

COASTWISE
NORTH DEVON



Tunnels Beaches

North Devon
SS516479

View over the coves towards Crewkorne Cove and the Ladies' Pool

Beach Profile for Coastwise North Devon

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Introduction and Historical Background

No description of Tunnels Beaches is complete without an overview of their history and place in the development of Ilfracombe. The beaches are unique in North Devon for their mixture of atmosphere, ambience and commercialism.

Tunnels Beaches are part of the seaside and harbour town of Ilfracombe, and have an interesting history. The town has long been a fishing and trading port, with the natural harbour enhanced by a Georgian jetty.

In the late 1700s Ilfracombe became a fashionable spa and sea-bathing destination for wealthy Georgians and a number of hotels, guest houses and public rooms were established. Bathing was centred round Raparree Cove to the East of the harbour and in 1803 the town's status as a resort was confirmed by its inclusion in the national "Guide to all the Watering and Sea Bathing Places".

The coast on either side of Ilfracombe is deeply indented because of geological folding, and prior to this surge in popularity two sheltered coves, Wildersmouth and Crewkhorne, about half



a mile west of the harbour had been extensively used by smugglers, mainly because they were inaccessible by land except for the very agile at low tide. It is also recorded that, even earlier, William de Tracy hid in one

of the caves here after the murder of Thomas a Beckett. He was one of the four knights who

responded to Henry II's reputed question "will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?" when the King and his Archbishop fell out badly in 1170.

However, in 1819 a local entrepreneur saw their potential. At that time it then took 28 hours to travel from London to Barnstaple, with a further lengthy and uncomfortable coach trip over the hills to Mullacott and down to Ilfracombe. With considerable vision he brought miners from the Welsh Valleys to cut tunnels at great expense through the cliffs to provide access to the coves, and in 1823 the beaches were opened to the public. The coves were modified in 1824 by the addition of large walls enclosing extensive bathing pools which were replenished each high tide. Crewkhome was reserved for men and Wildersmouth for ladies, and segregation was rigidly enforced. By 1832 Ilfracombe had become "...*greatly enlarged by the addition of numerous commodious lodging houses and elegant terraces. It has become a place of fashionable resort to the affluent and the valetudinarian...*" according to the North Devon Journal. In 1836 the Ilfracombe Sea Bathing Company built the bath house which can still be seen outside the entrance to Tunnels. Water was supplied from the sea by a steam-powered pump, the remains of which can be seen in a hewn cave above Wildersmouth Cove.

The Victorian naturalist, Philip Goss, visited Tunnels to collect specimens, and was a contributor to the huge expansion in interest at that time in the natural world that led to extensive collections and consequent depredation of wildlife in many popular sites .

Towards the end of the 1800s the beaches had become run down, but in 1903 the Ilfracombe Gazette & Observer noted that "*Now, with common able enterprise , and at great expense, the Ilfracombe Sea Bathing Company, through the efforts of Professor Parker, the lessee, has had the cliffs in the neighbourhood made quite safe, and constructed a sea wall between the third and fourth tunnels.*" This work shaped the beaches into what is seen today, although winter storms have destroyed the gentleman's pool, leaving only sections of the original 3m high walls.

The Present, and Practicalities

More recently, Jamie McLintock has taken over Tunnels and updated the facilities at the entrance, and a café, seating, children's covered play areas and award-winning loos are available.

The beach complex includes a shop for beach essentials, and Lifeguards are on duty over the main beach.

Access is from Wilder Road in Ilfracombe, and entrance for a family of 4 for a day will cost £6.50, although judging by the users at the time of the survey visits this looks like good value for money. Parking in the locality (the site's own car park is very close) costs approximately £4 per day. An entrance fee has been charged since 1823.

Description of the Beaches



From the new café and play areas on the town side of the cliffs, tunnels, hewn by Welsh miners in 1831, lead down to the beaches. To the East is Wildersmouth Cove, with Crewkhome Cove, a smaller beach, to the West.

On the left can be seen the remaining Victorian bathing pool, the “Ladies’ Pool” while the remains of the “Gentlemen’s Pool” can just be seen on the right in the picture on p.2 above. Both were constructed in 1824 and are submerged at high tide, which replenishes the Ladies’ Pool.

