstreaks, Holy Blue, Brown Angus and Common Blue butterflies.



Silver-studded Blue



Small Copper

News from the Otter Estuary Nature Reserve

Author: Rick Lockwood, Otter Estuary Ranger

The highlights of the Autumn migration period included several **osprey** sightings, with two juvenile birds seen together over the weekend of the 21st-22nd September. Individual **cattle egret** (8th Sept), and **great egret** (9-10th Oct), and then two **spoonbill** (5-10th and 16th 17th Oct) and an exotic **bar-headed goose** on the 1st Oct were all noteworthy.

In mid-October a party of four **bearded tit** in the reedbeds south of the Island hide were a nice surprise, but proved to be quite elusive as they fed low down in the reedbeds. A **curlew** with leg flags helped us to identify it as a 'head-started' bird released near Princetown in mid-August, as part of the Dartmoor Curlew Project. At the time of writing it was still present and so spending the winter here, along with around twenty other birds. Two **snow buntings** discovered on the 19th October were very confiding and were popular with visiting birdwatchers. These were surprising joined by a third bird in mid – November.



Credit: David R. White



Credit: David R. White

November began with single **pochard** and **tufted duck** on the 5th, and numbers of other duck species built during the month with high counts of 501 teal and 217 **wigeon** respectively on the 22nd. Wading birds included a smart **spotted redshank** from the 14th onwards whilst single avocets were noted on the 4th and 21st. Other wader highlights during the month included up to 17 **curlew**, 6 **snipe**, 2 each of **grey plover** and **red knot** mid-month, and a single **purple sandpiper** on the rocks at the estuary mouth on 27th. A **yellow-browed warbler** was seen intermittently near Clamour Bridge from the 4th to the 21st and at least 2 **water pipit** were seen on Little Marsh. At least 136 great **black-backed gull** sheltering during Storm Bert on the 23rd was notable, as was a single **kittiwake** on the 24th.

December saw many species settling into winter on the reserve. Maximum numbers of wintering duck included **wigeon** (201), **teal** (286), **mallard** (approx. 200), **shelduck** (16), **goosander** (3), and the **single drake gadwall** remained, with four **Brent Goose** at the months end. Waders present through the month included **curlew** (18),

redshank (15), **ringed plover** (7), **oystercatcher** (8), **black-tailed godwit** (6), a couple of **lapwing**, and a single **dunlin**.

A single **snow bunting** remained throughout the month and was often seen feeding in front of the Lime Kiln viewing platform, as did the wintering **spotted redshank**. Another over-wintering wader was a **common sandpiper** seen several times during the month.

Two **Barn Owls** hunting over the old tip on the 25th made one lucky observer's Christmas Day. Small numbers of **water pipit** (3), **chiffchaff** (3), and **firecrest** were also seen intermittently throughout the month.

A pod of 8-10 **common dolphin** were seen offshore heading west on the 28th. The last day of 2024 saw the most unusual sighting of the month when a **dead squid** was found by the footpath in the northern part of the reserve.



Credit: David R. White

Upcoming events in early 2025 include monthly guided walks with the ranger. These are free and people can book onto these via Eventbrite ([Eventbrite.co.uk](https://www.eventbrite.co.uk)) by searching for 'otter estuary ranger walks'.

Rick Lockwood, Otter Estuary Ranger
Rick.Lockwood@clintondevon.com [07976 06270]

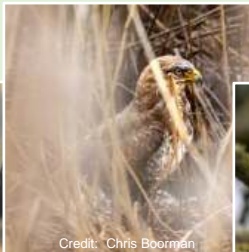
Local Photo's from local photographers



Credit: Chris Townend



Credit: Tom Wallis



Credit: Chris Boorman



Credit: Dave Thoburn

Re-published from the OVA Facebook group

OVA Talks Programme

Author: Keith Grundy, Talks Organiser

The Otter Valley Association continues its winter program with a series of talks that we hope you will enjoy. These talks are aligned to the initiatives that we focus on as a charity – water, flora, fauna, history. We hope you were able to attend the recent talk on Farming Practices – and their effect on water quality. We have two more talks scheduled for this season and hope to see you at Peter Hall. Entrance fee for everyone is £4, payable by card or cash on the door.

