WILD swimming Walks

CORNWALL

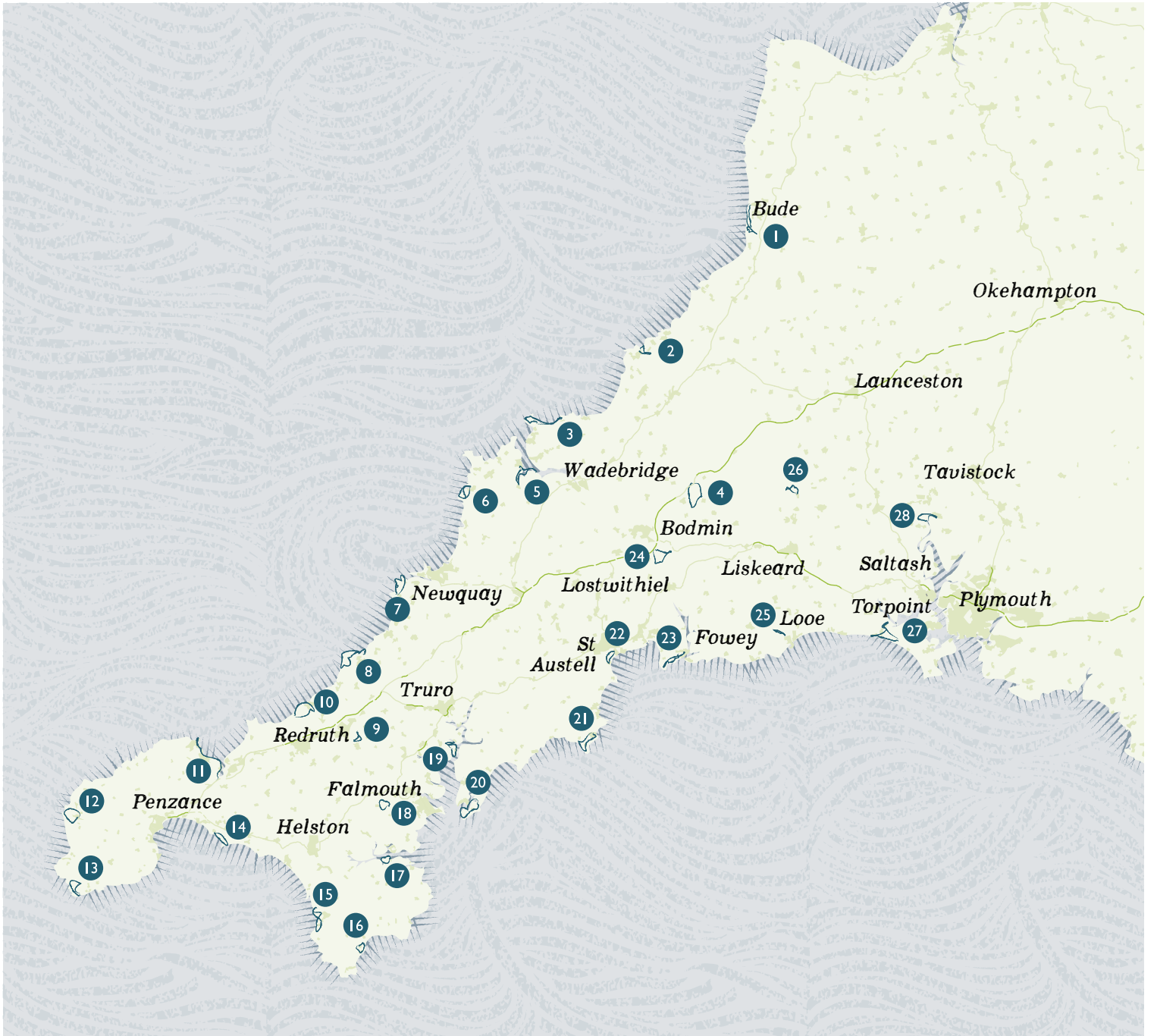
28 coast, river and beach days out

Matt Newbury

Sophie Pierce

WILD THINGS PUBLISHING

Mernaid Pool, Porth Nanven



THE WALKS

Pentire Head, Polzeath

INTRODUCTION

"It is magic that comes leaping into the mind when we think of Cornwall, and in truth it is a magic place. Saints and legends, holy wells and ancient crosses, are everywhere… and at times there is an eeriness in this grim rock-bound coast, so that unadventurous people do not always feel easy in its presence. Certainly Cornwall is no place for the man who has no mystery. Here if anywhere it is plain that we are such stuff as dreams are made of."

