

A walk around Minehead

The walk is about 3 miles long; quite a bit of it is uphill.

Minehead was originally three small townships, Higher Town up on North Hill, Middle Town at the foot of the Hill, and Quay Town along by the Harbour. Our walk takes in all three towns now linked together to give us the Minehead we know today, with a population of 8000 approximately.

Wellington Square

We start at Wellington Square. Here, in front of St Andrew's Church, is a fine statue of Queen Anne, this being the work of Bird, who also made the similar sculpture which stands outside St Paul's in London. However the latter does not have the elaborate canopy above it. Directly opposite, a row of new shops now stands where the old Coaching Inn "The Plume of Feathers" once stood. Facing these shops turn left into Park Street, proceed to Parkhouse Road (the site of the old Post Office) where once stood one of the many Toll Gates in the area. Carry along Parkhouse Road for 200 yards ... and you will come to the Parks Walk...This clever piece of planning by the council turned what was once a strip of waste land into a pleasant walk at any time of year, with its trees and shrubs both rare and common.

Proceed through the Park over two little bridges until you come to the road (Periton Lane) here turn right and opposite you across the main road take the flight of steps made into the side. At the top of the steps turn right into Whitecross Lane

You are now on the lower slopes of North Hill. Continue into Vicarage Road and one of Minehead's most famous landmarks will come into view : "Church Steps", you are now in Higher Town. Take note of the house at the bottom of the steps which some people say was a prison and others a workhouse, it was more likely to be the latter. Climbing up Church Steps remember to glance into the little gardens and courtyards, please noting that these are private houses and one should recognise the residents' privacy. On reaching the top of the steps you will find one of our many Churches, "St Michael's". Before entering (it is well worth a visit) stand in the forecourt and admire the view. Minehead old and new spread before you and in the distance beautiful Exmoor.

St Michael's

Parts of the church date back to the 14th century. Notice should be given to the Wagon Roofs in the nave and chancel, on top of the aisle screen a "Clock – Jack", 18th century figure of a man formerly with a hammer to strike the hours. See also the illuminated chained Bible. There is plenty to see in this fine old church. On leaving the church through the lych-gate, note the cottages on the right, these along with the thatched cottages on Church Steps formed most of the Higher Town built around the Church.

Carry on along St Michael's Road where you will come to the War Memorial commemorating the World War dead of Minehead, glancing up to your left you can see what at first sight looks like a castle, this in fact is Elgin Towers built in 1887 to the order of

Mr Kennedy Cooke, a wealthy Scottish confectioner copying what is believed to be the famous Elgin Towers in Scotland. Until 1982 it had been taken over by an insurance company as offices and stores, it is now however back in private hands.

At this junction we can either take Burgundy Road to the left and the zig-zag path through the woods and its semi-aerial view of the Harbour or the easier route by Church Path (the zig-zag route could be hazardous in wet conditions).

Both of these routes come out at the same place on the Quay. Once down on the Quay level turn to your left and admire the row of little cottages, you are now in Quay Town. Walking along here try to imagine another row of cottages on the sea side of the road forming quite a narrow lane as in days gone by. Take note also of the Old Customs House and Mother Leaky's cottage. You should now be at the harbour. Defoe called Minehead the best port and safest harbour in Somerset. Built in 1610 and enlarged in 1901 it was once a very busy port not only for fishing, mainly herring, but also coal and wool trade which once flourished here.

On the Quay next to "The Old Ship Aground" is the third church on our walk, "St Peter on the Quay". Once a coal and timber store, it was given by mariner Robert Quirke to the town after being saved from a storm at sea.

Just behind the church is the Lifeboat Station and during the season visitors are most welcome to look around. Retracing your steps and leaving the harbour behind you turn right at coastguard cottages. Proceed along Blenheim Road (or take a detour through Blenheim Gardens) until once again you come to the Parade.

Here opposite you can see one of the oldest buildings in Minehead, The Old Priory, early Tudor in origin it was a former manor house also used as a court house and manor offices. Turn right and the first road on the right is Market House Lane – here can be seen Quirke's Almshouses, an old and picturesque row of cottages. They were founded in 1630 by Robert Quirke, for the "relief of needy" persons of Minehead. An anonymous donation has ensured the restoration and continued use of the cottages.

At the northern end of the row of cottages is a bell-cot and reputedly this houses the bell from one of Robert Quirke's ships. An old inscription above number 5 gives Robert Quirke's reasons for the buildings.

Also, at the north end is the "stump of the Old Market Cross". If you now retrace your steps to the Parade and turn right you will have completed a circular walk of Minehead.