

Totnes - Dartington Access for All Path

Transcript of the audio-guide

Track 1

This provides a commentary to the Totnes to Dartington Access Path. This is Track One which contains information about the recording.

Track 2 describes the path and what you will find there.

The sequence of tracks then continues with a commentary that relates to ten numbered benches which are placed at intervals along the route. It starts at Bench One in Borough Park, Totnes (on Track 3) and continues in sections to Bench 10 at the Cider Press Centre (on Track 12).

Tracks 13 to 22 describe the same journey in reverse. The essential information gets repeated, but it's interwoven with a whole fresh set of observations. So, a journey there and back, whichever end you start from, will have something new to offer.

The recording invites you to explore the footpath which links Borough Park, in Totnes, Devon, to the Cider Press Centre at Dartington, a distance of just under two miles.

This recording is just over an hour long. It sets out to explain arrangements on the ground which have been adapted to the needs of disabled people. It also gives a new perspective on the landscape itself, in a variety of unexpected ways. So, we commend it to anyone for whom a country walk is a chance to stretch the mind as well as the body. The original recording was made in 2005 and revised in 2022 to take account of various changes.

Track 2

Track Two: What the path is like:

The path is two people wide, and mostly on level ground, though three sections at the Dartington end have gradients of one in twenty. Post and rail fencing, sometimes with a tapping rail, guards particular hazards. But, in general, the sides of the path are trimmed back to the natural vegetation, which can encroach upon the margins, especially in late summer. In the woodland sections, unfenced ground to the side of the path sometimes falls away steeply. Tapping rail marks out some

stretches, but often only on one side of the path, so you need to take care.

In the preparation of this guide, and in the design of the path itself, all reasonable steps have been taken to ensure your safety. But we ask you to note that you use these facilities at your own risk. From time to time, from season to season, things do change. Those who prepared this guide cannot be held responsible for any discrepancies that may occur upon the ground. The path itself has been incorporated into the National Cycle Network (Route 2). So, the full length of the path is used by cyclists, not all of whom have bicycle bells.

The number of each bench can be read as a raised figure, located at the Totnes end of the backrest – except for benches 4 and 10 which are picnic tables. These are flanked by a wooden post with the raised figure at the top.

The location of each bench is signalled by a square of cobbles in the path in front of it. But a dusty summer or a muddy winter can make these cobbles harder to identify underfoot. If you pause at each bench long enough to play the audio track that relates to it, you'll be prepared for the next stage of your journey.

If you mean to start from Borough Park, keep listening. If you are setting out from the Cider Press end of the path, you need to skip ahead to Track 13 – now.

The Totnes starting point can be found beside a children's play area adjoining the Swimming Pool and the Totnes Pavilion in Borough Park.

The first section of the path is of asphalt. A raised line runs down the length of it. Walkers should aim to stay on the right of this line, allowing cyclists to travel on the left.

A few yards from where the path begins, you'll find Bench One, on the right-hand side of the path. An information board stands just beyond it, and in the bottom right-hand corner of this board you'll find a QR code that leads to this website.

Track 3: Bench 1

Borough Park to the Railway Bridge

Bench 1 at Borough Park overlooks wide playing fields. The town itself appears in profile, climbing the spur of land from which Totnes derives its name – ‘Tota Naes’ in Early English, meaning ‘The Look-out Ridge’. Totnes Castle, built by the Norman French in 1070, still commands the tidal reaches of the River Dart. Perhaps you’ll hear the clock bell in St. Mary’s tower, which rises over the foundations of a Norman priory. Nine centuries ago, Judael of Brittany entrusted his priory church to Tetbald the monk, by placing in his hand the key to the chapel door, and the rope-tail of the chapel bell. Above the town, the timeless hills heave up their huge green sides. Behind us to the left, sounds of tuneful hammering salute the working week, from a nearby metal foundry on the industrial estate. And always, the cry of seagulls links us to the River Dart, flowing nine miles to the sea.

The path we are to follow is shaded by beech, plane and chestnut trees, which means beechmast and conkers underfoot in autumn. To the right, behind chain link fencing, a grass slope falls away towards a line of quiet houses. Our path runs beside this fence, heading towards tennis courts and a bowling green. Two successive strips of ribbed paving mark the junction that turns left to these facilities. But we continue straight ahead. A few yards brings us to a third ribbed strip, which signals a brief downward slope. At the bottom, another strip, and a wooden bollard standing in the middle of the path. This marks the exit from Borough Park.

Totnes Railway Station, with carparks, toilets, bus connections and public telephones, is a short walk to the left. But we turn sharp right at the wooden bollard. For the next few yards we are beside the railway track, at axle level to the Intercity trains, London to Penzance. Steel fencing keeps us safe, but any passing train will sound impressively loud and close. We reach a second wooden bollard, a second sharp right turn over a ribbed paving strip, we veer away from the railway, and then back again.