Help Requested

We are now looking for suggestions for the 2025 autumn talks programme. If you know of anyone who would be willing to give a talk, or you have ideas for a subject that you think would be interesting, then please do let us know. Simply contact the talks organiser, Keith, or a member of the executive committee – details on the back page of this newsletter.

Wednesday February 19th – starting 7:30pm at the Peter Hall in Budleigh Salterton



Credit: David R. White

Speaker: Stephen Powles

Abstract: In 2005 the discovery of otter spraint on the stream not far from my house was the inspiration to learn about (and try to photograph) one of our most charismatic but equally elusive British mammals. My otter journey (or, more accurately, 'obsession!') has continued to this day. From 2013 to 2018 I was immensely privileged to be able to study, film and photograph one female otter's life in incredible detail as she went on to have five litters of cubs. Hammer Scar, as I called her (after the hammer-shaped mark on her nose), allowed me to follow her night after night. On several occasions she even had the confidence to take a twenty-minute sleep only a few metres from me.

Formerly a vet, I changed career to pursue a lifelong passion for wildlife, wildlife photography, filming and conservation. My material has made several TV appearances. I have a keen interest in photographing and filming challenging wildlife subjects, many of which are in and close to my home. I have a special interest in otters, tawny owls, hedgehogs and hornets. I am based near Tiverton in Mid-Devon.

Wednesday March 26th – starting 7:30pm at the Peter Hall in Budleigh Salterton



Speaker: David R. White

Abstract: The Lower Otter Nature Reserve celebrated its one year anniversary in October 2024. The flora and fauna seen across this and the broader Otter valley is evolving as the tidal flow changes the habitat. New migratory species such as Osprey's are now being observed using the local habitat while Spoonbills, Snow Buntings, Bearded Tits join the local habitat. Meanwhile the Beavers and Otters continue to enjoy the environment.



David will share his perspectives on the Nature Reserve and provide a glimpse into the wonderful and changing species adapting to take advantage of this new environment.



David is an accomplished photographer who lives in East Budleigh. His photographs came to national prominence in 2018 when he won the competition for the BBC Countryfile 2019 calendar. A keen naturalist, David continues to amaze with his knowledge and photography.

Fairlynch Museum: Coffee Talks

Author: Phil Ashworth, Fairlynch Museum

The Fairlynch Museum's voyage of discovery has continued. We had a great start with a talk about aid to Ukraine from East Devon and the remarkable stories from an East Devon man who was twice sacked by the newspaper tycoon Robert Maxwell. November saw us hearing more stories of fraud and deception as Ken McKechnie unravelled the amazing gold fraud he witnessed out in Borneo. He watched as a firm embezzled investors out of £6 billion, that's a huge amount of money if you translate it to 2025 prices. Ken knew it was a fraud because his company was there on the ground and could tell a major swindle was going on. The fraudsters downfall came from using the wrong sort of gold! Not the wrong sort of snow but the wrong sort of gold. Ken explained that when gold is discovered by panning in a river the grains reflect the centuries of wear and buffeting from the water. They are rounder grains of ore. The fraudsters might have got away with it if someone hadn't noticed that the gold claimed to be discovered in test bore holes wasn't sharp and angular as it should've been but had in fact been found in a riverbed. A fascinating tale that reinforces the old saying in financial circles, if it sounds too good to be true it certainly is!

December's talk was altogether more wholesome as Candy Adkins told the story of her mother's exploits during World War II. Jack Moggridge worked for the Air Transport Auxiliary delivering new planes and the barely airworthy ones on their way to be repaired. They had to jump into the cockpit of planes they'd never flown before without any briefing, relying only on a much cherished and battered handbook that



Photo: Candy Adkins

explained how it all worked. There were no helpful YouTube videos in those days. They flew without radio, radar or weapons, armed only with a map. It was a story of how a few women overcame prejudice and chauvinism to play a significant role in winning World War II. After the war Jacqui went on to be a trailblazer for women pilots in the civil aviation industry. However, what came across as much as anything else was the pride and joy that Candy took, in telling the story of her mother's life.

