



Coast

of contrasts

Birds flock to it, ships fell foul of it and a great poet was inspired to write his greatest works by it. Now Julia Buckley takes a hike along the recently-opened Ceredigion Coast Path and finds herself equally captivated by the landscape she discovers.



Spectacular views, unique wildlife, challenging terrain and beautiful historic villages – for me, coastal trails are a walking experience that’s hard to top. The newly created 96km/60-mile Ceredigion Coast Path has all of these features in abundance. Wending its way along the Mid Wales coast from Cardigan to Ynyslas, the route encompasses a fantastic array of contrasting features: from cliff scrambles to shoreline strolls; waterfalls to rock pools; marshlands to sand dunes; and from rural hills where there’s not another soul in sight, to the busy towns of Aberystwyth and Cardigan.

MERRY SHIPWRECKS

My partner, Ian, and I began at the official Ceredigion Coast Path start point in Cardigan – a bronze statue of an otter beside the river Teifi. Averting our eyes while we passed a supermarket car park, we soon reached more rural landscapes feeling our journey had begun in earnest.

Orchids and evening primroses are among the many flowers to be seen along the route in the warmer months. It was mid-October when we took the trail, but it soon became clear that my floral expectations were to be exceeded. Dots of colour winked from all around, especially a pink flower, rising above the grass, which I believe is called ‘thrift’. The trees in the forests when we looked inland, like the ferns on the cliff edges, were an autumnal mix of fading greens and browns, and the bracken which flanked many of the paths bore a silvery tinge.

Nineteen kilometres/12 miles from Cardigan is the pretty village of Aberporth. The points of historical maritime interest along the coastal path are far too numerous to share here (the guidebook by Gerald Morgan mentioned in *Walk It!* on p53 gives some great accounts). But one of my favourites is the tale of the French ship which was not the only thing to get wrecked just up the coast in Penbryn in 1817. It was discovered to the delight of many locals to have a huge cargo of wine. The merry-making got so far out of hand that corks weren’t the only thing to pop – it’s said a few of the finders indulged so enthusiastically they died. Sometimes poetic justice is harsh.

Further on from the scene of the party, which for some was to end all parties, is Llangrannog. Perhaps the most attractive of all the villages on the route, Llangrannog comprises of just a few rows of houses, a church, a pub, a single shop, but several closed cafés proving its popularity with visitors at peak season. This was the beginning of a theme – at most of the tourist spots along the path we found many cafés, shops, and even some pubs and hotels shut down for the winter. You might think me strange, but I kind of liked it. To me it echoed what





“The tourist spots shut down for winter echoed what was happening around us in nature. You might think me strange, but I liked it.”

was happening around us in nature – things going to ground through the cold months, returning full of colour and life again when the season changes.

I enjoy being one of the few hardy enough to see the quieter side of seaside resorts. This could be set to change though. Ceredigion County Council is keen to promote the Coastal Path with the aim of revitalising off-season tourism. It seems, however, they’ve work to do. Among the fellow rambles we met, few were aware that the routes from Cardigan up to Ynyslas had been joined to make a 96km/60-mile trail.

GEOLOGY, POETRY AND HERITAGE

Urban living makes it easy to overlook the fascinating geology shaping the land around us. The great appeal of coastal walks is that these great tectonic forces are often clearly displayed in the fantastically folded and twisted strata of the cliff faces – the same forces that formed the Welsh mountains beyond.

Over the 15km/9.5 miles from Llangrannog to New Quay there are numerous interesting rock formations to command your attention. During the Silurian Period 430 million years ago, most of Wales was undersea and on the edge of a large,

Above: Across the wet sands of beaches near Aberystwyth. Top left: A quick map-stop outside Llangrannog. Middle: Along the clifftops near Ynys Lochtyn. Bottom: The harbour at Aberaeron.

barren continent. Rocks, gravel, and silt were washed into the sea by rivers and floods, fanning out on the ocean floor to form layers of stone, sand, and mud. Over time this compressed into rocks, called mudstones. They don’t provide much for the fossil hunter; most of the animals living in the mud only left behind faint traces of their burrows. But their colourful strata decorate cliff faces along the coastal path, and we found them scattered around the bays at New Quay and Clarach, between Aberystwyth and Borth.