From *Cornwall, England's Farthest South*
by Arthur Mee 1937

Cornwall. Kernow. A country, not a county, a kingdom with its own language and fierce identity. A place of romance, beauty and legend, but one whose people have historically had tough lives, battling both the sea and the land in their main industries of fishing, mining and farming. Around four million tourists visit every year, drawn mostly to the 300 miles of breathtaking coastline, but there is so much more to experience along Cornwall's central 'backbone', from magnificent moorland with ancient stone circles and quarry lakes to the china clay district, where the heaps of white spoil thrust skywards like Cornish Alps.

The Cornish identity is distinguished by separation and the proud independence of the men and women of the soil and the sea. The 'Corn' comes from the Cornish 'kern' meaning 'horn', and Cornwall is very nearly an island, with 80% of it surrounded by water, while you are never more than 16 miles from the coast. It has the sea on three sides and the Tamar forming a natural boundary with Devon for over 57 miles before it flows into the English Channel.

Cornwall is Celtic, with its own language, which after nearly dying out is thriving today; hence the 'Kernow a'gas dynergh' or 'Welcome to Cornwall' sign you will see as you drive over the River Tamar. Many people do not like it being called a county. Merv Davey, a former Grand Bard of Gorsedh Kernow, writes: "The term 'county' fails to recognise Cornwall's distinctive identity and encourages our friends in the media to fade Cornish identity into an amorphous 'Westcountry'. Many English counties have a strong sense of identity with rich traditions that contribute to the modern culture of these islands. I am not saying that Cornwall's culture is stronger or superior, simply that it belongs to the Cornish world and not the English one and to call it an English county betrays this identity."

You might argue, what does it matter? But this desire not to be an English county tells us something about the nature of Cornwall. That sense of independence has its roots in the geography of the place and its connections to the ancient Celtic world, on the routes between Ireland, Wales and Brittany. And of course, being at the end of a peninsula, it has long been far removed from the centre of power and government.

Today, Cornwall relies heavily on tourism to provide jobs and bring in money, and is officially the UK's favourite holiday destination, an accolade it wins year after year. Its main selling point is its spectacular coast, but it also has an irresistible aura of myth and mystery. The legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table is one that is ingrained into our national DNA, and Cornwall lays claim to it in places such as Tintagel and Dozmary Pool. There is even an Avalon app you can download, with a map to help you 'walk in the trail of King Arthur's footsteps'.

A little booklet called 'Cornish Legends', published in the 1960s, contains all manner of

Cornish folklore, from pixies to giants, ghost ships to miners' imps, and witches to wish hounds. Stories including the Spectre Ship of Porthcurno, the Witches of the Logan Stone, and the Giant of Nancledry convey the spirit of fable that permeates the Cornish experience. And again, like the spirit of independence, this goes back to the landscape. In the rolling mists coming in off the sea, great standing stones and stone circles, huge tors, and sea stacks and caves where the water foams and spurts, you can see the inspiration for these stories. And that legendary landscape endures today, for us all to explore and enjoy.

It is a swimmer's paradise. The south coast is sheltered from the prevailing south-westerly winds, providing safe, calm waters in many creeks and harbours that are perfect for swim safaris. From the gin-clear sea of Mevagissey Bay, to the languid green waters of the Helford River, this coast provides a warm welcome. The Lizard and Land's End have dramatic shorelines with imposing rocky buttresses as an exciting visual backdrop, and many caves, arches, tunnels and islands to explore. Inland, the Cornish rivers are small but enticing, and there are spectacular freshwater quarries, the legacy of mining and quarrying on the moors. The north coast has rolling surf, rugged cliffs and many tidal pools, and the walks are just breathtaking.