The New Year brought fascinating talk by Rick Lockwood, the Otter nature reserve warden and Sam Bridgewater the environmental head of Clinton Devon Estates.

We'd asked for an honest, no holds barred, assessment of the £26 million project that's now become an integral part of Budleigh Salterton and is proving to be a major attraction. They certainly didn't disappoint. Rick spoke about the challenges in establishing a nature reserve. He detailed the birds that returned in even greater number and the birds that had set up home, some only as visitors as they pass through on their migration. He also detailed the birds that have been attracted following the transition from agricultural land to floodplain. He spoke about the growing population of beavers and otters and some of the challenges presented when humans met nature.



Sam was very frank in his assessment. Although it's been a huge success, he did admit there were some things they did, or had to do, that they would change if there was ever a second time! There was a huge conflict between establishing a nature reserve, for the long-term benefit, and preserving what was already there. For example, they couldn't work during the winter months because that would just ruin the ground they were trying to protect. Quite often important species were nesting and mating just at the ideal time for groundworks to be undertaken. He acknowledged that not everyone approved of what they were doing, as graffitied signs proved, but he hoped that many doubters were now supporters when they had seen what had been achieved.

Looking ahead in February, we turn our attentions to Budleigh's own film star Belinda Lee who died in a road accident in California in 1961 at the age of 26. She was often compared, unfavourably, with Diana Dors. She was fine actress when given serious parts, but many directors saw her as a typecast "blonde". Dr. Phil Whickham, from Exeter's Bill Douglas Cinema Museum will tell us her story.



Photo: Public domain

In March we welcome Sir Walter Raleigh's mother. Well, not actually his mother but the acclaimed writer and historian Rosemary Griggs, who has researched the story and lovingly plays out the part of



Photo: Rosemary Griggs

Katharine Champernowne. Her book, “A Woman of Noble Wit”, was published recently. Rosemary has been called “the Devon time traveller” and she admits she spends as much time in 16th century dress as 21st century attire!

We end the talks season in April with a look ahead to the Battle of Britain commemorations. The focus of attention, quite rightly, is on the role Kent played. But Devon had a significant part in the successful defence of Britain’s skies. John Smith’s talk and demonstration of life in the area as a Roman soldier delighted us a couple of years ago. He returns to Budleigh Salterton with what promises to be an equally informative insight.



Photo: Public domain

- **5th Feb. Belinda Lee, Budleigh’s controversial film star.**
- **5th Mar. Meet Sir Walter Raleigh’s mother.**
- **2nd April. Devon’s part in the Battle of Britain.**

We meet in St Peter’s Hall for coffee at 10:30 and the talks will begin at 11. £4 for Friends and £6 for non-members

Walks: Programme [February – April]

Author: Paul Kurowski & the walks team

Welcome to our Walks programme for February, March and April - there's a wide variety of walks to choose from ... Thanks to Jane Connick for producing the Walks Programme over recent years and for providing clear guidelines so that it was easy for me to follow-on. A huge thanks to all the walk leaders who have come up with some interesting walks.

Following the interest and success of the local heritage walks around Otterton and East Budleigh, Haylor will be leading us around Newton Poppleford in the morning of Thursday 10 April with an optional pub lunch at the end. Many of the walks are within the Otter Valley and close-by. A little further out, we have the Sidmouth Ring in two halves, the inland route from Otterton to Sidmouth and an Avocet Line Amble; and for the more adventurous, Jon will be leading a walk on Dartmoor.

We may also be offering pop-up walks later in the programme and these will be advertised on the various OVA media – so keep your eyes open. All walks are subject to confirmation nearer the time, bearing in mind weather, time of year, storms etc - **check the website, Face Book and WhatsApp for updates.**
<https://www.ova.org.uk/ova-diary/category/walks>

We hope to see you at one or more walks ... enjoy your time with us taking in the wonderful villages, coast and countryside.

