

29th October 2016 - "Bootiful Branscombe!" with Jon Roseway

'An eight mile figure-of-eight'

Walk Leader Jon Roseway arrived early as there had been some confusion about start time, to find that the Branscombe Village Hall car park had been cordoned off! A chat with some locals revealed that there was going to be a christening and anyone booking the church got the hall and its huge car park. Some OVA members were lucky enough to get into the National Trust (NT) car park for the Branscombe Forge; and others squeezed into the narrow roads of Branscombe ... leaving enough space for the bus!



The tree outside the Village Hall decorated with pom-poms and a crow!



The start of the walk at the Village Hall

Jon gave the walk briefing and information about the village; throughout the walk, there were interesting historical and geological facts provided at relevant points (which I've expanded upon following a little web research). The village of Branscombe is believed to be the longest village in the country, but is really three hamlets as it sweeps down a spectacular valley past colourful cottages from Street through Church to Vicarage (but some say includes Bridge) down to the sea.

Branscombe is located at the meeting point of two valleys or combes, and this is how it derives its name. The name of the parish is probably Celtic in origin. It is made up of two words, "Bran" and "cwm". Bran is a well-established Celtic personal or tribal name that may also mean "black" or "crow black". Cwm is a topographical term still in use in English as well as modern Welsh to describe a steep-sided hollow or valley. Thus the name may derive from the first Celtic family or tribe to take possession of the land, probably from the Dumnonii tribe, sometime between 2000-2700 BC.

Branscombe has a number of historic, but still working buildings: the old bakery was the last traditional bakery in Devon before it closed in 1987; and the NT compact working forge built about 1580 is the only thatched one of its kind in England.

There are two public houses at opposite ends of the village: the Fountain Head and the Mason's Arms. The Fountain Head is sited at the source of a spring in the hamlet of Street. The name of the Mason's Arms is a reminder that stone quarrying in the nearby Beer stone caves was once a major employer in the village; from the undercliff path east of Branscombe Mouth, an adit to the former Beer stone mine can be seen.

From the 17th to the 19th centuries, Branscombe was a source of hand-made lace, and Branscombe Point is a style that is still practised by lacemakers worldwide.

Enough of the history - what of the walk? There were 10 plus two dogs for the first loop that set off uphill from the Village Hall along footpaths until we had a magnificent view across one of the valleys encompassing Hole House and Edge Barton.



Jon pointing out the features and buildings in the valley



Hole House - I'll let you read Trip Advisor for comments about this accommodation!

It is said that Hole House was built in 1075 by Simon de Holcombe, a Saxon Bowman at the Battle of Hastings, after being evicted by the Normans from his former manor at Farrington. The house stayed in the family for over 500 years. A few generations later, Sir John de Holcombe was knighted by Richard the Lionheart for bravery in the Third Crusade. According to legend, he killed three Turks with one swing of his sword - a feat celebrated in the family coat of arms, which depicts the three heads; but he himself was killed in one of the closing battles. He is buried in one of the country's finest Crusader tombs in Dorchester Abbey, near Oxford.

There are traces of a family chapel built at Hole in the fourteenth century, but the house was extensively remodelled in the late sixteenth century.

The first written mention of Edge Barton was in the early thirteenth century. There is a central spiral staircase of stone that dates from around that time. It is thought that there may have been a barton (or "barley farm") on the site in Saxon times. It is claimed to be one of Britain's oldest continually inhabited houses, although there are gaps in its documented history and it was said to be derelict in the eighteenth century. There was a substantial chapel on the site, also from the thirteenth century. There is a rose window surviving in the attic from the same period.

Like Hole House, Edge Barton is perched on a ledge above the valley and fortified to defend it from any attack from below. Defensive platforms like this, with pallisaded earthen walls, were used from the earliest times in the steep valleys in this area. It is possible that the site at Edge dates back to prehistoric times.

The house belonged to the Branscombe family for at least two hundred years. In the 1370s they sold it to the Wadhams of North Devon, who lived here for eight generations. Nicholas Wadham, who died in 1609, was the founder of Wadham College, Oxford, and his mother's grave is the finest Elizabethan grave in the church.

