

LEE BAY



A BEACH PROFILE

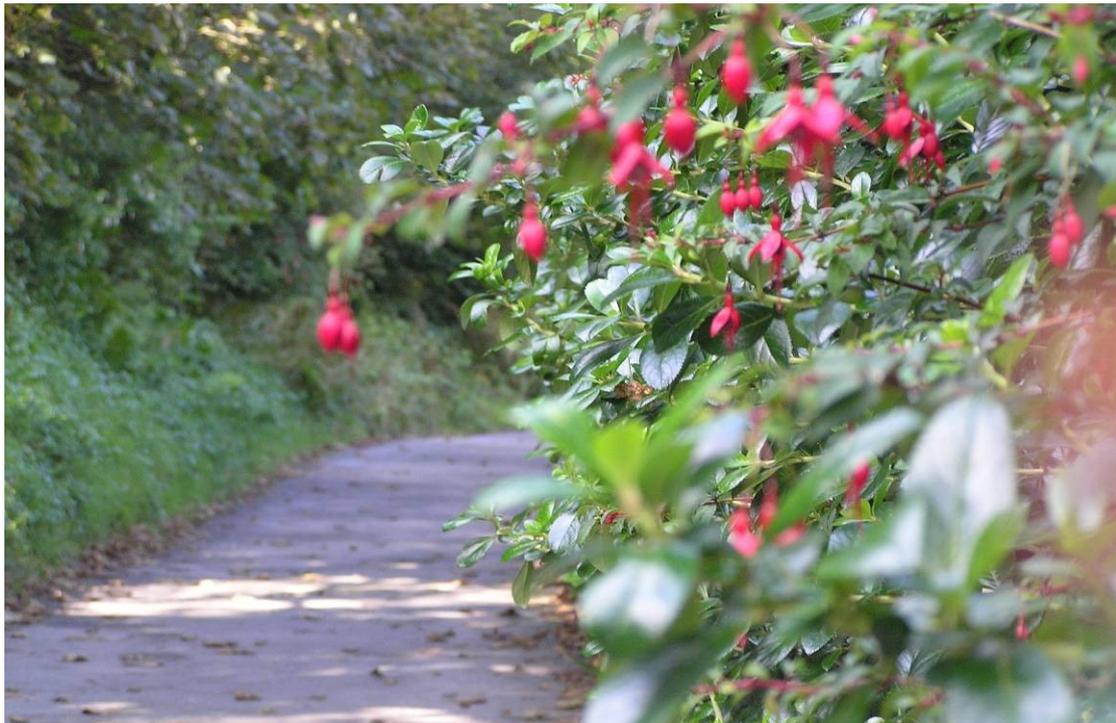
Jim Monroe
Coastwise North Devon
13.9.08.

**Lee Bay.
SS 479466**

Lee Bay lies on the North Devon coast between Ilfracombe and Woolacombe. It is reached, past the village of Lincombe, via a narrow wooded valley. On arriving at the village the visitor will find a small car park near the Church, before a fork in the road. To the left is The Grampus, the village Public House. This road ends in a footpath which, crossing a footbridge, leads to the bay. To the right the road continues past the Hotel to the bay, then past the entrance to a small car park, before climbing steeply from the village.

Around the bay are several properties, and the Hotel, which dominates most views from the west.

Many of the hedgerows and garden hedges bear the red blossoms of fuschias which give the area its local name of "Fuschia Valley".



The footpath to the bay.

Lee Bay faces North and is therefore somewhat sheltered from the elements of the Atlantic, and is subject to the large tidal differences of the Bristol Channel.

From the road, steps lead down to the beach. This has a gentle slope and is divided by ridges of rock which form gullies and rock pools. Down the centre of the beach a concrete channel carries the fresh water of the valley streams down to the sea.



The rock ridges, running N.W. out to sea are evidence of the dramatic upheavals that occurred in the Earth's crust some 300 million years ago.