Tuesday 4 February – 10:00 – 6 miles. 3 hours.

'The Inland/Alternative Route from Otterton to Sidmouth



Meet: The Green, Fore St, Otterton, parking in nearby roads (OS 115, SY 081 852), what3words [///origin.uncle.movement](https://www.what3words.com/origin/uncle.movement)

Starting on The Green, going up the Chockenholes to Bars Lane, across to Mutters Moor and down into the Bickwell Valley. It will be muddy in places. Bus back after lunch - bring your bus pass! Bring a flask. Lunch in Sidmouth or bring a beach picnic.

Walk Leader: Dee Woods 01395 568822 / 07789 334469

Wednesday 12 February – 10:30am – 5.3 miles. 3 hours.
‘Two Woodburys in one walk’



Meet: Woodbury Village CP (OS Map 115 SY012872; Postcode EX5 1LX) what3words ///torn.pans.animates

A walk around the edges of Woodbury with a visit to Woodbury Salterton.

Bring a flask as there will be a stop for coffee.

Walk Leader: Sarah Westacott 0770 6078143

Tuesday 18 February – 10.15am – 6 miles. 3 hours
‘Sidmouth Ring west (clockwise)’

Sid Valley Ring

A signed 13 mile walking route around the beautiful Sid valley

Meet: Sidmouth Triangle at 10.15 (157 bus arrives 10.03hrs). what3words ///plant.minute.chefs.

We will walk the western half of the Sid Valley Ring which uses quiet lanes and footpaths to take us from the seafront at Sidmouth westwards and up to the lovely village of Sidbury. Bring a flask and a packed lunch is suggested. Number 9 bus back from Sidbury.

Walk Leader: Iain Ure 01395 568822 / 07789 670297

Thursday 27 February – 10.00am – 5.5 miles. 3 hours
‘Snowdrop Surprise’



Meet: Newton Poppleford, Recreation Ground car park, Back Lane, Newton Poppleford (OS 115, SY 088 899) what3words ///wisely.amazed.configure.

From Newton Poppleford, we make a gradual ascent to Harford Common, being rewarded by fine views as we swing round to Venn Ottery. We return via Southerton, where we hope to see a fine display of snowdrops. This is a moderate walk, but likely to feature plenty of mud and standing water, so boots are absolutely essential. There will be a coffee stop part way round (so bring a flask).

Walk Leader: Ross Hussey: rdandamhussey22@gmail.com or 01395 227991 / 07902 255915 mobile on the day. No need to contact him in advance unless weather is uncertain.

Tuesday 4 March – 10.15am – 7 miles. 3.5 hours
‘Sidmouth Ring east (anti-clockwise)’



Sid Valley Ring



A signed 13 mile
walking route around
the beautiful Sid valley

Meet: meet at Sidmouth Triangle at 10.15 (157 bus arrives 10.03hrs). what3words ///plant.minute.chefs.

We will walk the eastern half of the Sid Valley Ring, which uses quiet lanes and footpaths to take us from the seafront at Sidmouth eastwards with a couple of coast path sections visiting Dunscombe and Salcombe Regis before arriving at Sidbury.

Bring a flask and a packed lunch is suggested.
Number 9 bus back from Sidbury.

Walk Leader: Iain Ure 01395 568822 / 07789 670297

Week starting Monday 10 March - time, date and details to be confirmed
nearer the time - check OVA website



One of the ‘Avocet Line Ambles’, eg, Exton to Topsham via Woodbury, Newcourt to Digby & Sowton via Clyst St. Mary, Digby & Sowton to Topsham or Topsham to Exeter Central via the Ship Canal - all about 5.5 miles and 2.5 - 3.0 hours

Details to be confirmed - please check OVA Web

Walk Leader: Penny / Paul Kurowski 01395 742942 / 07792 619748

Wednesday 19 March - 10.00am - approx. 7 miles. 3 - 3.5 hours
‘Exmouth Circular’



Meet: Exmouth Estuary Long Stay Car Park (OS 115 SY002812). what3words ///erase.paying.humble.

