



East Devon

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

The Mason's Trail

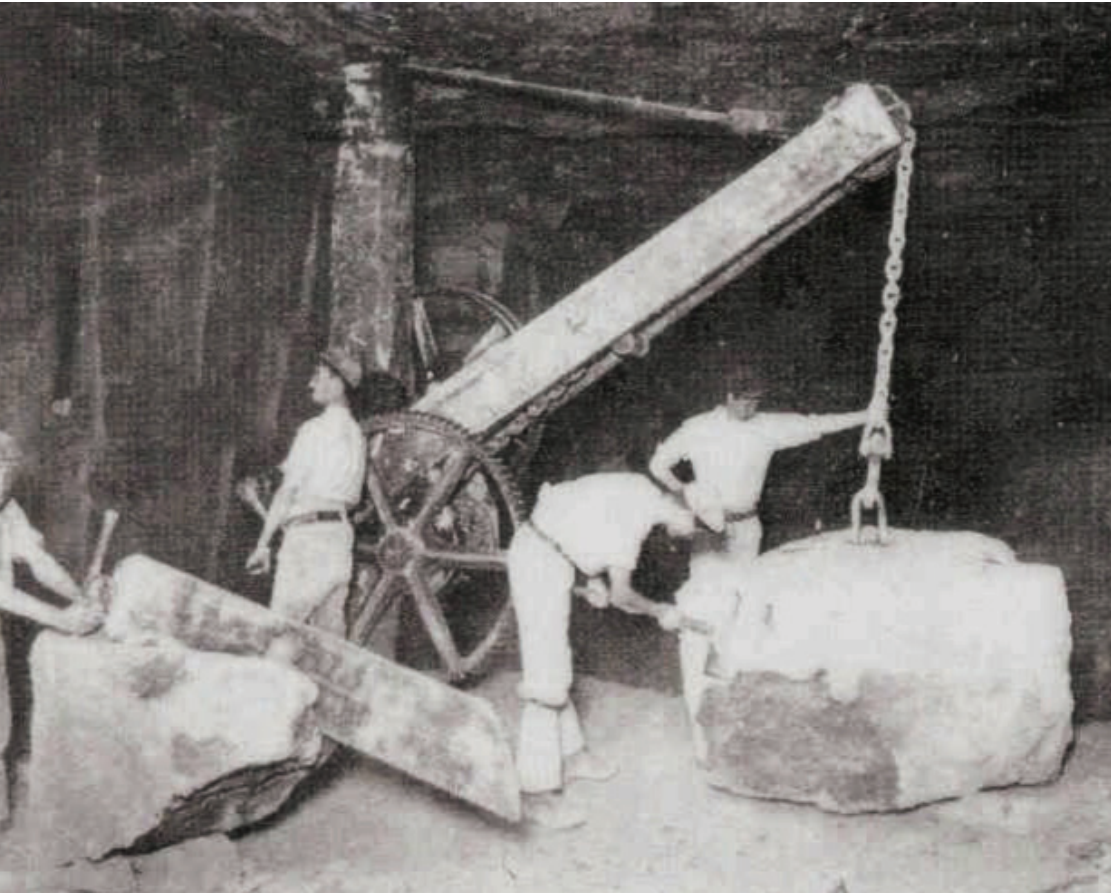
Guided walk booklet



A 5 mile linear walk

The Masons Trail

A short trail using the South West Coast Path and footpaths that reveals the rich legacy of stone working and quarrying in the area. This can be traced back to Roman times and has been a major industry in the area. With the help of this leaflet we discover the stories of these past industrial relics that lie hidden behind the tranquil beauty of the East Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.



The Trail

The Masons Trail is a 5 mile linear route, which is linked at both ends by local bus services. It is suggested that you park at Sidford Car Park and catch the bus to the Donkey Sanctuary from where you can start your walk.

The Donkey Sanctuary is an international charity which cares for donkeys and mules, aiming to improve their welfare. Located at Slade Farm it is one of the biggest attractions in East Devon, it is well worth a visit.

www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk

From the Donkey Sanctuary follow Walk H from the main drive, past Shelter 4 and from here join the road and follow it round to the left. From the main road follow the lane towards Dunscombe Manor, go through the main gate and then follow the signs for the footpath down through the valley.

Dunscombe

Now a beautiful wooded valley, it is still possible to catch sight of the quarrying that once filled this valley. There are several quarries that can be seen along the track from Dunscombe Manor to the cliffs at Rempstone Rocks. These quarries contained Salcombe Stone, a coarse sandstone of the upper greensand laid down in the cretaceous period, approximately 100 million years ago. Salcombe Stone varies in colour from yellow or dark orange to green and this being the most durable and hardest. Salcombe Stone was quarried from several locations around the parish of Salcombe Regis, but is at its thickest here.