To the right, behind post and rail fencing, is a line of dusty-smelling conifers. On the embankment to our left, ox-eye daisies take the stage in summer; hips and haws supply the birds in winter. These flowery borders lead us to an iron bridge, where trains go rumbling

across the River Dart. A final strip of ribbed paving signals a dip down towards the river. Post and rail fencing stops you falling in, and steers you sharp left, under the bridge. But first comes a square of cobbles signalling Bench number 2 on your left.

Track 4: Bench 2

Railway Bridge to Dartington Weir

Bench 2 at Railway Bridge looks out towards the marshes where the winding River Hems joins the Dart, at a place called Snipe Island, at the far side of the river. I'm told that snipe can still be found here, especially in winter, when they use their long, straight bills to probe the mud for worms. 300 years ago, there was a bitter lawsuit between the leading men of Totnes and the Duke of Bolton, who was the owner of Snipe Island. The Duke claimed that water levels created by the town's mill dams were swallowing up his grazing land. This peaceful scene has often known controversy. Sometimes, the lords of Dartington were in conflict with the monks of Buckfast Abbey, squabbling over fishing rights. Or it was the tanners, way up on the Moors, who were accused of silting up the river with their mineral scourings. Our ecological concerns do continue. Sadly, the number of salmon in the Dart continues to decline, and the salmon stock has been officially classified as 'at risk'.

The cycle path now merges with the footpath. We pass under the railway bridge, and almost immediately the path divides. Wooden handrails guard this junction. The right-hand fork leads upwards, between chain-link fencing, onto a steel footbridge, giving access to Littlehempston Station, on the far side of the Dart. This is the Totnes terminal of the South Devon Steam Railway, with its seasonal timetable of trains to Staverton and Buckfastleigh.

The bridge is slung from a high steel gantry, on two stilt-like legs. As passengers cross the walkway, the whole suspended structure resonates like a tuning fork. When a train has just come in, you will hear the clank of footsteps, as passengers make their way across the bridge, to explore Totnes. Sometimes, mainline Intercity trains and preserved steam engines call to each other across the marshes, which is very touching. But we must take the left-hand route sidestepping the bridge. A square of cobbles marks the correct route.

We turn away from the river, and skirt chain-link fencing on our left-hand side, with rough grass and woodland growth at its foot. This follows the perimeter of a derelict site, which used to house the Dairy Crest milk depot. Three times the path angles to the left. The right-hand margin is guarded by stretches of wooden tapping rail. At one point a secondary path strays away to the right and dips down into the wood. Avoid this turn-off, which heads into an area flooded at high tide.

Pursuing our own path, we are threading our way through a little jungle. Water bubbles in black pools below us to the right. Willows lean across the marshy floor, which is carpeted in spring with celandines and kingcups, and later choked with burdocks, and humming with flies. Emerging from this tropical corner, we find ourselves approaching a wooden bridge and a mill leat. You could continue over the bridge, but then you would miss Bench number 3. To visit Bench 3, we turn sharp right at a cobbled square just before the bridge.

This is a short detour from the main path, not signed or shown on the map, and the surface is limestone grit, which may be uneven. The path runs straight and parallel to the leat, which is beyond a narrow strip of grass to the left. Keep to the left side, because the path opens out to the right as you continue. Take extra care as the verge may not be clearly defined, and the leat is close by. Sixty yards ahead, the leat is spanned by a second footbridge, and Bench number 3 stands to the left of the path just beyond this. We have reached the place where the river Dart takes a sideways turn to pour down the wide incline of Dartington Weir. Beyond Bench 3, Dartington Weir hydropower scheme, with two huge steel Archimedes screw turbines, harnesses the energy of the river Dart to generate enough clean electricity to power around 400 homes.

Track 5: Bench 3

Dartington Weir to Riverside Picnic Table

The weir beside Bench 3 has many moods and aspects. In times of drought, the whole structure lies exposed, with water ebbing from one place and another like a broken jug. On a summer's evening, when the sun is low, the water slides across the spillway in one glittering, unbroken silver skin. But after weeks of winter rain, you may hear and feel the thunder of the brown, creamy torrents that leap the crest of the dam, and charge into the turbulence below. That's the moment to recall that sinister old rhyme out of Devon folklore: "Dart, Dart, cruel Dart, every year thou claimest a heart."

Returning from Bench 3, some sixty yards brings us back to the cobbles at the bridgehead, located earlier. Turn right onto the bridge, then right again, where low rails and a cobbled square will indicate that you have crossed the leat, with its ducks, and its sunlit shallows, and have now reached Swallowfields. The surface continues as limestone grit. Much planting has been undertaken here, on both sides of the path, creating tunnels of greenery. You might catch the sweet July smell of privet, the resinous tang of young spruce, the dead meat smell of hawthorn in the spring. Fields to the left provide sports facilities for local schoolchildren. We pass a grey boat shed. Batteries of floodlights are angled over a vast all-weather pitch of artificial turf. Those that use it are the fortunate inheritors of a school that was founded in 1553, by the sickly and unsporting boy king Edward VI, who died the same year at the age of fifteen.