A walk along the beautiful Exe Estuary and bird reserve to the charming village of Lypstone, along footpaths and tracks to the National Trust Property of A La Ronde, along further tracks and then existing footpaths through old parts of Exmouth back to the Estuary Car Park. Approx 7.2 miles, one long gentle climb, a few stiles, and some mud. There is the possibility of just walking to Lypstone and catching the train back.

Bring a flask.

Walk Leader: Claire Read 07866 435333

Thursday 27 March – 10.00am – 6 miles. 3.5 hours
‘In Sir Walter’s footsteps’



Meet: East Budleigh CP (OS 115, SY 0657 8487; Post Code EX9 7EB) what3words ///dentistry.reefs.enrolling

An undemanding walk over East Budleigh Common with varied scenery, including Squabmoor Reservoir, and good views across the Otter Valley. Historical content includes a look at Sir Walter Raleigh’s birthplace and military relics of WWII.

Walk Leader: Jon Roseway 01395 488739 / 07887 936280

Tuesday 8 April – 10.00am – 9 miles. 5 hours
‘Otterton - Colaton - Yettington Circuit



Meet: The Green, Fore St, Otterton, parking in nearby roads (OS 115, SY 081 852), what3words /// origin.uncle.movement.

Bring a flask and a packed lunch.

Walk Leader: Iain Ure 01395 568822 / 07789 670297

Thursday 10 April – 10.00am – about 1.5 miles. 2 hours
‘An historical stroll around Newton Popleford’



Meet: Newton Popleford Playing Fields car park. what3words ///watch.fattening.origins.

This historical stroll around Newton Popleford will include some old buildings, some lost and gone, some new(ish) ...

Optional pub lunch at the end.

Walk Leader: Haylor Lass 01395 568786

Tuesday 15 April – 10.00am – 8.5 miles. 4.5 hours
‘A Walk Around Commons and Plantations’



Meet: Four Firs Car Park (OS Map 115 SY032864, Post Code EX5 1JL) what3words ///weeds.growth.thankful

A walk around Woodbury Common, Uphams Plantation, Crook Plantation, Stoneyford, Hawkerland Valley and Colaton Raleigh Common.

Bring refreshments and a packed lunch.

Walk Leader: Sarah Westacott 0770 6078143

Tuesday 22 April – 10.00am – 5.5 miles. 3 hours
‘Otter to Sea’



Meet: The Green, Fore St, Otterton, parking in nearby roads (OS 115, SY 081 852) what3words ///ranted.fork.prune.

The classic circuit via Stantyway Farm, Brandy Head, the White Bridge and the Otter, but not necessarily in that order. The river section is flat, while the coast path is a bit hilly but not too steep. We'll pause on the coastal section for coffee, so bring a flask.

Walk Leader: Ross Hussey: rdandamhussey22@gmail.com or 01395 227991 / 07902 255915 mobile on the day. No need to contact in advance unless weather is uncertain.

Saturday 26 April - time and details to be confirmed nearer the time - check website



‘Knowle to Bystock Figure of 8’

Details to be confirmed – please check OVA web

Walk Leader: Steve Hagger 01395 442631 / 07868 889260

Tuesday 29 April – 10.00am – 8 miles. 5 hours
'Belstone Cleave and some moor'

Booking required



Meet: Belstone CP (OL 28, SX 6216 9381) what3words
///leotard.helm.inspected.

Contact the walk leader if you wish to carshare.

This walk takes in the moorland scenery of Belstone Common and Cosdon Hill before descending through the contrasting pastoral landscapes around the quaint villages of South Zeal and South Tawton. Next we follow the River Taw on a delightful riverside walk through Belstone Cleave.

Bring refreshments and a packed lunch.