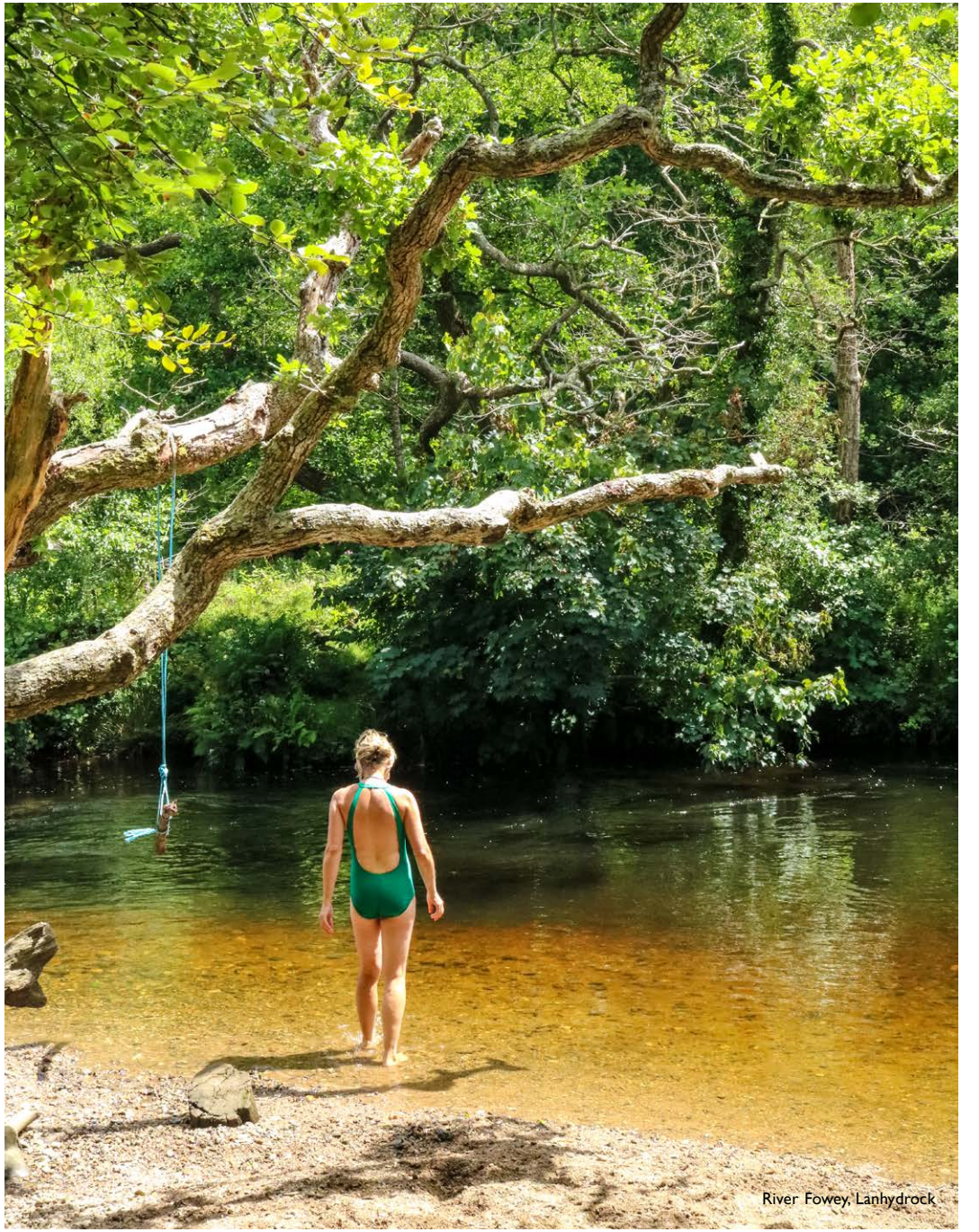
This truly is a place you can have all manner of aquatic adventures. Whether it's swooshing down one of the many estuaries and creeks with the tide, swimming from beach to beach, or wallowing in the abundance of tidal pools, marvelling at the wildlife below the surface, you will find Cornwall an aquatic Avalon full of swimming surprises.

Delectable Duchy

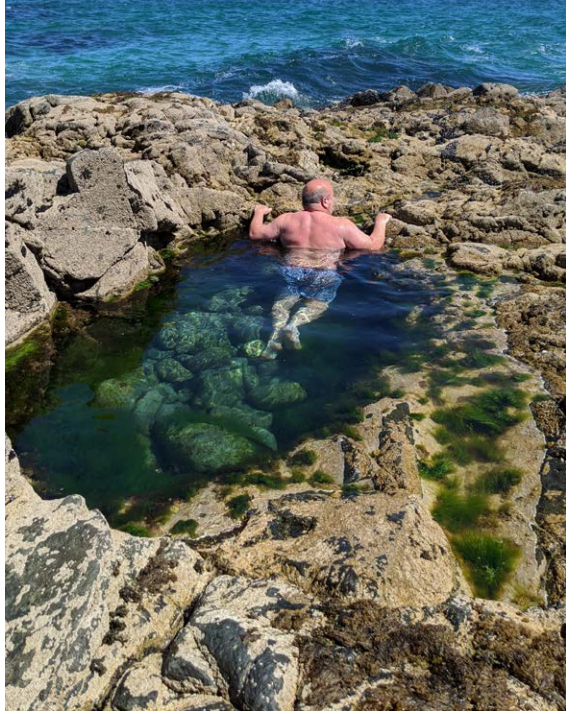
The golden and unpeopled bays
The shadowy cliffs and sheep-worn ways
The white unpopulated surf
The thyme-and-mushroom scented turf
The slate-hung farms, the oil-lit chapels
Thin elms and lemon-coloured apples…