Post and rail fencing steers us past the head of the weir, on our right-hand side. Two benches overlook the water to the right of the path. But these are not part of our schedule. Our next stopping place is a few yards further on. To the left of the path, adorned with ivy, stands the first of two ancient stone stiles, from the time when these were fields for cows and horses. Now they adjoin back gardens. If you pass this way in July, there is a scent of garden roses in the air. At this spot, where the water's brown and slack each summer, generations of Totnes youngsters come and swim.

Then we reach another cobbled square across the path signalling Bench 4, two benches, actually, having neither arms nor backrests. Shaded by willows, they face each other across a fan-shaped wooden picnic table. This is flanked at the Totnes end by a wooden post on which its number can be read as a raised figure.

Track 6: Bench 4

Riverside Picnic Table to Dartington Drive

After Riverside Picnic Table (Bench 4) the path continues between oaks, alders and willows to the right and garden fences to the left. We pass the second of the two field stiles. One of Dartington's venerable oak trees dips its toes into the strip of marshland to the right, as the river swings away from us. Tall meadowsweet blooms here in July and August. Its frothy flowers smell of marzipan. From the green flowers of the oak, the yellow flowers of broom and the white of meadowsweet,

the enchanter Gwydion constructed a girl, the fairest ever seen. Her story belongs in the Welsh Mabinogion, translated in the 1840s by Lady Charlotte Guest, a friend of the Totnes mathematician Charles Babbage. The flowers of oak, broom and meadowsweet can all be found along the path. But they don't all bloom at the same season – which is, no doubt, why enchanted girls are not as common as they might be.

Soon we come to a strip of blister paving that warns of possible traffic on the driveway to Dartington Hall. Turn right at this point, through the open lodge gates, past the black and white half-timbered lodge house, and over a bridge with a stone parapet. There is a raised footpath to the right of the drive. But wheelchair users or cane users will need to stay on the road, against the right-hand curb, as the footpath is interrupted by four very large oak trees in a line. Halfway down this stretch of drive, the road contains a traffic calming hump, broad, square and dark. But the footpath has been lowered to the right of this obstruction, allowing wheelchair users to skirt round it.

Beyond fencing to the right of the drive, Berryman's Marsh retains distinctive marsh and meadow plants with their associated insects, birds and butterflies. It offers a glimpse of what field and fallow used to be before the age of agro-chemicals. Look out in August for the tall spires of purple loosestrife. This flower once garlanded the necks of oxen, as a magic charm to settle them to the plough. Hence its name.

To the left lies Queen's Meadow, which back in Tudor times was grazed by oxen. The level field is faintly ribbed with drainage channels, which remind us that in winter it is inclined to flood. This creates a vast, serene mirror of water extending to the West, a gathering place for Canada geese, for swans, for noisy mallards, or the gaunt, ghostly figure of the heron fishing.

After about 100 yards, where dark trees rise up on either side, turn sharp left and leave the road. At once, another strip of blister paving signals that you are clear of the Drive. Overhead, the woods of Dartington Hill rise abruptly and dramatically. When evening sunlight leans against these hills, it moulds the shadows around cliffs of foliage, and causes every leaf to gleam and glow. In the heat and stillness of summer, listen for the mewing cries of buzzards, that command this vantage point above the woods. And on rainy days, or in the mists of autumn, listen to the whisper of waterdrops, falling from twigs and leaf tips far above your head.

To the left of the path and signalled by a cobbled square, you'll find Bench Five, Dartington Drive. It has its back to the path.

Track 7: Bench 5

Dartington Drive to Cliffside

To the left of Bench Five, a wooden bird-hide looks out over ponds on Queen's Meadow, where you may see Canada Geese, a heron or an egret. The bench looks back towards the lodge-keeper's house, guarding the gateway to Dartington Drive. Below its walls, the Bidwell Brook passes under the road on its way to join the Dart. Until the 16th. century, the water here was wide and deep enough to carry barges laden with quarry stone from the wharf at Puddaven. The name means frog marsh.

From Dartington Drive, the path is raised above Queen's Meadow, and runs below slopes of oak, ash, sweet chestnut and larch. Bordering the right-hand side are the rocks and roots and mosses of the hill itself. There is a downward incline for the last few yards of this section, then a square of cobbles signals Bench number 6, Cliffside, which stands to the right of the path, and looks out across Queen's Meadow.

Track 8: Bench 6

Cliffside to Old Sewage Beds

The bench at Cliffside takes its name from the earthy shoulder of limestone that breaks out from the steep woods directly behind it. Stand at the back of the bench and you can touch the naked rock. It's a reminder of how very thin is the layer of fertile soil that clothes our planet, a clothing frayed and fretted by wind, rain and frost, as well as by human activity of every kind. These are the contours of Buckham Park Copse. Broom bushes grow beside the path, green, dry and stringy, with bright yellow flowers that appear in May. The mediaeval kings of England used it as a badge, and called themselves Plantagenets, after its Latin name 'planta genista'.

In springtime in these woods, the great tits that call 'teacher – teacher – teacher' all day long, ought to make any schoolchild wish that he or she were out of doors. In autumn, squirrels will be

splashing about in the leaf canopy overhead, searching for hazelnuts. In summer the cows will be wandering and drowsing in the meadow. At the far end of Queen's meadow, beside a square of cobbles, lies Bench 7 to the right of the path.

