



Walk No. 9 – Kerswell to the source(s) of Kate Brook

This is walk number nine in a series of historical walks around Chudleigh and the surrounding countryside compiled by Alan Brunton for the Chudleigh History Group. Most walks commence from the Town Hall. The historical content of the walks is mainly brief, but further information can be found on our website and in The Chudleigh Book, available in the library.

Walk 9: Distance approx. 5.5 miles. Time 2–2.5 hours. Roads and footpaths, can be muddy in places

Walks three and seven take you to **Kerswell** for the start of this walk (there is limited parking by the lime kilns if driving to this point), but if you have not read those, from the Town Hall just cross the Sports Grounds to Hams Barton and follow the road to Kerswell, allowing the extra distance and time to, and return from, Kerswell.

Walk up the short footpath alongside Kerswell Cottage to the road. Cross straight over past a bungalow named Springfield, although its name is not visible on this side. The very old walling around here dates back hundreds of years defining the boundaries of the Harcombe Estate. Follow the narrow road ahead for 300 yards to a footpath sign between high hedges on the right (marked 1 on the map). This is known as Sticksend. Take this rugged path with entrances to badger setts either side until reaching a stile to the left (2 on map). Climb the stile and walk straight ahead for 200 yards to a gateway (3 on map). This area can be very wet during the winter months so adequate footwear is advised.

On the opposite side of the valley is Harcombe House now owned by the Fire Services National Benefit Fund but signposted as the Fire Services Charity.

The Saxon origin of the name is Hare Valley – Hare Combe – Harcombe. It is a small, old hamlet which at one time had a small infants' school and cottage Sunday service. Some of its cottages, no longer extant, were built in the 14th and 15th centuries. Later during this walk you will cross the Chudleigh parish boundary into Kenn parish and then back again, not too far from the remains of some of those cottages.

The Balle family, who owned various lands in the parish, created Harcombe and a branch of the family came to own much of Mamhead a few miles distant. Following the Balles, the Earl of Morley, who owned Whiteway, came to own Harcombe and in 1830 sold it to Thomas Newman from Dartmouth. His family created an arable and stock farm on the estate. In 1912 the Newmans sold it to Sir Edward Channing Wills, a descendant of the Wills Tobacco Company, although not in their employ. He was actually a surgeon and deeply opposed to smoking.

Channing Wills demolished Newman's farmhouse and built the grand property we see today. However, he had only a few years in his new home, dying in 1921, and is buried in a tomb in the woods overlooking his estate. When crossing the aforementioned stile the tomb is in the woods 200 yards up to the right, but is not open to public viewing. His widow, Lady Isabella, survived him by thirty-two years, passing away in 1953. He was a very controversial character and many stories survive him. Soon after purchasing the estate, Channing Wills erected gates on the roads leading to and leaving his land. In



August 1912 our council received a letter informing them of this action. They were under the impression these highways were public and consulted the district council to 'establish parishioners' rights to these roads'. At a council meeting held in March 1913 the minutes show that the local authorities had successfully overruled Sir Channing's claim and the roads were to remain open for public use. The matter was said to be resolved amicably although local legend maintains Sir Channing held a permanent grudge. Over the following years he would not employ any Chudleigh resident. Following his death Lady Wills did not follow her late husband's wishes and enjoyed a much happier relationship with the local authorities and tradesmen.

The estate was sold in 1960 and then up to 1979 endured several owners and investors. In that year the main house was converted to a hotel and holiday chalets were built in the grounds. In 1981 the Fire Services National Benefit Fund purchased the house and all facilities and further improvements followed. In 2008 the Fund was renamed The Fire Services Charity. It now specialises in providing holiday accommodation and also rehabilitation facilities for members of the Fire Service and these include a therapy centre. A comprehensive chapter on Harcombe can be found in The Chudleigh Book, pages 128-136.

Having climbed the stile (2) follow the left-hand hedgerow down the field to a gateway (3). Turn right and follow another hedgerow which brings you to Kilnfield Covert (4). Follow the path through the woods with some fishing lakes off to the left until reaching a track coming from the holiday bungalow park (5) Turn left here and then turn right at a public footpath sign (6) and follow this track up through the woods. You are now entering the extensive woodland of Great Haldon and may often see deer hereabouts.

After half a mile you will come to a large gate with stile alongside. Climb over the stile and proceed for another few yards until the track forks (7). Bear left and very soon you will leave Chudleigh parish and walk into Kenn parish although there are no markers to advise you of this. The track bears right and soon will join another coming down from the right (8). Turn left and as this main track begins to bear left you cross over a small watercourse underneath (9). A few yards up the bank is one source of the Kate Brook. It rises just the other side of the A380 close by here and then meanders down through Harcombe, Hams Barton and Chudleigh before its confluence with the River Teign below Heightley and near the drive to Lawell House. This is where the old Bridge Hill was situated.

Stay on this main track, bearing left at a fork in the path (10) and the track then bears right and uphill. After several minutes and a few hundred yards you come to another cross of forest tracks (11). If you were to turn right it would take you to the A380 near the garage at the top of Exeter-bound Telegraph Hill, or straight on to the road linking highways of the A380 and A38 or left, which is your direction, down and up to another cross track (12). At this point straight ahead is the Exeter Racecourse. You now have a choice: either turn left and follow the straight track for the best part of a mile to a parking area alongside the road down to Harcombe (14) or go on up to the racecourse, turn left (13) and do likewise the above. If you do go to point 13 and then turn right for 20 yards there is a culvert that is another (and longer) origin point of the Kate Brook which runs out from the side of the racecourse. The parking area at 14 is for horse trailers whose owners intend hacking through the forest tracks and is not connected to the racecourse. Before reaching it you have crossed the boundary back into Chudleigh parish.