Walk Leader: Jon Roseway 01395 488739 / 07887 936280

Walks Report: Ottery's River

Author: Paul Kurowski (back-marker for the walk)

Walks with the Otter Valley Association are casual, engaging and give walkers the opportunity to exercise in the fresh air, meet new (and old friends) and learn a little about the local history. Here is a great example of such a walk:

Seventeen of us met at the Land of Canaan long stay car park in Ottery St. Mary - the forecast fog was barely a mist! We walked down to the river-side; our first stop was at the site of one of the world's first water-powered factories, built in the late 18th century for the carding and spinning of wool, and the Tumbling Weir, that allows water from the man-made leat to reach the River Otter. We gathered around for Haylor to explain all about the Tumbling Weir. The rare circular design means that the top is surrounded by the stream. The water then cascades down some more smaller cast iron rings until it enters a culvert which enters a tunnel under the nearby path before sluicing down to the river a few metres away.



As we diverted inland, two more 'late starters' joined us just in time for the one stile on this walk. Haylor explained that we were on the Coleridge Way for a short while and, in response, to a query, outlined Samuel Taylor Coleridge's life and connection to Ottery St. Mary.



We continued walking on the east side of the river southwards as far as possible - part of the path has been closed for years following erosion by the river. Haylor showed us Coleridge's Pixies' Parlour: a sandstone cave in the river cliffs; Haylor then pointed out carved faces in the rock cliff.



Whilst not seen on this walk, there were the initials of Samuel Taylor Coleridge plus '1789' carved into the rock at Pixies' Parlour. Coleridge visited the cave with some young ladies when he was 21, and it inspired his 1793 poem 'Songs of the Pixies'. Apparently, Pixie Day is an old tradition which takes place annually in June in Ottery St. Mary. The day commemorates a legend of pixies being banished from the town to local caves known as the "Pixie's Parlour".

We diverted uphill to look at Wiggaton and the AA sign - the AA established road signs with mileages to destinations. The original metal sign 'disappeared' in late 2005 and was replaced by a plastic one: notice that the distances go to ¼ mile!

After a brief coffee stop, minor roads and tracks we rejoined the river at Tipton Mill: a Grade II listed building - we stopped for another coffee stop opposite the Archimedes Screw type hydro-electric generator.

Whilst continuing along the west side of the river, a couple of us identified the source of the metallic hammering - a Great Spotted Woodpecker on a telegraph pole. Interesting fact: the Great Spotted Woodpeckers beat their beaks against hollow branches or tree trunks (or metal parts) at a stunning 40 hits per second!



Some of us sent to read the Ottery St. Mary Heritage Society's blue plaque on the Mill which outlined the history of the building before its conversion to apartments.

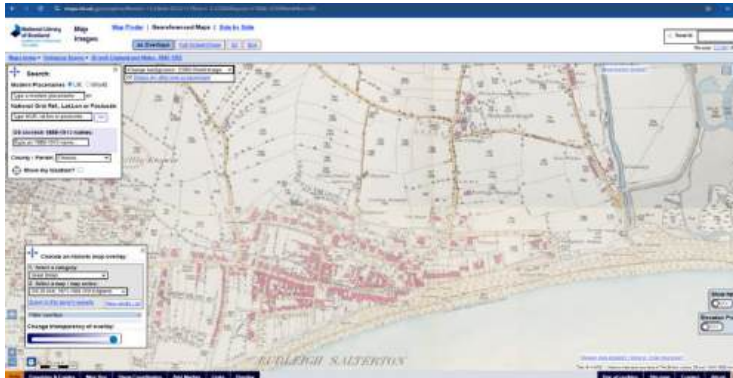


We completed the 6 mile walk back at the car park in just over three hours in time for some to hit the 'high spots' in Ottery for lunch.

Historic Maps of South-West England

Author: Martin Smith

The National Library of Scotland (NLS) may not be the first place one would look when searching for old maps of south-west England, but their online resources are extensive..



<https://maps.nls.uk/>

The NLS started posting their holdings of old maps online over 10 years ago. The maps can be viewed as single sheets within a series, as seamless georeferenced layers over modern mapping, or side-by-side with modern maps. There is a facility to simply mark a spot with a pin and all available maps are listed in a panel.