Track 9: Bench 7

Old Sewage Beds to the Grotto

Bench 7, Old Sewage Beds, stands at the head of Queen's Meadow. Here the busy main road, the A385, swings closer. Road, stream and footpath are about to enter a narrow pass between two wooded hills. The Bidwell Brook has carved itself a deep, rocky gully to the left of our path. The sewage beds used to lie to the left, beyond the bench, but these were cleared away some years ago, and now the area is giving way to birch saplings, burdocks, nettles and brambles. A left-hand turning doubles back towards the main road. But continue straight on up into the wood. You begin to smell an earthy, mushroomy sort of smell, the breath of former quarries. You may hear the sound of water, falling through hidden culverts to the stream.

The upward gradient continues for 30 yards and then levels off. In early spring, snowdrops and celandines appear here in quantities. On the right-hand side, a clearing opens to reveal the rock-face of a former quarry. Then the path descends gently, winding on towards Bench number 8, the Grotto, which stands to the right of the path.

Track 10: Bench 8

The Grotto to the Millrace

Bench number 8, the Grotto, is my fanciful title for a feature that is entirely natural. Immediately beyond the bench is a cleft in the rock to the right of the path, from which water gushes into a small, rocky pool. The overflow is carried under the footpath, and falls away to join the brook. The path is narrow here, guarded by wooden fencing on both sides. Nothing green grows in the pool itself, suggesting a chemical riddle waiting to be solved. But the place is overhung with laurel, whose white flowers in early spring smell like a medicine chest. Beside the brook, the vegetation clammers around fallen trees and swampy pools, like glimpses of a rain forest. It could remind you of

Coleridge's poem Kubla Khan – "Where Alph, the sacred river ran through caverns measureless to man" – if it weren't for so much passing traffic.

Beyond the Grotto, the path continues upwards for a while, then veers slightly to the left and takes a downward turn. This brings us to a strip of blister paving set in asphalt, announcing that we have reached the concrete forecourt of a former tweed mill. The building is a long, low, two storey structure, with the factory floor at first floor level to avoid flooding. The weaving looms are long gone.

A hump-back bridge of stone leads out towards the road. Turn left onto this bridge and locate its upstream parapet – we are travelling upstream, remember. You can use the stonework of the parapet to guide yourself round the sharp right-hand turn you need to take when you reach the far side of the brook. We don't want you straying into the road. You will cross a strip of blister paving. Keep contact with the stone wall all the way – it runs a little below waist height for about ten yards. Then there are 5 yards of wooden fencing, then 15 yards of tapping rail. You are passing in front of the mill, with the brook to your right down below you and post and rail fencing to your left guarding you from the main road. In times gone by, you would hear the clack, clack, clack of water as it drove the iron framed mill wheel, some 12 feet in diameter. In dry seasons, the boulders that lie in the stream bed are a good place to see dippers or wagtails. Listen for the "pip, pip" of their distinctive calls, down where the current stirs the water-weed, as green and lank as the hair of Cutty Dyer, the Devon water spirit.

At the end of this 30-yard stretch, turn right, across a long wooden bridge which takes us back across the Bidwell Brook, and returns us to the trees. Bearing left and climbing upwards, we soon reach Bench 9, Millrace, beside its square of cobbles. The bench is to the right of the path.

Track 11: Bench 9

The Millrace to Lime Kiln Yard

Bench 9 at Millrace surveys the dam that used to feed water into a leat to power the mill. The narrow channel, bright with hurrying water, ran parallel with the path for some 40 yards. Old mill leats are one of the most ancient features of the Devon landscape. Many of

them nowadays are choked and dry, or have been ploughed out or built over. But originally every one of them ran back to a weir, a mill dam and a sluice gate like those below us now. Beyond Bench 9, at the brow of the final climb, ignore the raised curb to the right, at the point where a second footpath doubles back into the woods.

As we descend from the brow, the path reverts to asphalt. Immediately to the right, a shop fills the mouth of another ancient stone quarry. You 'd hardly guess how much of the hill behind has been scooped out by quarrying, a century or more ago. If time ran backwards, the farm buildings and cottages of Shinnars Bridge would all fly back to their beginnings, and pack themselves, stone by stone, into the earthy layers of Foxhole Copse, below which we have just been walking. In an angle of the cliffs can be found the gaping mouths of two old lime kilns. Their purpose was to provide lime to sweeten acid soil, or to whitewash the walls of a dairy, or to mix into mortar for the building trade. This was quite a little industrial suburb once, with strong dray horses hauling stone, and the acrid dust and smoke of the kilns swirling on the wind and whitening the leaves.

But the lime burners departed many years ago. There are new distractions now. Under a huge old ash tree in Lime Kiln Yard you can find Bench 10 – two benches in fact, with neither arms nor backs, but facing each other across a table. The whole structure is built of heavy chestnut planks 3 inches thick, standing beside its little square of cobbles. In front of the bench is a wooden post on which its number can be read as a raised figure: Bench 10.