Sir John Betjeman – 1974

Porthmeor Beach, St Ives



River Fowey, Lanhydrock

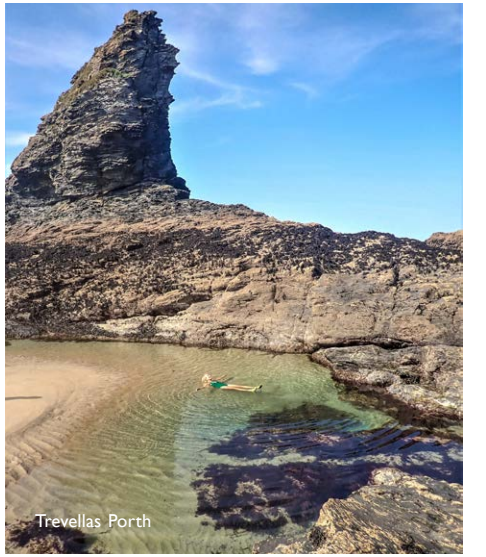


Porthpean

THE COLOUR OF WATER

There are dozens of words to describe the colour of water, from turquoise and jade, to azure, emerald and aquamarine. And in our adventures around Cornwall, we think we have seen them all. Nowhere else have we found ourselves exclaiming "look at the colour of that water!" on so many walks. The vibrant, almost glowing colours are straight from a screensaver and are eminently Instagrammable. It's why collating the pictures for this book has been such a joy. We have swum in the former china clay pools of Cardinham Moor, where the milky sands turn the waters opal. We dipped in the liquid bliss of the upper Fowey, where mineral deposits glitter in the dappled indigo waters, like mythical pisky dust. We have shrieked with cold and with laughter under the sacred waterfall at St Nectan's Glen, as the cerulean-tinged white water thunders down, the spray refracting into a spectacular array of colours. However, it has been the different colours of the sea that have left us most in awe of Cornwall.

Cornwall itself is geologically tilted, which is why the north coast boasts mighty cliffs and deep slate blue water, while the southern shore is often sandy with shallow clear waters. A variety of factors leads to the remarkable palate of blues you will discover. Cornwall has very few rivers to wash mud and silt into the seas, meaning calm weather results in extraordinary water clarity. Heavy sand particles and a lack of sediment give the waters of west Cornwall an incredible turquoise colour. Sea beds made up of crushed shells give rise to cobalt blue and aquamarine, with the colours changing depending on the light, the depth of the water and time of day. Direct light from the sun can cause a different shade of blue from light that is diffused through clouds and mist or reflected when it bounces off the surface of the water. A week's holiday can take you through a diverse colour chart of blues, with no two days the same.



Trevellas Porth

The astonishing light and the exceptional water colours have inspired generations of artists to adopt Cornwall as their home. It was perhaps J.M. Turner who first highlighted the magnificent light and intense colours of Cornwall in his 1811 illustrated travel guide, *Picturesque Views on the Southern Coast of England*. His watercolour, oil and pencil sketches of Newlyn, St Ives and Penzance turned these sleepy towns into meccas for artists. By the 1930s, they had become a hive of creativity for bohemian painters and sculptors, inspired by the beautiful coastline around them.