THE ROCKS

The rocks in the Lee Bay valley are Morte Slates. They form the high Damage Cliffs to the West of Lee and are part of a band of rock running roughly E.W. through Devon to Somerset. To the North of this band run the Ilfracombe Beds. These rocks appear on the coast to the east of Lee Bay and form the magnificent cliff scenery of Lee Downs and the Torrs.

The Morte Slates were formed some 350 million years ago when massive N-S. pressures from continental movement caused what were originally sedimentary muds to be converted to slates. The folds and cleavage patterns were mostly aligned E-W, as evident in the coastline, but faults and joints in a NW-SE direction dominate on a small scale, as here on the beach.

Further movements allowed molten minerals like silica to escape to the surface and this may be seen as the white bands of quartz.



NATURAL HISTORY

The valley.

Lee Bay lies at the foot of a wooded coombe. Borough Wood is a remnant of the ancient broadleaved woodland which once covered vast areas of the land. The woods survived as the valley sides were too steep to clear for agriculture, and Ash Hazel and Oak still survive, despite much of the latter being used in two world wars. Beech and chestnut have been introduced and Sycamore and Rhododendrons are plentiful. Parts of Borough Valley and Windcutter Hill were planted in the 1970's by the Forestry Commission with Sitka Spruce, a species well able to withstand the climate of the S.W.Coast.

The rocky shore.

Upper Shore.

Due to the concrete wall below the road, the strandline is constantly changing with the tides, Sometimes a huge carpet of kelps and debris cover the first few metres of beach, at others the line is barely evident.

Pied Wagtails may be seen around the area, and the freshwater stream attracts the grey wagtail.

On the Upper shore most of the rocks and boulders are covered with a thick layer of gutweed. This growth may be encouraged by the constant flow of fresh water to the beach from the stream. Also evident, but not nearly so abundant is spiral wrack, and above this in the "splash zone" channelled wrack may be found.



Middle Shore

As we move to the middle shore, the green carpet of gutweed gives way to a browner covering. The shore here is dominated by large swathes of egg wrack and bladderwrack. Among these may be found the Common Periwinkle, with some examples of the Flat and Rough periwinkle. On the rocks are limpets, barnacles, dog whelks and Flat and Thick Topshells.

Sea Lettuce, Pepper Dulse and false Irish Moss give colour to the rockpools. Patches of Black Tar Lichen stain the rocks and boulders.



Lower Shore

On the Lower Shore, the toothed wrack is more evident, while seaweeds in the rockpools here provide a wide diversity of colour. Mossy green Cladophora alongside the light green Gutweed, with Sea Lettuce, Dulse and Carrageen or Irish Moss which when seen under water in sunlight shows an attractive violet iridescence.

Also in the rockpools may be found Beadlet , Snakelocks and Gem Anemones, Shore and Porcelain Crabs, Gobies, Blennies and Prawns. Many of the rocks bear the white chalky evidence of tubeworms and keelworms.

The large brown kelps such as oarweed which are normally abundant on the Lower Shore are not so common at Lee Bay. This may be due to the large area of sand which appears on the lower shore at low tide not providing the rocks and pebbles which the kelps need to attach themselves to ,by means of their holdfasts. These have the appearance of roots ,but are purely a form of anchorage.

Oyster Catchers may be seen (and heard!) sharing the bay with Herring and Greater Blackback Gulls. Rock Pipits also frequent the area. Fulmars breed on the cliff ledges, while winter visitors such as Turnstones may be seen on the shoreline, where Grey Heron and Little Egret sometimes visit.

Above all, Lee Bay excels in ROCKPOOLS.



Recreational Activities.

The area lies within the N.Devon AONB and has the added benefit of National Trust coastland on either side of the bay.

Walkers may enjoy the magnificent coastal scenery from the S.W.Coast Path, and there are circular walks from this around the area.

Sunbathing . Whilst Lee bay does not enjoy the benefit of miles of sandy beach ,local people know that it is possible at low tide to traverse the rocks at the western end of the bay to a sheltered shingle beach called Sandy Cove. There is also a steep stairway down to this beach from the National Trust's Damage Cliffs.