According to a Dartmoor legend, thirteenth-century Walter Branscombe, Bishop of Exeter, was riding across the moor one day when a stranger appeared from nowhere and offered him bread and cheese. Before he could take a bite, however, his servant noticed the stranger's cloven hooves and knocked the food from his master's hand. The stranger disappeared in a puff of smoke, leaving behind two rocky outcrops known to this day as Branscombe's Loaf and Cheese.

We continued along the road past Hole House and then on footpaths through Pits Copse admiring the fungi. There are a number of overgrown pits in the woods along the walk. It is thought to be where chalk was quarried in order to make lime for using as a fertiliser in the fields, and for use as mortar. There is also flint among the chalk, and there is extensive evidence of this being used for tools by the local inhabitants in Neolithic (late Stone Age) times, as much as five thousand years ago.

We emerged from Pit Coppice onto the South West Coastal footpath near Berry Camp, an Iron Age Hill Fort. There were magnificent views of the beaches and cliffs and these would continue throughout the rest of the walk particularly as we descended to Branscombe Mouth and the lunch stop at the Sea Shanty. Pasties, baked potatoes and soup were consumed with gusto! Two walkers and one dog took the opportunity to head back home at this point.



The descent to lunch



Before setting off up another hill to start the second loop, we took in the history of the MSC Napoli on 18 January 2007 the container ship MSC Napoli was holed whilst in the English Channel during the European windstorm Kyrill, forcing the rescue of her 26-man crew by French Navy and Royal Navy helicopters. On Saturday 20 January 2007, she was beached at Branscombe to enable the salvage of the cargo.

The MSC Napoli was carrying 2,394 containers, of which around 150 contained "hazardous" substances including industrial and agricultural chemicals, according to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. The ship was beached following serious structural failure, amidst fears she would not reach nearby Portland Harbour. Items of cargo were stolen in acts of wrecking.

The remaining eight walkers and one dog set off up the hill and then into the undercliff heading towards Beer making the most of the beautiful surroundings.



The view back toward the Sea Shanty



Has the undercliff been spoilt?

We skirted below Branscombe East Cliff and Hooken Cliff and Jon gave an excellent explanation of the geology that we were admiring, eg, the age of the Greensand and Chalk rocks and the Hooken Undercliff which was formed in 1790 after a dramatic landslip. Beer is home to a cave complex, the Beer Quarry Caves, resulting from the quarrying of Beer stone. This stone has been prized since Roman times, because of its workability for carving and for its gentle yellow colour on exposure to air. Beer stone was used in the construction of 24 cathedrals around the UK, including Exeter Cathedral, St. Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey.



The rocky outcrops of Greensand and Chalk



An adit entering the Beery Quarry

From a point close to the beach, we then climbed up the narrow pathway to the top of the cliffs -there was a short stop at a viewpoint looking at a Peregrine Falcon flying past.



The Peregrine Falcon



Chris' Roman remains actually the site of a Napoleonic gun battery

From South Down Common there were again magnificent views backwards to Branscombe and forwards towards Beer, Seaton and beyond. As we approached Beer Head, Chris Buckland told us to look out for the remains of a Roman villa - we found an 'L'-shaped set of stones with the rest missing due to the cliff's edge. This was a good time of a tea break with Penny's cakes.

We headed towards Beer and then turned back inland before the caravan park - we found an Information Board that highlighted that Chris' Roman villa was not the remains found by the cliff edge. The Roman villa was further inland and not on our route; however, the WWII radar station remains were used to tease Chris again! Over the top of the hill past the Old Coast Guard's Lookout (now a holiday let) and a different path from the steep steps down to Branscombe Mouth to complete the final leg of the figure of eight and down into the Branscombe valley. Our path, with unrestricted view of the sewage works, eventually brought us back to our starting point at the Village Hall.



Unrestricted views of the Branscombe sewage works

Our thanks go to Jon for organising an excellent route, arranging good weather, and providing an interesting narrative of all the features on this walk.

Paul Kurowski
7 November 2016