There is a rocky mid and lower littoral zone with plenty of rock pools to investigate, and a varied flora and fauna to identify. A (non-exhaustive) listing is included later in this survey. There are two coves, each of approx. 50m width. A receding tide reveals the rocky sea bed and



interesting rock pools. The large shelving Ladies' swimming pool dominates the shore in Wildersmouth Cove.

Overview of Natural History

- **Geology** - The surrounding cliffs are of heavily folded Middle-Upper Devonian Ilfracombe Slate. The complex stratigraphic deformation observed on an ENE/WSW axis along the North Devon coast has helped form the rock pools which are a common feature of many of the area's beaches.
- **Beaches** - At high tide, only grey shaly sand is present. Low tide reveals an extensive area of rocky outcrops and pools of varying depths. Total area of the coves is approx. 1Ha. Approximately 100m of shore is revealed between high and low springs. The sand is coarse and grey, and is probably not great for sand castles, although that does not deter the visitors from attempting construction.
- **Fauna** - The owners report sightings of peregrine falcons on the cliffs, and frequent sightings of seal and porpoises offshore.
- **Flora** - The flora is dominated by the precipitous grassy areas of the surrounding cliffs, and further detailed investigation is prevented by the Danger notices.
- **Sea Condition** - The beaches appear comparatively sheltered, but the cove sides may create currents around high tide. At mid-to-low tide the seawater tends to be turbid due to wave action, but the swimming pool is clear, calm and safe.

Marine Biology

At mid to low tide the beaches form an excellent marine habitat. At low tide there is a thick cover of brown seaweeds in places. There are large rock outcrops, rock pools, sheltered gullies, damp and dark crevices, and some limpet cover.

Species present - a listing of species observed is included on P.6. This is almost certainly incomplete, but will be updated with further observations.

Location	Common Name	Name	SACFOR Code
U=Upper M=Middle L=Lower			S=Super-Abundant A=Abundant C=Common F=Frequent O=Occasional R=Rare P=Present
UML	Gutweed	Enteromorpha intestinalis	S
M	Sea Lettuce	Ulva lactuca	C
M	Velvet Horn	Codium tomentosum	F
L	Kelp (Oarweed or Beltweed)	Laminaria digitata	C
L	Thongweed	Himantalia elongata	C
ML	Channelled Wrack	Pelvetia canaliculata	F
ML	Japweed	Sargassum muticum	C
ML	Bladder Wrack	Fucus vesiculosus	F
ML	Serrated Wrack	Fucus serratus	A
ML	Coral Weed	Corallina officinalis	F
M	Red Encrusting Algae	Lithophilum or Lithothamnium spp	F
M	Dulse	Palmaria palmata	A
M	Keelworm	Pomatoceros lamaki	F
M	Calcareous Tubeworm	Spirorbis spirorbis	O
ML	Barnacles	species not determined	C
M	Common Prawn	Palaemon serratus	F
L	Edible Crab	Cancer pagarus	R
M	Shore Crab	Carcinus maenas	R
M	Rockpool Springtail	Anurida mantima	O
ML	Common Limpet	Patella vulgata	A
ML	Toothed (Thick) Topshell	Monodonta lineata	A
M	Grey Topshell	Gibbula cineraria	O
M	Flat Topshell	Gibbula umbilicalis	C
L	Painted Topshell (PF)	Calliostoma zizyphinum	O
ML	Edible Periwinkle	Littorina littorea	F
M	Rough Periwinkle	Littorina saxatilis	F
ML	Small Periwinkle	unidentified	R
L	5-Bearded Rockling	Ciliata mustella	R
M	Gem Anenome	Bunodactis verrucosa	R
L	Snakelocks Anenome (PF)	Anemonia viridis	R
L	Beadlet Anenome (PF)	Actinia equinus	R
M	Jelly Buttons (possibly)	Leathesia difformis	O
U	Mermaids Purse	-	O
L	Brittle Star Starfish (PF)	Class Ophiuroidea	R
L	Sea Squirt (PF)	Class Urochordata	O
Sky	Herring Gull	Larus argentatus	C

Location Map

