



From Dittisham to Totnes: The Dart Valley Trail

Villages

Dittisham takes its name from a Saxon chief named Deedas, who settled after the Saxon invasion of Devon around 600 AD. The village once boasted seven inns and cider houses, and is famous for the Dittisham Plum, a variety peculiar to the village. The plum is said to have arrived from the sea, a cargo of them having been dumped here by a ship's captain who had been unable to sell them. In the heyday of the Dittisham plum orchards, people travelled from far and wide to stock up on the rare and delicious fruit each year.

Beyond Dittisham Mill Creek, the old mill in the valley to the left of the footpath is Brambletorre Mill. Now a residential property, you can still see what is said to be the largest waterwheel in Devon sandwiched between the buildings.

The tower of St Peter's Church, Cornworthy, with its three 'layers' one upon another, is of a style unique to Devon. The church is also known for its roodscreen, Georgian pulpit, and the font, the only surviving relic of the original Norman church which stood on this site.

Unlike most other villages, Tuckenhay did not evolve over centuries but was established in 1806 by one Abraham Tucker as an industrial centre. The old paper mill can still be seen - look back up to the left near to where the path emerges on to the road. The distinctive clock was brought from Totnes Parish Church.

The mill processed rags: 'thrashed' into fibres, bleached, boiled, and finally hand-made into paper. The mill was once a very successful enterprise, producing the highest quality paper, used for artist's paper and bank notes the world over. Aside from the mill, Tuckenhay also had a cider factory, limekilns, and bustling quays. These days the creeks have silted up, and the mills, quays and warehouses converted.

Ashprington evolved as an estate village for Sharpham House (now home of the winery & cheese dairy.) It is because of this that many of the stone built houses are in such a similar architectural style, with their diamond-shaped windowpanes.

The ruined building on the exposed hill across the river, seen as you walk along the river between Sharpham and Totnes wharf, was named appropriately Windwhistle Cottage. The last owner of this atmospheric ruin reputedly had 19 children!

As you leave the wharf you enter 'Little Totnes', one of the oldest parts of the town. Originally a tidal marsh, the area around the Steam Packet Inn was in Victorian times an elegant 'pleasure ground' complete with bowling green. The quay itself is much older, once the site of the 11th century St Peter's Chapel, used by monks from Totnes Priory.

The broad street of The Plains where the walk ends was reclaimed from marshland in the 15th century. The shops and residential properties here were once warehouses storing grain, apples, bacon, cider and ale. Even the old Methodist chapel on the right became a cider store after closing its doors to worshippers.

Wildlife

The river is rich in birdlife, including Heron, Swan, Mallard, the white, orange and black Shelduck as well as Canada Geese.

You may also see the large, black, ungainly-looking shapes of Cormorants, sitting low in - or flying low over - the water. Unusually, they do not have naturally waterproof feathers; so you may also see them perched on branches or rocks with their wings hung out to dry.

The brilliantly vivid Kingfisher is often seen as a tiny whirring flash of blue and orange. Perhaps our most spectacularly colourful bird, the Kingfisher also has a reputation as one of the smelliest. Its nest holes in particular are said to have a strong pong of rotting fish.

Atlantic Salmon are still caught commercially on the River Dart, although now in strictly limited quantities. Small boats catch the fish using netting techniques little changed for centuries. The salmon is a handsome, silvery fish with varying colourings and blotches. Salmon hatched from eggs in the upper reaches of the Dart and its tributary streams, head off to their feeding grounds off the coast of Greenland. Incredibly, they later find their way back across the ocean to spawn in the very same spot where they first hatched.

The woodland through which you walk after branching off the Sharpham drive is carpeted with bluebells and primroses in spring. Along with mixed broadleaved trees are larches, Britain's only deciduous Conifer. Its tufted needles turn a beautiful golden colour in the autumn, and its heartwood makes dense and durable timber.

Reed Warblers breed in the reed beds you pass on the river south of Totnes. Small brown birds with white throats and sharp slim beaks, reed warblers weave nests suspended from several reed stems.