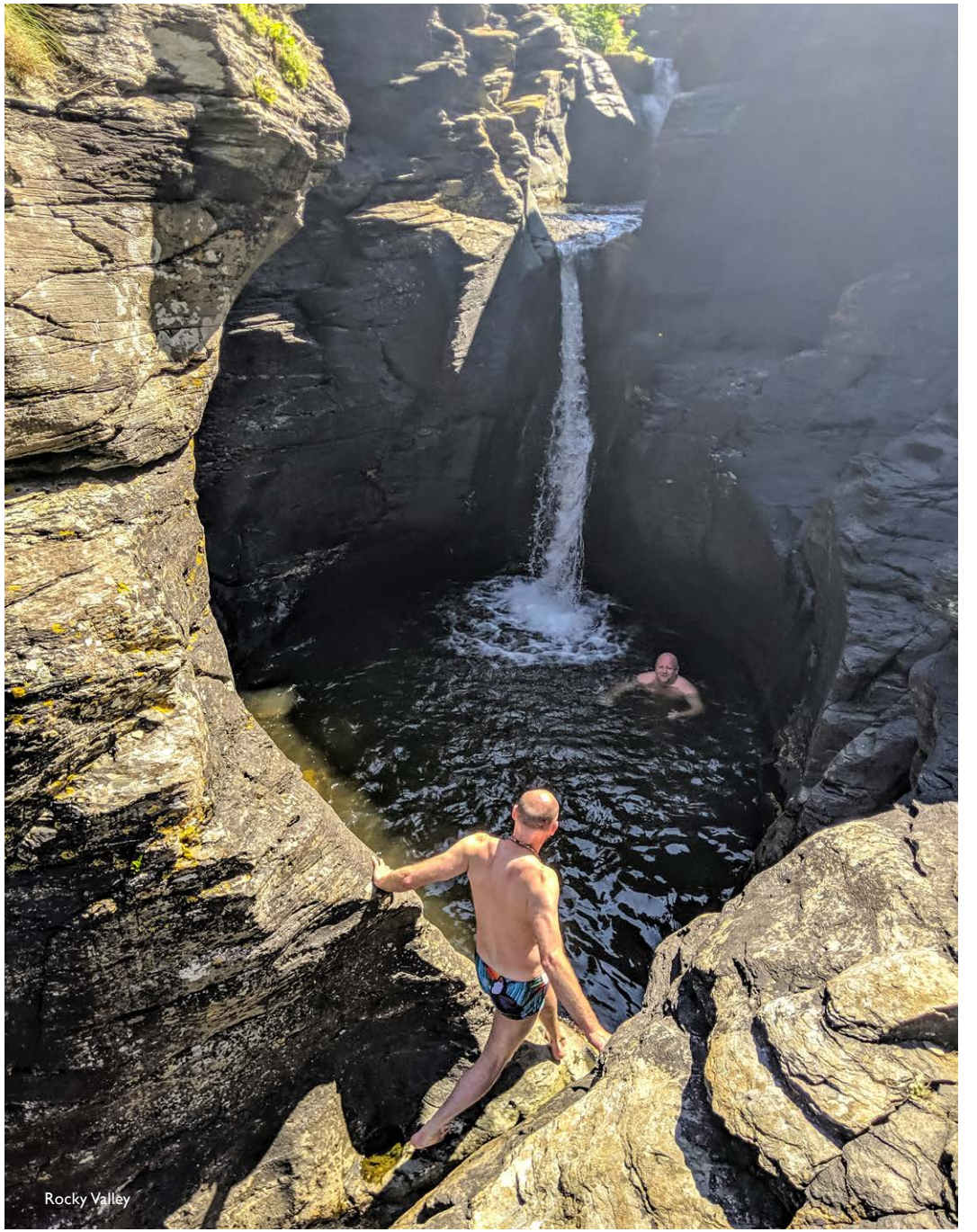
Today, Cornwall continues to attract artistic types, with the late Barbara Hepworth saying of her home in St Ives: "The horizontal line of the sea and the quality of light and colour… reminds me of the Mediterranean light and colour, which so excites one's sense of form." We think that this is perhaps selling her adopted home a little short, and that there is hopefully another artist in the Mediterranean who is saying that the coastline there reminds them very much of Cornwall.

ENTERING THE LANDSCAPE

The popularity of wild swimming has grown enormously since we first started writing books about it almost a decade ago. Not that we take any credit for it, the word just got around! This is fantastic news, as the health benefits, both anecdotal and now scientifically proven, are huge. Not only is it great for your heart and circulation, it is apparently also good for your libido, while the natural high is undeniable. We've also heard that it is supposed to help weight loss, although we have always successfully countered this with the amount of cake we eat following a dip. It is also immensely beneficial for your mental health and we can vouch for this from personal experience. It certainly helps to reduces stress, anxiety and depression and can be very meditative. We've often joked that if a pharmaceutical company could find a way to bottle it, they would make a fortune.

