

GOLDEN COVE



A BEACH PROFILE

Jim Monroe
Coastwise North Devon
9.3.08
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Golden Cove

Map Ref. SS 563477

Golden Cove and the adjacent beach to the East, Sandy Bay, are sheltered coves on the North Devon Coast, in the parish of Berrynarbor, approximately 1 mile West of the town of Combe Martin.

The beach is of firm brownish grey sand, sloping gradually to coarser slaty shingle. It is backed by steep wooded cliffs some 200 feet in height. Approximately 230 steps provide access down these cliffs to the beach. The steps start from a clearing in the narrow clifftop wood which is a National Trust property, also named Golden Cove. Through the wood runs the South West Coast Path, which at this point follows the route of the Old Coast Road.



The Cove faces North and is therefore protected from the elements of the Atlantic. It is however subject to the large tidal variations of the Bristol Channel, giving an intertidal extent of over 200 metres on the moderately sloping beach. At the western end of the beach is an area of long narrow rockpools, with a small cave, accessible at low tide, and a rock arch.

At the eastern end a wooded stack is separated from the cliffs by a narrow strip of beach from where there are fine views of the Hangman hills of Combe Martin. Great Hangman, at more than 1000 feet above sea level, is the highest cliff in Southern England. There is a path through the cliffs here which, at low tide, provides a route to Sandy Bay.



The Rocks

The cliffs around the beach show rocks thrusting out at an angle of 45 degrees. These rocks are Ilfracombe Slates. They form a band running roughly Northwest to Southeast across Devon and occur on the coast between Lee Bay and Combe Martin. To the South of this band are the younger Morte Slates, while the band to the North consists of the older Hangman Sandstones which start on the eastern side of the valley of Combe Martin. The rocks are sedimentary, originally laid down some 400 million years ago as mud and sand. There are also some thin layers of limestone, formed from small coral reefs. Around 300 million years ago the rocks were lifted and folded by massive continental movements. The thin white veins of quartz were formed when minerals were forced, molten, to the surface by great pressures. These intrusions are often associated with silver lead deposits.



Mining.

Although it is widely known that there were silver mines in Combe Martin, there are also traces of silver lead mines around Berrynarbor, the village closest to Golden Cove.

The remains of a shaft of one such mine, the Watermouth Mine, may be seen beside the woodland path along the clifftop at map ref. 565476. This mine was worked for silver bearing lead from 1859 to 1866. The path is backed by further short steep cliffs, with some evidence of quarrying.

In 1919, Golden Cove was the scene of a great landslide. A large piece of what was then the road to Ilfracombe slid into the sea. There are still smaller rockslides in modern times and the original steps giving access to the eastern end of the cove and to Sandy Bay have been closed to the public by the National trust, in the interest of safety.

On the clifftop, beside the Old Coast Road are a few properties and the Sandy Cove Hotel. The entrance drive to the hotel is beside the Coast Road and at this point all three routes that were at different times the main route to Ilfracombe may be seen. Originally the only route was the road through Berrynarbor village. Then, in the 1860s the coast road was built and remained the main route until the landslip in 1919, which caused the present main road to be constructed.

Natural History

The Surrounding Cliffs.

On the cliffs several trees have a precarious existence on the near vertical surface. Ash, Sycamore, Oak and Beech are mixed with Holly and Hawthorn. Lower down, and where water soaks down to the beach there is thick growth of Goat Willow or Sallow.

Beside the steps several species of fern grow, including Hart's Tongue and Maidenhair, and there are several patches of bluebells, with foxgloves, primroses and violets adding colour at different times.



The cliffs are frequented by Jackdaws and a group of Fulmars nest on the ledges.

Upper Shore.

The rocks around the cove carry a wide band of the Black Tar Lichen. Egg Wrack and some Spiral Wrack lie thickly at the eastern end of the beach, with barnacles limpets and thick and flat topshells.

Rock Pipets may be seen on the rocks and Herring and Greater Blackback Gulls sometimes visit the rocky shore especially the rocks and boulders between Golden Cove and Sandy Bay where there are few people.

Mid Shore

Egg Wrack here is mixed with layers of Bladderwrack. Periwinkles and Topshells occur, with Dog Whelks, limpets and Mussels. Some beadlet anemones may be found especially in the rockpools and crevices at the western end.



Lower Shore

Kelps can be found on the lower shore, mostly Oarweed. Fishing is popular from the rocks at both ends of the cove. Mackerel and Bass are often caught and the rocks are favoured by Wrasse, caught mostly in daylight, and Conger Eel, the latter being caught at night. Local fishermen also mention Whiting, Dogfish, Garfish Pollack, and Triggerfish.

From the point above the western end of the Cove one may be lucky enough to observe Gannets feeding, their appearance often coinciding with sightings of Porpoises.

Rockpool Survey

Species found in a rockpool 21.9.08 . 16.30 after 2m low tide.

Toothed Wrack, Sea Lettuce, Corallina, Cladophora, Dulse.

Beadlet Anemone, Strawberry Anemone.

Tubeworms and Keelworms

Brittlestar.

Lithothamnium pink Algae.



The Future

There will always be the risk of rockfalls and collapse of the cliffs at this point of the coast as has already happened at the eastern end of the National Trust property, causing the closure of a beach access route.

There seems little impact from the nearby caravan site, possibly due to the easier access to closer beaches such as Briery Beach. This coast is part of the North Devon AONB and also falls within the North Devon Biosphere reserve, Britain's first new style world class UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

North Devon shores have such a wealth of marine animal and plant life that in 1994 the coast between Combe Martin and Woolacombe was designated a Voluntary Marine Conservation Area. This is managed by the Devon Wildlife Trust who employ a full time Marine Awareness Officer and seasonal rangers.