Track 12: Bench 10

Lime Kiln Yard and back again

Bench 10 in Lime Kiln Yard marks the end of our 2-mile excursion from Totnes. The stream bed has been widened here, to reduce the risk of winter flooding. The lime-burners' bridge has been given a second span. The mortared stonework of the original rises in a perfect arch, elegant and strong. The new span uses concrete and steel, laid flat like a motorway culvert. Why did no-one care to make them match?

Beyond this point lies the Dartington Cider Press Centre, a lively selection of shops and cafes where you'll find arts and crafts, fine glass, clothing, cookware, a wide range of gifts and a selection of

locally-sourced food and drink. The car parks include spaces for disabled people and there are wheelchair accessible toilets.

Behind the Cider Press, on the steep uphill side, a footpath strikes off towards High Cross House, and Dartington Hall with its famous gardens. The distance to Dartington Hall is about two-thirds of a mile. The uphill gradients are fairly strenuous. In the courtyard of the Cider Press, at holiday times you may find jugglers or musicians playing to the throngs of people who are drawn to this buoyant enterprise, housed in a huddle of stone farm buildings that were once no more than a sleepy corner of the Devon landscape. Take care on the steps and slopes that seem to be everywhere.

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The next track on this recording, track 13, pilots you back to Totnes, following the same instructions in reverse order, but offering new observations on the way.

Track 13: Bench 10 Lime Kiln Yard to the Millrace

The route from Dartington Cider Press Centre to Totnes begins at Bench number 10 in Lime Kiln Yard. It is located beside a square of cobbles in the asphalt path and identified by the number post that stands beside it. A lofty ash tree dominates the yard, growing before the yawning mouths of two ancient lime kilns set into the side of the hill. Just beyond the bench there is an information board, and in the bottom right-hand corner you will find a QR code that leads to this website.

Bench 10 beneath the ash tree overlooks the Bidwell Brook, which winds between tree roots and rocky pools on its way to join the River Dart. Behind you lies the Cider Press Centre, noted for its craft shops and locally sourced food and drink.

In 1928, the craft of cider making was revived here at Shinnars Bridge, as part of Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst's bid to restore the rural economy of the Dartington Estate. But the cider making failed to prosper, and other enterprises took its place.

It's years too since the lime kilns were in action; and years since the stone-cutters vacated the quarry, to the left of the path, where a shop now stands. When we set off up the slope into the woods, we shall be entering a narrow and steep-sided valley that opens out towards Totnes. Here the brook has carved itself a deep and shadowy channel to the right of the path. On its further bank, among the trees, the A385 Plymouth to Totnes Road, once a quiet turnpike lane, is now constantly noisy and busy with motor traffic. In the yard itself, a steel handrail beside the path prevents us from falling into the brook. The rail is interrupted where a stone-built bridge gives access to the road beyond.

As we go up into the wood, the handrail terminates. The asphalt path becomes limestone grit, which can get muddy after rain, or littered with leaves and debris after a storm. A short strip of grating and a cobbled curb mark the entrance to the shop on the left.

Then you are into the trees – Foxhole Copse, followed by Symon's Tree Wood. Symon's Tree, Shinner's Bridge, Berryman's Marsh, the names recall those faded sepia photographs from the time when labouring men wore waistcoats, watch chains and leather gaiters. Symon's Tree Wood leaves you wondering who Symon was, and what the significance of his tree might be. Follow the path above the brook, but remember that the ground falls away steeply upon the right-hand side. There is a side path to the left at one point, but ignore it. We descend towards Bench 9, at the Millrace.

Track 14: Bench 9

The Millrace to the Grotto

Bench number 9 with its square of cobbles, stands to the left of the path in the lee of the wood. It overlooks a disused millrace, constructed as recently as 1930, to drive the looms of a textile mill. This represents the last phase of that long history of water-powered industry — the tucking mills, edge mills, grist mills, stamping mills and paper mills — that once brought wealth to Devon. A little beyond the bench, wooden railings guide us to a right-hand turn, directly onto a wooden footbridge that crosses the millrace and the brook. At the far end, turn left. The path runs straight for 30 yards. We pass in front of the mill which faces us across the water. To our left, 15 yards of tapping rail, then 5 yards of wooden fencing, and then some 10 yards of stone wall, a little below waist height. The busy main road runs parallel with the footpath,

immediately to our right, behind stout wooden fencing. Make contact with the stone wall to the left. It will steer you safely over a strip of blister paving, and then by a sharp left turn over a hump-back bridge, down into the mill yard and away from the road. Woollen cloth was produced on this site until the 1970s. The huge old millwheel, sadly no longer working, bears the inscription 'Willcocks of Buckfastleigh, Millwrights and Ironfounders'. It was designed using the overshot system, whereby water is conveyed to the top of the wheel by means of a raised wooden channel called a launder. The weight of water caused the wheel to turn with a characteristic clacking sound, as water spilled from paddle to paddle, sparkling and dancing.