Dunscombe Cliffs



One of Dunscombe's now abandoned quarries.

This stone was used mainly to build Exeter Cathedral which was built of 20 types of stone from 26 different quarries, Locally these were Salcombe stone used for facing the external walls and carved arches, with Beer stone being used for decorative features. We will learn much about Beer Stone later on the route.

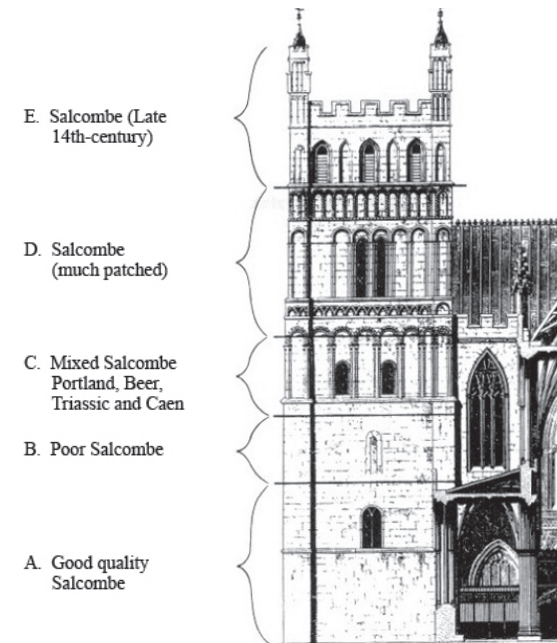
The quarrying of Salcombe Stone occurred mainly in the medieval period when the cathedral was being constructed and re-modeled. It was during this period that Bishop Walter Bronescombe (Branscombe) (1258 - 1280) extended the existing Norman church to create the gothic form of the Cathedral we see today. *'The Accounts of the Fabric of Exeter Cathedral 1279 - 1353'* provides the best source of information about the materials used for the Cathedral. There are over 50 accounts of stone being transported from Branscombe and Salcombe (Erskine 1981 and 1983). In this period Branscombe was spelt Brankescombe and Salcombe spelt Saltcombe. Good examples of where Salcombe Stone was used in the Cathedral are the north tower and Bishop Brewer's doorway.



Photo: Charles P. D. Miller

Right: Exeter Cathedral today

Where Salcombe sandstone can be found at Exeter Cathedral (Laming)



Engraving: Wyatt & Le Keux in Britain 1827 (PL X)

Quarrying for stone for Exeter Cathedral has taken place here over a number of phases, the most recent one being in 1979. Master Mason Peter Dare led the restoration work from Beer. At first it was difficult to find the right stone for the restoration work because the exact location of the quarries had been lost, but by looking at old archives and walking round the Branscombe area, the Dunscombe quarry was located and excavated for stone. On discovering the quarry, evidence of the original pick marks made by medieval stonemason's tools were found.

More recently Salcombe Stone has been used in the construction of Sidbury Church, Branscombe Church and the Mission at Woolbrook.

Once quarried the stone was either taken overland by cart or records dating back to 1299 show that it was taken down to the beach at Weston Mouth and loaded onto barges bound for Topsham. These track ways down to the beach have long since disappeared due to coastal erosion but our path will shortly take us down to the beach.

The path leaves the main track, signed to Dunscombe Cliffs and on reaching the Coast Path we fork left and head down towards Weston Mouth.



Dunscombe Cliffs; William Havell 1819

On your way down to the beach you will pass the Weston Plats, small fields carved out of the cliff slope in which crops were grown, typically early potatoes, as these benefitted from south facing frost free slopes, fertilised with seaweed from the beach. These are quite a feature of this section of coastline; it is well worth breaking your journey to pay these fields a visit.