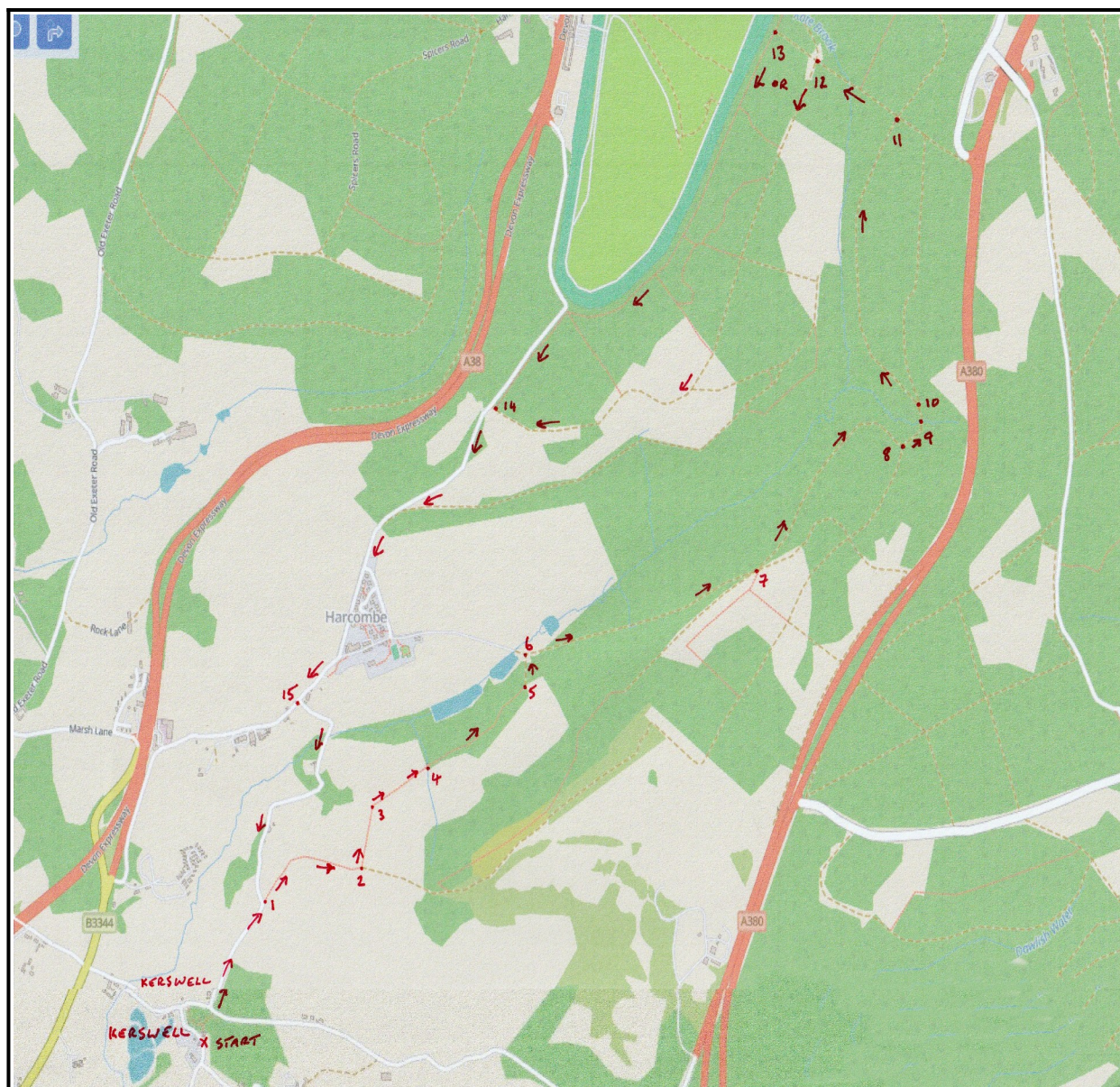


On reaching the road, walk downhill passing the entrance to the Harcombe House bungalow park. To the left of this drive is a field into which on June 23rd, 1952 a Vampire jet, piloted by nineteen-year old Allan Durham from an R.A.F. flying/training school near Yeovilton, plunged 30,000 feet. It is believed that Allan lost consciousness in his unpressurised cockpit. Lady Wills was asleep in Harcombe House and slept right through the crash although several residents in Exeter Road heard the explosion when the aircraft hit the ground.

Walk on down past the main entrance to Harcombe House and turn left down a steep hill alongside Harcombe Cottage (15), although it is hardly a cottage. At the bottom you will cross over the Kate Brook and off to the left you may notice a remaining wall of an old mill which stood here probably 200 years or more ago. Now walk up a fairly steep hill past Harcombe Court and Sticksend where the road levels out and you can look across to Harcombe Barton Farm and further west some holiday homes of Holmans Wood. From here just follow the road you took some time ago back to the lime kilns where you may have parked or on to Hams Barton and across the fields to the town.

Exeter Racecourse stages National Hunt racing. The first jumps meeting was staged in 1898, but the site has been use for horse racing since the middle of the 17th century, one of many racecourses created due to Charles II's love of the sport, and there have been claims that the racecourse is one of the oldest in the country. The Jockey Club was formed in 1750 and horse racing under its rules was standardised shortly after. There are a records of a number of races being run at Exeter from 1804¹. The course now holds race days from October to April. It does not have a watering system so has to wait for nature to provide suitable ground conditions for the horses. The centre of the course is open to Caravan Club members from Easter to October.

1 For more on the history of Exeter Racecourse, see <https://www.thejockeyclub.co.uk/exeter/about/history/>



Route of Walk No.9 (map source: OpenStreetMap)