From the mill yard end of the little bridge, the path continues downstream, crossing another strip of blister paving set in asphalt, to climb back into the wood. The trees close in, and the path reverts to limestone grit. Ignore the raised curb on the left, where side paths branch away into the wood. Post and rail fencing, with a tapping rail, guards the right-hand side of the path from the bridge foot right through to the next stopping place, which is called The Grotto. There are trees on both sides of the path – oak, ash and sycamore – three different leaves, three different fruit – acorns in their cups, ash keys in bunches, sycamore seeds that fly like paper helicopters. In autumn, you'll be trampling them underfoot – unless you pot them up for future forests.

The path dips down and we are heading for The Grotto, a cleft in the rocks to the left of the path. Here the season's rainfall, whether much or little, spills into a dark pool before it slips away into the brook. Even in summer, when the flow is reduced to a trickle, this is a cool and shadowy spot, smelling of moss and overgrown with laurel, the tree into which the wood-nymph Daphne was transformed, hiding from the Sun God who pursued her. Fencing on either side of the narrow path steers you past the pool, to where you'll find Bench 8, to the left of a cobbled square in the path. It faces the screen of trees that overhangs the brook and hides the road.

Track 15: Bench 8

The Grotto to Old Sewage Beds

Beyond the Grotto and Bench number 8, the path descends towards number 7. These are the slopes once quarried for the stone that built much of Dartington Hall, that great quadrangle of mediaeval buildings

lying half a mile to the east of these woods. Now the angles of the quarry face are curtained with ivy, the haunt of robin and wren. If you hear them singing from the underwood, remember the old country rhyme that says: "If it were not for robin and wren, spider and worm would overwhelm men".

The Great Hall at Dartington was built around 1388 for John Holand, the half-brother of King Richard II. He was overwhelmed by his enemies in the year 1400, on the 10th. of January, when he was captured and taken to the little castle of Pleshy in Essex, where his head was removed by the village butcher and sent home in a fish basket. Better if he had stayed in peaceful Devon.

As we approach the edge of the wood, the path divides. The right fork crosses the brook and heads towards the Totnes Road. But we shall take the left-hand route, to where the valley opens out into a long, wide, level stretch of grazing land. But first we must pass a strip of waste ground to our right, where nettles and brambles, hogweed and burdock are reclaiming what were once old sewage beds. Beside its square of cobbles, where the path veers slightly left, we shall find Bench 7, on the left-hand side.

Track 16: Bench 7

Old Sewage Beds to Cliffside

Bench 7 at Old Sewage Beds stands at the head of Queen's Meadow. At the far side of the field the Bidwell Brook is lost to view, beside a farmhouse thatched and whitewashed, at a place called Puddaven. Venn indicates a marsh, a fen. Paddow is the old gypsy word for a frog or toad. The open land before us was once a tidal arm of the River Dart. The man who reclaimed it from the waters was Gawen Champernowne of Dartington. He was one of the eleven generations of Champernownes who owned Dartington Hall, a man who sent his own fine ship, the Phoenix, to join the fleet confronting Spain's Armada in 1588. So, Queen's Meadow presumably refers to Queen Elizabeth I.

From Sewage Beds to Cliffside and Bench number 6, the footpath rambles below a long stretch of ancient woodland, descending from the higher ground of Buckham Park. The age of the wood is revealed by the number of plant species it retains, and by the gnarled shapes of pollard trees whose roots buttress the rocks to the left of our path.

Between the trees the bluebells flow in spring, their honied scent mingling with the onion breath of white-flowered wild garlic. The botanical name for bluebell is Endymion, the young man in Greek mythology who fell asleep forever in a wood, when the moon fell in love with him. Spindle trees grow beside this path. Their lean, hard wood was favoured in the past for making meat skewers and knitting needles. Their waxy pink berries, which appear in October, were baked and powdered to provide a folk remedy against headlice. There's holly growing on these banks as well, which the old Cornish carol calls 'the first tree in the greenwood'. Then there is holm oak, with its dark, leathery leaves, and hazels, fit for the trade of hurdle-making.

So, it's onward to Bench 6, where the path widens at a little rise, beside a rocky outcrop which gives the bench its name: Cliffside.

Track 17: Bench 6

Cliffside to Dartington Drive

Behind Bench 6, which surveys Queen's Meadow, you can touch bare rock, an outcrop of the underlying limestone. The edges of the path at Cliffside are littered with thin fragments of broken shale. A few yards further on, the left-hand bank side is packed with slaty layers of stone lying edgewise, like bundles of old newspapers. In spring the fleshy leaves of navelwort push out among the rocks, each one displaying the dimple that gives the plant its curious name. Its Devonshire name is penny-weed, which describes the size and shape to which the leaves grow, round and heavy like old pennies. In summer in these fringes of the woods, foxgloves raise their drooping bell-towers; and the scent of honeysuckle is wonderfully strong, especially at dusk. In late autumn ropes of briony are twisted among the hawthorns, bright with scarlet berries as if for a harvest festival. The berries are extremely poisonous. In October, the husks of beechmast lying underfoot might mark a place where badgers come to feed.

The path continues to the far end of Queen's Meadow, where, to the right of the path, with its back to the cobbled square, you can find Bench 5, Dartington Drive.