Fishing is possible from the lower shore rocks. Pollock frequent the shore, as do Bass, Mackerel, Mullet and Rockling. Ballan Wrasse feed around the rocks in the daytime, while Conger Eel are more active there at night. Local fishermen also mention Dogfish, Garfish, and even Triggerfish.

LOCAL HISTORY.

Lime burning in kilns began in the 1600's and by the 18th. And 19th. Centuries was common all along the North Devon Coast. The cove at Lee Bay was used to receive coal and limestone from Wales. The limestone was burnt in a nearby limekiln to produce quicklime, which helped reduce the soil acidity in local fields as well as being used in mortar and as a whitewash.

The steam coaster Snowflake was typical of the boats bringing in coal, and the area to the left of the bay where it was dumped became known as Black Pit.

This rugged stretch of coast includes Bull Point and Morte Point, both notorious for shipwrecks in earlier times.

Smuggling was carried out extensively along the North Devon Coast and Lee Bay saw it's fair share.

The trade with Wales may have encouraged smuggling, as ships from overseas were known to wait in the Bristol Channel, hoping to offload contraband goods to the smaller vessels which could more easily enter the coves and bays of the coastline.

Smuggled goods were carried inland and stored in outhouses and cellars. Many people saw smuggling as a way of making life easier in harsh times.

Some insight may be gained as to the makeup of such contraband by a quote from a survey of North Devon smuggling by Graham Farr of the National Maritime Museum:-

"In June 1786 Edmund Fishley a customs officer from Ilfracombe seized hampers containing 66 bottles of gin, 13 gallons of Portuguese red wine, 250lbs of salt and a box containing 73 packs of playing cards, all missing the Ace of Spades. They were in an outhouse at Lee belonging to John Beer."

One of the most notorious smugglers known to have operated from Lee was **Hannibal Richards**.

He moved to Lee with his wife in 1789 from Morwenstow in Cornwall, where he had been a member of Cruel Coppinger's gang. He lived in The Gwythers, originally a farm, which became the village inn and no doubt proved useful in selling his goods. He is said to have used a lookout at Sandy Cove which helped him avoid capture when his gang was raided by revenue men and though mentioned in many reports there is no record of his having been convicted. He died in 1849 aged 85 and is buried with his family in the Churchyard at Ilfracombe. family are buried in the Churchyard at Ilfracombe.

PLACES OF INTEREST.

St.Mathews Church.

Consecrated in 1835 it is a small Victorian building in the neo-gothic style. The first Parish Clerk was Martin Richards, son of the notorious smuggler. The Richards memorial is in the wall of the nave.

Chapel Cottage.

Originally the Chapel of St.Wardrede it fell into disrepair and became used as a cowshed and store. Hannibal Richards was said to have kept a cache of smuggled goods there- at a convenient distance from his home.

The Former Post Office.

Some time after Hannibal Richards died his son Martin transferred the village inn from The Gwythers to this building which became known as the New Inn .In the early 20th. Century it became the village Post Office, replacing what is still known as **The Old Post Office**. In 1994 this was closed and the Post Office business transferred to **The Grampus** Public House.

THE FUTURE

Lee Bay should remain a popular attraction to all, for its charming village, sheltered bay and the fascinating world of it's rocky shore. It is not only part of the North Devon AONB but is also within the North Devon Biosphere Reserve. This is Britain's first new style world class UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, where conservation and sustainable development go hand in hand. This shows that North Devon can demonstrate a high quality environment with a community that is willing to develop in harmony with it.

North Devon shores have such a wealth of marine plants and animals 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.

The rocky shore of Lee Bay serves another very useful purpose. It is one of the beaches where marine life is surveyed and regularly monitored by the Shore Thing project. This is an initiative of The Marine Life Information Network, and the survey results can show changes that may occur over time. One such cause of these changes could be climate change, something very pertinent in our lives today.