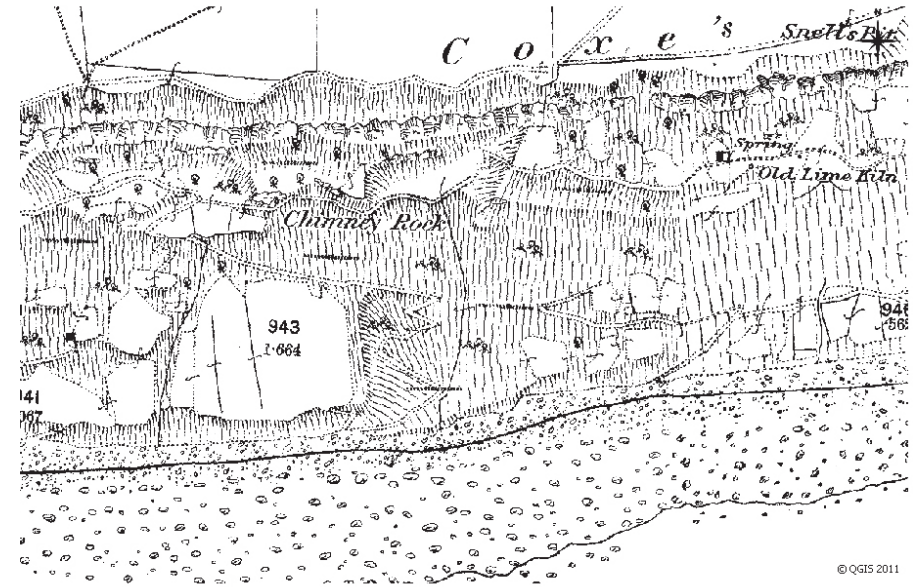
As you walk along the Coast Path towards Branscombe you can look down onto the vegetation growing on the slope of the cliff. Now it is a very wild place and home for peregrine falcons, with no hint of human interference.



Right: Peregrine Falcon

Photo: www.northeastwildlife.co.uk

However, a glance at the 1898 OS map reveals that this area was a hive of activity with many more plats, pathways, sheep washes and old lime kilns, showing that these slopes were put to good use in the past.



© QGIS 2011

Above: 1898 OS Map

As you pass by Berry Camp, look down into the Undercliff to see the remains of the plats - no longer growing potatoes but instead housing holiday chalets.

Take time to read the interpretation board about Berry Camp, an Iron Age hill fort, telling you about how this land was used over two thousand years ago.

The Mason's Trail Map



Branscombe Down

As the Coast Path leaves the cliff edge and turns inland it joins Kiln Lane, which gives a clue as to what used to happen here and the cause of all the unusual tree covered mounds; this is Branscombe Down.

The chalk was dug here and taken to the nearby Lime Kiln. This is barely visible now in the woods, but as a working kiln this would have been an island of industry in a rural setting, much removed from their present day surroundings. The pits and humps in this area are testament to the level of activity that used to take place here. The chalk rock near the surface was broken up and burnt with culm and rush to make lime. Culm is a low quality coal dust which was brought from South Wales by sea and landed on the nearby beaches to then be transported up to the kilns by donkeys. This helps explain the proximity of the kilns to the beach and why there are numerous kilns marked on historic maps within the undercliff area.

Landing the coal on the beaches was no easy feat requiring great skill and being restricted by weather conditions meant that coal could not be landed all year, which will have restricted the lime burning season. A temperature of 900 degrees centigrade was needed to convert the chalk to quick lime.

In Britain lime burning was done way back in Roman times to provide mortar and there are Saxon references to lime and mortar. By medieval times limekilns were used to produce lime for mortar and by the 16th century there is specific reference to lime being used to improve the soil.



Donkeys bringing goods from the cliffs

By the 18th century lime burning for agricultural use was widespread and was a major business in the area. In the 1851 census Branscombe had 6 lime burners listed, one of which belonged to John Ford, who employed ten men and three boys. Mrs Leigh, a lime producer in 1802, recorded 1037 transactions for 95 customers; only 17 of those came from Branscombe and Salcombe, showing that the rest was exported to parishes without chalk of their own.

For a slightly longer walk leave the Coast Path and follow the footpath down through Pitt Coppice to the Fountain Head Inn.

The term Pitt is frequently used to indicate an area where lime burning was carried out in a shallow depression rather than in a masonry lined kiln.



The Fountain Head Inn

The Fountain Head was the site of the blacksmiths, but there has been an inn here since the 14th Century. The inn was so called (www.fountainheadinn.com) because it is located at the head of an underground spring. It used to be owned by the Dean and Chapter at Exeter Cathedral, as were most of the buildings in Branscombe, but is now in private ownership.

The lane leading up from the Fountain Head Inn is called Pit Lane as it leads to Culverhole Hill, which is riddled with pits and humps; yet more remains of old lime workings called 'Old Pits' and 'Hole Pits'.

On reaching the road turn right and follow it down back into the village, where you will pass old stone quarries. These contained Branscombe sandstone, which was similar to Salcombe sandstone, but not such good quality. Much of this sandstone wasn't good enough to cut and dress, so houses, cottages and outbuildings were often built of sandstone and chert rubble retained within dressed cornerstones, these were often cut Beer stone.