Track 18: Bench 5

Dartington Drive to Riverside Picnic Table

Soon after Bench 5, a strip of blister paving signals a road crossing. The road in question is the asphalt drive that links Dartington Hall, away to the left, with the A385 Totnes road, away to the right. Cross here to the raised pavement on the opposite side of the drive, and turn right towards Totnes. Wheelchair users will need to stay on the drive, as the raised path goes awkwardly round four large oak trees in a line. Within forty yards the road is interrupted by the wide, fat pillow of a traffic-calming hump. The curb to the left has been lowered to allow you to skirt this obstacle.

Another forty yards will bring you to Dartington Lodge gates. Here the Bidwell Brook passes under the road, through a bridge with a stone parapet which you must cross. Only in winter, when the floods are out, can you get a sense of how this landscape used to be. Then the whoop and flap of birds' wings might draw your attention to geese or swans flying, a wonderful fairy-tale sight, as they pass below the steep, frowning woods – woods that were the hiding place of giants in the days of Brutus the Trojan, the legendary founder of Totnes. Giant Gogmagog, he's the one to watch out for – so says Geoffrey of Monmouth, writing in 1136. But recently another legendary creature may be seen upon this meadow. And that is the white egret, a bird much reduced in numbers at the turn of the 19th. century, when its feathers were a fashionable adornment of women's hats.

So now it's across the causeway, past the wildflower sanctuary of Berryman's Marsh on the left, with its frog ponds, oaks and alders and its willows harvested for basket-making. Go past the lodge-keeper's house on the right and out between the stone piers of the lodge gates. A left-hand curb of stones for a few yards makes a left-hand turn over another strip of blister paving. Beyond this point, a field lies to the right, where a clump of oak saplings is hoping to survive 300 years; to the left of the path is a stretch of marshy land where one mossy old oak tree has already done so.

Himalayan Balsam is advancing here, a fiercely invasive species that will grow to a height of six feet or more and will crowd out the diversity of our native waterside plants, unless it is controlled. Its fleshy pink flowers in summer smell like a sweet factory. Where

gardens and the backs of houses now begin, we find the first of two ancient stone stiles, standing redundant, to the right of the path. On the left, the River Dart will soon sweep into view from behind a screen of willows. But first, signalled by a cobbled square, you will find two benches drawn up to either side of a fan-shaped picnic table. This is stopping place number 4: Riverside, a spot where many generations of Totnes youngsters have come to swim in summer.

Track 19: Bench 4 Riverside Picnic Table to Dartington Weir

The picnic table at Riverside is close to the smooth, wide surface of the Dart, at the last moment before it tumbles over Dartington Weir. A few yards further on, opposite the second of the two old field stiles, another pair of benches, not part of our numbered series, surveys the head of the weir. Then comes post and rail fencing to the left of the path, beside a screen of sycamore and alder trees that hides the river. The fence ends; the line of trees continues. They follow the course of another mill leat, which is fed from a sluice at the top of the weir.

Two wooden footbridges span the leat. The first is narrow, with steep steps up and down. Ignore this and continue for 50 yards until you reach a square of cobbles. Turn left here, across the second footbridge. At the far end of this footbridge there is a second square of cobbles. Here, you could go straight on towards Bench 2, but then you would miss Bench 3, so instead we turn left again, back towards the weir.

This is a short detour from the main path, not signed or shown on the map. The surface of limestone grit may be uneven. You are walking between grass verges with the leat on your left. To the right a steep bank drops down to a tidal pool, where a tangle of fallen trees carpets the marshy floor. Keep to the left side, because the path opens out to the right as you approach the weir. Take extra care as the verge may not be clearly defined, and the leat is close by. The path takes a straight line towards the rushing torrents of the weir and the hydroelectric scheme, with its two giant Archimedes screws.

Some 60 yards ahead, Bench number 3 stands to the left of the path. Bench 3 surveys the sweep of water below the weir where the river swings in a wide S-bend as it heads towards the town. Just beyond the

bench, a rather inconspicuous little boundary stone lies abandoned in the grass. Engraved upon the upper side are the letters BB, for Borough Boundary and D for Dartington. Upon the lower side and now hidden from view is the letter H for Hempston, the parish beyond the river.

Track 20: Bench 3

Dartington Weir to the Railway Bridge

Bench 3 stands beside Dartington Weir, the highest tidal reach of the River Dart. At the weir, with its spillway, hydropower turbines and fish pass, where the grey heron goes fishing, the water becomes a living presence. There may be a long-winged cormorant flying over, or squealing gulls, or swifts on summer evenings, racing and shrilling over the lower pool in search of insects dancing on the water. But gone, alas, are the days described by Daniel Defoe, when he visited Totnes around 1720, and saw fifty young salmon caught, with the aid of a swimming dog, in the very mill leat that runs behind the bench.

On leaving Bench 3, we return some 60 yards beside the leat. Keep to the path 'till the square of cobbles at the bridgehead identifies the bridge that brought us here. This time turn left, leaving the bridge behind. The surface underfoot reverts to asphalt at this point, and remains so right through to Borough Park. Tapping rail on the left-hand side guides us through this woodland section. We head towards a jungle of swampy pools and willows, on a path that skirts the perimeter of what was formerly the Dairy Crest Milk depot. Huge container lorries used to manoeuvre behind the chain-link fencing to the right, and generations of contented snails still explore the burdocks to the left.