As one would expect, the NLS specialises in old maps of Scotland, but they also hold Ordnance Survey maps including the 'Old Series' (1800-1860) which has just been placed online (December 2024). The First Series Ordnance Survey maps are online, along with dedicated 25-inch coloured maps of SW England (1873–1888).

Ordnance Survey maps are available up to 1974 in a wide range of scales. There are georeferenced layers of RAF aerial photos (1944-1950). Included on the site is a Ministry of Transport map layer of 1923 which was the first to display the road numbering that was just being introduced. This was prior to bypasses and motorways, so it is interesting to note the towns one would have to drive through at that time. Other maps include town plans, geology, land use, population change, and even a rainfall layer from 1881-1915. The list is endless and whatever your interest the NLS probably have a map to cover the topic.

A full index to all of the maps available can be found by clicking 'Map Images' top left of the screen. A panel listing all of maps series/categories appears on the left and within each holdings are ordered by place, scale and date.

The modern mapping base layers include Google satellite, Open Street Map, Ordnance Survey API and Leisure at 1:50,000 maps, and even LIDAR, among many

others. A slider varies the layer transparency so one can 'see' through to the base mapping when viewing an old georeferenced map.

Of interest are place names where the spelling varies over time and sometimes changes completely. Some places have disappeared altogether and others remain as perhaps the name of a farm or dwelling. Villages on the old maps are tiny clusters of buildings; now they are the names of suburbs in vast towns and cities.

The NLS are constantly adding more resources to this website which are listed under 'Recent Additions'. Be warned: if you like looking at old maps you can lose track of time when viewing these maps!

Communication Update

Author: Chris Boorman, Vice-Chairman

The OVA uses a combination of printed newsletters, online website, Facebook groups, WhatsApp and email to help ensure everyone knows what is going on:

Our Website (www.ova.org.uk) :

This is where all information is posted. We are now starting a new project to update and modernise areas of the website – checkout recent updates to the Natural Environment section, as well as the Walks and Walk reports area. If you are interested in helping, please do get in touch.

Our Facebook group (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/ottervalleyassociation>):

This continues to grow with about 850 members. This is where daily discussions occur, and interesting articles are shared. Please do consider joining the Facebook group – there are many interesting articles that are shared on that which don't make it into our printed newsletter. A few of the recent articles that have garnered significant attention are:

- David R. White – sharing recent sightings on the estuary reserve
- Chris Townend – sharing photo's of a barn Owl
- Tom Willis – sharing photo's of a kingfisher diving off Elizabeth bridge
- Chris Boorman asking for acronym ideas for the water quality campaign
- Mike Simcox – sharing a picture of the estuary 2 hours after moonrise
- John Wokersien – sharing photo's of the kingfishers
- Simon Wakely – sharing photo's of the snow buntings
- John Burdett – sharing photo's of a rainbow over the nature reserve

The Otter Valley Association Annual General Meeting

**SAVE THE DATE: Tuesday 17th June at 7:30pm
Peter Hall, Budleigh Salterton**

The Otter Valley Association

Web: www.ova.org.uk

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/ottervalleyassociation>

Trustees (and Executive Committee)

Haylor Lass	Chairman	01395 568786
Chris Boorman	Vice-Chairman, Editor	07517 137050
Jane Kewley	Secretary	01395 445598
Martin Smith	Treasurer, Membership, Website	01395 442333
Geoff Porter	OVA Natural Environment, Otterton	01395 567055
Dee Woods	OVA Built Environment, Otterton	01395 568822
Bob Wiltshire	Budleigh Salterton	01395 444395

Other Contacts

Paul & Penny Kurowski	Walks Organisers	07792 619748
Jon Roseway	Walks Organiser	01395 488739
David Daniel	History Advisor	01395 445960
Heather Fereday	Newsletter distribution	07484 627312
Olly Watts	East Budleigh	07837 861354
Michaela Manning	Colaton Raleigh	07718 287480
Keith Grundy	Talks Organiser	01395 265917

Otter Valley Association

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OVA NEWS January 2025

OVA PO BOX 70

Budleigh Salterton

EX9 6WN