Arriving at New Quay, I felt the shadow of perhaps one the town’s best-known residents. Dylan Thomas visited New Quay frequently, and lived here from 1944 to 1945. This was one of the most prolific periods of his writing career, not least because he enjoyed being so close to the sea, with good pubs to hand. He rented a little house called ‘Majoda’ which he described as a ‘wood and asbestos pagoda’, and, ‘a shack at the edge of the cliff, where my children hop like fleas in a box’.

The house, no longer standing, was draughty and cold but had a wonderful view across New Quay Bay. Here he found a new rush of creativity and productivity after a long dry spell, and immortalised many of the local characters he met in his work. New Quay is often sited as the inspiration for the >>



town of Llareggub in his play, *Under Milk Wood*. (Note the backwards reading of Llareggub, which seems rather unfair.) Fans will enjoy the 5km/3-mile Dylan Thomas Trail, which starts at the harbour and, like Dylan's life, rather resembles a pub crawl!

Further along the path, on the approach to Aberaeron, is a small pink building, once the lime weighing house. Lime was used for mortar in most pre-19th-century buildings in Ceredigion and also in lime-wash to paint the stone cottages white. The lime was brought from Gower and Pembrokeshire by boat, offloaded at high tide and collected from the beaches when the tide went down. The Ceredigion Coast Path passes several lime kilns, in varying states of preservation, once used to heat limestone to make the lime. Aberaeron's colourful painted houses and smart little harbour are well worth a stop.

From Aberaeron it's 12km/7.5 miles to Llanrhystud along a shingle path, on to some clay cliffs and through the pretty little village of Aberarth, then uphill for a long stretch towards Morfa Mawr. As well as some spectacular views ahead, if you look down to the shore at low tide you'll see arcs of large stones. These are the foundations of wattle fences placed here over a hundred years ago to catch fish on a dropping tide. Shortly after, the path follows a road inland to a bridge crossing the River Wyre, then takes a sharp turn back towards the coast through Pencarreg village and on to Llanrhystud.

BUTTERFLIES AND BIRDS

The 16km/10 miles to Aberystwyth features some wonderfully dramatic views along the coast. In summer, 29 species of butterfly flutter by this area – almost half the species living in the UK. You'd be lucky to spot any of those in autumn I suppose, but we did see a couple of lovely fat furry caterpillars.

Seals, dolphins, and sometimes even whales are often spotted off the Ceredigion coast. Though easier to spot is the great variety of bird life all along the length of the path. Although we didn't see any of the elusive choughs in the cliffs above New Quay, we did enjoy close encounters with stonechats and oystercatchers. Despite not being great birdwatchers, we were in awe at the sight of a red kite only yards from the path. It remained impossibly motionless over the cliffs in the stiff sea breeze before plummeting into the ferns below.

Aberystwyth, with its crumbling, yet still majestic castle, busy harbour, pier, and promenade gives the initial impression of a traditional Welsh seaside resort. However, rather than the senior citizens that usually populate such places, the typical 'Aber' resident is in their early 20s thanks to the university (and often possesses an in-depth knowledge of >>



Leaving 'vibrant' Aberystwyth. Below: Path founder David Bateman of Ceredigion Ramblers and Rhodri Morgan at the path's launch.

“From the promenade you're faced with an imposing cliff... fortunately, the view back over 'Aber' was fantastic.”

CREATING THE COAST PATH

The Ceredigion Coast Path was finally opened in July 2008 after five years of hard work by local Ramblers and Ceredigion County Council. Making the 96km/60-mile path involved clearing miles of new paths, cutting through mounds of thorns, bracken and bramble, and installing 15 bridges – not to mention all the steps, stiles, signposts, and kissing gates along the trail.



Myra Clark (pictured left), chair of the Cardigan Ramblers is thrilled with the path. “A working party of our members helped build six of the bridges along the path, winning the 2006 Ramblers' Association Award for Best Project for one of them, so it's great to get on the trail and enjoy the results of their efforts.”