At holiday times, as you approach the Dart, you'll be aware of steam engines on the South Devon Railway. They puff and whistle in and out of Littlehempston Station, at the far side of the river. You might even catch that rare scent, the occasional whiff of sulphur from the engine smoke. The station can be reached by crossing Bulliver Bridge, where the season's timetable is posted. The elegant steel structure rises to the left of our path. It was installed in 1993, to the great satisfaction of all supporters of steam railway preservation. A square of cobbles marks the left-hand turn to the bridge; but we shall ignore this, to continue on our way. A few yards further and we pass beneath another bridge, a low, ugly, box girder construction that carries the Intercity mainline services over the river towards Totnes, Plymouth and Penzance, or back to Exeter and London. Immediately beyond the railway bridge,

and to the right of the path, you'll find Bench number 2, with its back to the railway, and its face to the broad river. A cobbled square marks the spot.

Track 21: Bench 2

Railway Bridge to Borough Park

Beyond Bench 2 at the Railway Bridge, the landscape opens out across the river to wide pasture lands and distant woods. A footpath follows the riverbank as far as Totnes Bridge and Vire Island. But on rising from Bench 2 we turn away from the river. The fencing that steered us under the bridge and kept us out of the water now swings round to the right, and directs us up a short slope, past the riverbank turn-off and away towards the town. From this point, till we reach our destination, the pathway is divided by a raised white line. It indicates shared use, putting pedestrians to the left, and cyclists to the right of the line. A ribbed paving strip marks the starting point of this division. When the ribs run across the path it means 'walkers'. When they run parallel with the direction of the path, they mean 'cyclists'. This entire footpath system is also a designated national cycle route, and a well-used one. So, caution and consideration must be the watchwords for us all.

The path continues, with post and rail fencing to the left, a screen of conifers behind it, and behind them on lower ground, the industrial estate. To the right, beyond a narrow grass bank and a steel fence, runs the railway line. So be prepared for the thunder of passing trains. Another 100 yards or so, and the path twists briefly to the right. There's a last glimpse of the mill leat, before it slinks away behind the industrial units, to re-emerge alongside the supermarket carpark. There it makes itself available to turn the machinery of the old Town Mill.

But we are approaching the bottom end of Totnes Station carpark. Across the railway track lies another piece of local history. Among the installations of the now derelict milk depot stand two solid gable ends in grey and blue. They look as if they have been built from the big wooden bricks that might be found in the toy box of a Victorian nursery. They are all that remains of the Totnes Pumping House, built to serve the Atmospheric Railway of 1846-8. This ill-fated scheme, designed by the great Victorian engineer Brunel,

aimed to run trains upon air pressure instead of locomotive power. But the work was ruined by rats, who gnawed through the leather valves of the air pipes.

When the path does its twist to the right, it's interrupted by a ribbed paving strip and a wooden bollard. Then, within a few steps, we make two left-hand turns in quick succession so that the railway is behind us and the car park to our right. Here, a second strip of ribbed paving and a second wooden bollard signal a short upward incline that brings us into Borough Park. A third strip of ribbed paving indicates that we have reached level ground again. Two more strips lie ahead. They denote a side turning to the right, leading to a bowling green and tennis courts. But we move straight ahead, across the strips, ignoring them.

Keep to the left as you go; you'll find the path is bordered by a chain link fence. To the right, a line of mature trees guards the broad grassy acres of the recreation ground. Totnes Pavilion lies ahead, beside the sports centre and the swimming pool. Here you can find toilets open daily. A few minutes' walk brings us to Bench number 1, situated to the left of the footpath beside a cobbled square. An information board stands beside the bench.

Track 22: Bench 1

Borough Park and back to Totnes

Bench 1 at Borough Park is the final stopping place upon this 2-mile walk from Dartington. The footpath moves on down a short slope to a final strip of ribbed paving, a children's play area, a traffic road and a car park. Before you move off, spare a moment to consider a famous granite stone, embedded in the pavement at Fore Street, in the centre of Totnes. That was where Brutus the Trojan set his foot, after the fall of Troy. That was the stone at which he uttered the memorable words: "Here I stop and here I stand / This shall be called Brutus land". In the course of time, as the language altered, Brutus Land became British Land – the land of Britain. All that occurred 3,000 years ago. But the Brutus Stone is still there, with its name written up beside it in letters of gold. Which seems to prove that stories and landscape always run together. To find the stone you must return to the town, the traffic, the present day. Like Brutus, we have come to the end of our wanderings. But every ending is a new beginning. So be careful how you travel.

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* * * * *

If you are going back with us to Dartington, you need to switch back to Track 3 of this recording, now. This is the end of Track 22 and the end of the recording.

Research and text for the audio-guide: Clive Fairweather
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Additional commentary: Gill Cowsill, RNIB Transcription Service

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