The longer route brings you down back into the village past the school.

The shorter route follows the Coast Path to the right for a further 400m before descending to the left through Church Coppice and the churchyard of St Winifreds.



Branscombe Church

Branscombe church was built from local stone, the walls from Salcombe stone whilst Beer stone was used for the detailed stonework. It is well worth pausing from your journey to take a look inside where examples of stone work have been left exposed and early wall paintings have been revealed from beneath the whitewash.

Other notable buildings made from local stone that you will pass as you walk down through the village include Church Living, which could be as old as St Winifreds and is said to be linked by an underground passage to the church. It was never the vicarage but is said to have been a guesthouse used by visiting canons.

Now that the two routes have rejoined, we pass the Old Bakery teashop www.nationaltrust.org.uk/branscombe-bakery-mill-and-forge and a National Trust information point. Go down the valley and past Manor Mill, a water powered grain mill built in the 1800's; this is sometimes open to visitors when the wheel is also operated.

Forking left from the valley bottom path we follow Parsons Lane into the square and to the post box. Here you will see The Masons Arms, which is said to have been built in 1360 as a cider house with only one bar, measuring just 8ft x 4 ft and situated in the middle of a row of five cottages. The pub used to be called 'The Inn', but at some point its importance to the stone working industry was recognised and it became known as the 'Masons Arms', in recognition of its earlier customers and it now occupies the whole row of cottages. www.masonsarms.co.uk



Above: Masons Emblem
Left: The Masons Arms

In the past stonemasons held a very privileged position in society, because usually only the son of a mason could become one. They were paid more than labourers and were literate, educated men, who understood geometry. Men would train as an apprentice for seven years and then spend three years as a 'journeyman', improving their skills and perhaps going abroad. Masons were very protective of their craft and would only pass it on to other masons. This explains why there are so few masons' drawings in existence, textbooks outlining masonry methods and why the Freemason Society was created as a meeting place for masons. There are texts, which describe this secrecy written in the fourteenth century called the 'Constitutions of Masonry', written by a cleric called Regius MS.

Follow the road towards the beach at the top of the hill, at the road junction turn left and take the footpath which will take you over Stockhams Hill.

As we climb out of Branscombe and over Stockhams Hill, we again pass old quarries which nature has reclaimed and where local houses have been built. These houses are particularly distinctive as the stone is coloured red, stained with iron oxide. This is reflected in the name given to the field on the hillside that the quarry sits in: 'Redpit' - as recorded in the 1840 Tithe apportionment. Iron oxide is what gave Manor Mill its reddish tint.

On reaching the top of Stockhams Hill we follow the footpath across open fields to Beer Quarry Caves. These caves are man made and the workings were once much more widespread, extending across the other side of the road and further along the valley. The oldest workings have now been opened up as show caves. www.beerquarrycaves.co.uk.

Beer Quarry Caves are immensely impressive; the site of quarrying since Roman times, there are over 2000 years of industrial heritage hidden beneath the ground. You can still see the pick marks left in the rock by those



ancient quarrymen. The caves supplied stone for 24 cathedrals including Exeter Cathedral and St.Pauls, parts of Westminster Abbey, as well as the Tower of London, Hampton Court and Windsor Castle. Quarried by hand the stone was carted on horse-drawn wagons and by barges from Beer beach to its destination, sometimes involving journeys of several hundreds of miles.

Beer stone was much prized by the masons, as freshly quarried it is ideal for fine detail carvings. It hardens on exposure to the air, turning a beautiful creamy white colour. Although seen today by the thousands of people who visit these famous buildings, sadly few stop to wonder where the stone came from or give even a passing thought to the generations of local families who worked here under appalling conditions by the light of tallow candles.

To discover all the intriguing tales about these caves, take time out from your walk to allow for a tour of these caves, lasting approximately an hour, or if time does not permit returning another day.

To catch a return bus to Sidford, follow the road down to Beer, taking in this picturesque village and perhaps even sample some of the local produce while you wait.

Below: Relaxing on Beer Beach



For further information.

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Ordnance Survey Explorer Map;
Exmouth and Sidmouth | 15
Lyme Regis and Bridport | 16

Websites of Interest;

www.eastdevonaonb.org.uk

www.southwestcoastpath.com

Bus timetable information

www.travelinesw.com

Services; X53 and 899

Text the bus stop code to
84268 and you'll get a text
back showing the next three
buses due at that stop.

Sidford Spar bus stop code;
dvngaptm

Beer bus stop code;
dvngdgap



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East Devon

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

South West Coast Path

NATIONAL TRAIL



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