Myra refers to the construction of a 12m/40ft steel-framed bridge over a chasm near to Cardigan. The area – between Mwnt and Aberporth – was inaccessible to transport, so volunteers had to carry the materials and put the whole thing together manually – not bad considering some of them are in their 70s and 80s! One member of the group, 85-year-old Ted Davenport, told the local paper, “We wanted to put something back for all the enjoyment we get out, and make the paths enjoyable for everyone else. We're all OAPs but we work like hell and there's always plenty of banter.”

Anwen Parker, promoting walking officer at Ramblers Cymru said, “I think it's amazing. The Ceredigion path is a fantastic example of the across-the-board support footpaths can draw. The Welsh Assembly, local authorities, and the Ramblers all worked together to make this happen. Minister Jane Davies was very enthusiastic in her praise of the project and the ramblers involved, so we were all encouraged by that. This marks a major step forward in our aim of a path along the whole coast of Wales.”



WALK IT!

TIME/DISTANCE:

Allow 4-6 days to walk the 96km/60 miles from Cardigan to Ynyslas.

MAPS: Landranger 135, 145, 146; Explorer OL23 198, 213.

TRAVEL TO: Borth and

Aberystwyth have regular rail links to Machynlleth, Shrewsbury and Birmingham (☎ 08457 48 49 50, www.nationalrail.co.uk). National Express coaches run a service to Aberystwyth, from London via Birmingham and Shrewsbury (☎ 08717 818181, www.nationalexpress.com).

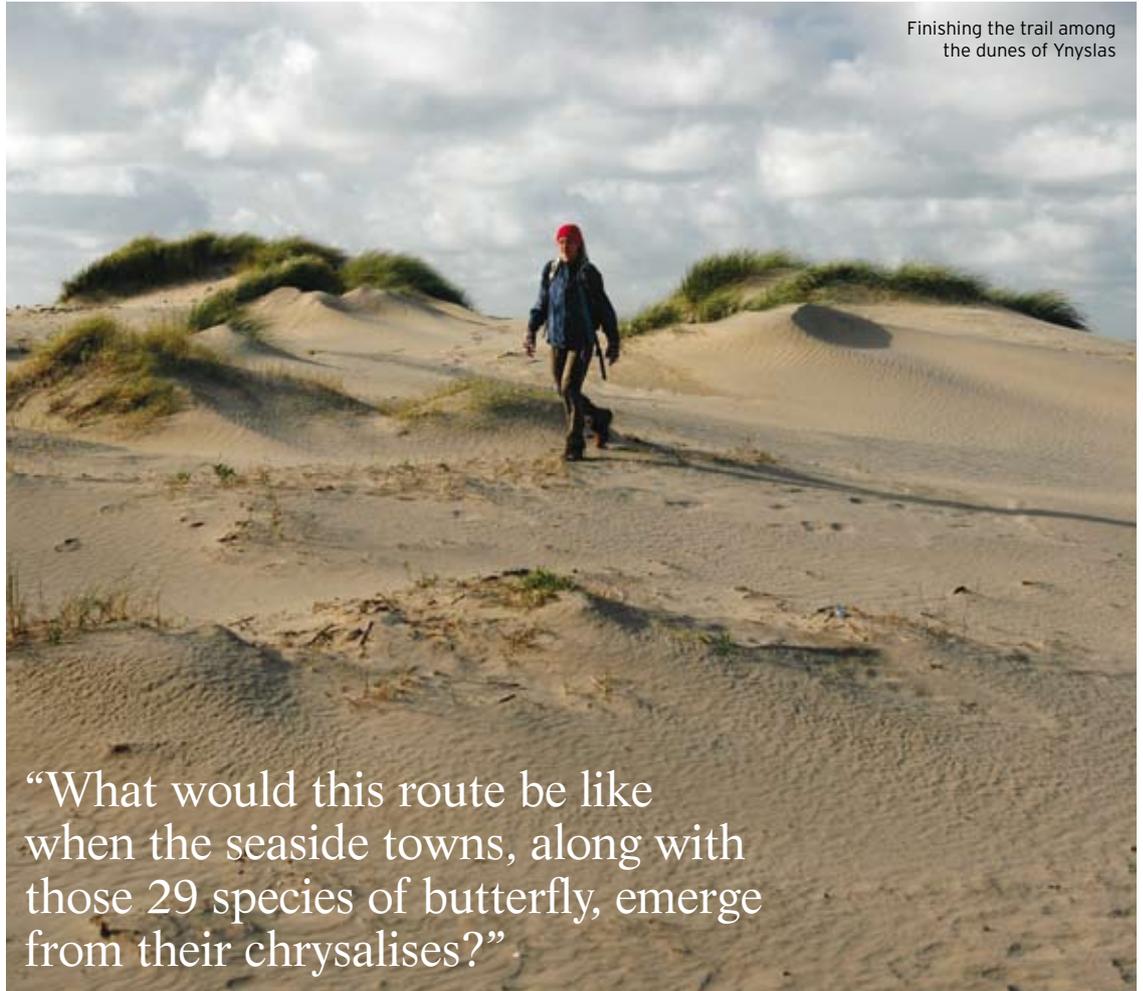
TRAVEL AROUND: Local

buses follow the coast between Aberystwyth and New Quay. The X50 and 550 provide a regular service linking Aberystwyth and Aberaeron with Tresaith, Aberporth, and Cardigan. The Cardi Bach is a twice-daily summer service along the coast south of New Quay to Cardigan, but doesn't operate on Wednesdays. The 230, 460/461 are regular services from Cardigan to Carmarthen (visit www.ceredigion.gov.uk for full details).

GUIDES: *Ceredigion Coast Path:*

From the Teifi to the Dyfi by Gerald Morgan. The official, comprehensive guide to the trail with maps, directions, and many interesting asides. Published by Ceredigion County Council (£10, ISBN 978 0 9534383 3 4). Available from Cardigan TIC, ☎ 01239 613 230. *The Dylan Thomas Trail* by David Thomas is published by Y Lolfa Cyf (£6.95, ISBN 978 0862436094).

FURTHER INFO: The Walk Cardigan Bay website, www.walkcardiganbay.com, has lots of useful info, including tide times, accommodation, and route changes.



“What would this route be like when the seaside towns, along with those 29 species of butterfly, emerge from their chrysalises?”

daytime television schedules to rival most retirees). This makes for a refreshing liveliness and vibrancy after passing all those sleepy old fishing villages, and there's an interesting juxtaposition of trendy shops and bars among the historic buildings of the town.

From the promenade you're faced with an imposing cliff to begin the last leg of the trail to Ynyslas. There's a café at the top alongside a camera obscura, but it was closed for the winter when we arrived. Fortunately, the view back over Aber was fantastic and proved reward enough. There were at least a couple more steep climbs before reaching the small town of Borth, which made us glad we'd eaten a good breakfast that morning.

When the tide's low, the fossilised remains of the 'drowned forest' appear on Borth beach – the stumps of trees which grew 6,000 years ago when the seabed was lower. Along the beach you pass houses built right on the shingle. The sandbags in the yards show flooding must be a regular occurrence. None of the houses looked abandoned though; in fact most were lovingly maintained. Clearly the residents feel the view and gorgeous surroundings make up for the sea's invasions. I can't say I blame them.

Just outside Borth, the path bears right, travelling inland for a mile or so across peat bogs. Later we emerged back on the beach, but the high tide and many groynes meant we had to walk along the dividing wall. Luckily it was wide enough for us to keep a steady pace and the groynes soon dwindled, allowing us back onto the sand to rejoin the trail at the dunes of Ynyslas.

After turning along the Dyfi Estuary, the trail comes to its end with a sweeping view of the town of Aberdyfi across the water. The café and visitor centre were closed, but the firm sands at the top of the beach appeared popular with picnickers and dog walkers.

I don't usually like to re-walk a trail; there are so many I haven't done, it seems a waste. But looking back across the dunes, I remembered something a fellow walker on the Ceredigion Coast Path had said. He was a regular along several sections and told us how the seasons dramatically altered the surroundings making for a different experience each time. What would this route be like when the seaside towns, along with those 29 species of butterfly, emerge from their chrysalises, amid the spring flowers and bouncing lambs in the fields? I think in this case I might just make an exception. ■