There is also a real sense of community with wild swimming, and we are eternally grateful for the many lovely and like-minded friends we have met along the way. This book was put together with the help of many people who joined us throughout a year of research. They shared their enthusiasm, knowledge, photography skills, humour and cake as we traipsed all over Cornwall, falling even more in love with the county along the way. Sometimes things went wrong and we got hopelessly lost, or were sucked into bogs or arrived at potential swim spots that had dried up years before. But even the disasters were part of the fun, thanks to the wonderful people wild swimming seems to attract.

Another tremendous benefit of walking and swimming is that it allows you to reconnect with nature, the importance of which can never be underestimated. By enjoying nature we value and understand it more and want to do everything



Rocky Valley

Vault Beach, Gorran Haven

in our power to protect it. It's why we are really appreciative of the National Trust, which own a quarter (742 miles) of the 3,000-mile coastline of England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Alongside the South West Coast Path (England's longest nature trail), it ensures that we continue to have access to endless swim spots along the 300 miles of the Cornish coast. And it's why we don't mind throwing a few quid into a car park machine.

Of course, we have a responsibility to respect the places we are walking and swimming through, and also to educate the next generation to value the privilege and fragility of nature. As the popularity of wild swimming has grown, there has been a bit of a backlash with people not wanting to share swim spots, like territorial surfers protecting their secret breaks. And there is a balance to be struck. The collapse of society's engagement with nature is happening simultaneously with the collapse of the natural world. It's why National Parks only promote some car parks and sacrifice certain 'honeypots' for the greater good, knowing that most people don't venture very far from their vehicles.

"The thought that most of our children will never swim among phosphorescent plankton at night, will never be startled by a salmon leaping, a dolphin breaching, the stoop of a peregrine, or the rustle of a grass snake is almost as sad as the thought that their children might not have the opportunity."

George Monbiot

When deciding what swim walks to include in this book, we also felt a responsibility to ensure we weren't adversely impacting on nature by sending people to sensitive and fragile habitats. With this in mind, we eliminated places where we thought the environmental impact may be too great, including delicate riverbanks. We also excluded some quite well known spots because the Cornwall Wildlife Trust and other organisations felt that wild swimming could have an adverse effect on the wildlife in that area. Many of the swims are from beaches and rocky outcrops, or harbours and quays where you can enter the water without damaging the banks. We have also updated our Wild Swimming Code in this book, so we can all pledge to protect the very environment we enjoy so much.

By not just driving directly to swim spots, but including circular walks as well, we can all enjoy the nature around us, whilst entering the landscape ourselves. We have also learnt about the natural and social history of Cornwall and all sorts of fascinating history along the way. With this in mind, we hope this won't just function as a guide book but also prove to be an enjoyable and inspiring read while you are sitting by the fireside or in the bath on a cold winter's night, dreaming about summer swimming adventures. Cornwall is a land that has inspired countless shanty singers and writers, artists and film makers. And it has inspired us to write this, our love letter to Cornwall.

See you in the water, dreckly!

Walk 1

NORTHCOTT MOUTH AND BUDE CIRCULAR

A cliff-top walk that leads to the sea pools of Bude, before returning along the sands at low tide, pausing to swim wherever takes your fancy.

This walk very much relies on setting off two hours before low tide, so you are able to swim in the sea pools safely and walk along the beach without being cut off. We'd hate for the coastguard to have to rescue anyone floating out at sea, clutching a copy of this book above their head. After leaving the National Trust car park at Northcott Mouth ❶, the walk joins the coast path for some impressive views down onto the beach below. The area below Maer Cliff/Maer Downs has been designated an SSSI for the amazing rock formations you will see.

On the cliffs and foreshore you will be able to spot alternating shales, mudstones and siltstones, with beds of sandstone between them. Geologists refer to this as the Bude Formation, moulded on what were then ocean beds during the Carboniferous period, around 300 million years ago. These layers, or strata, were then compressed by movements during a period known as the Variscan Orogeny, when huge pressure created the dramatic patterns you can see today. It's definitely not advisable to go too close to the edge though, as there has been a significant level of rock fall here in recent years.

'Bude, dude' has become known as a bit of a surfer's paradise, and the town's bodacious beaches will soon come into view. First there's Crooklets Beach ❷, then Middle Beach, then Summerleaze Beach and finally Breakwater Beach in the distance. You should also be able to spot the 'Pepper Pot' tower up on the cliffs beyond, which is where we will be walking to after a couple of refreshing swim stops along the way. The path drops down to pass the colourful beach huts and beach concessions, as well as The 2 Minute Charity Shop, another amazing enterprise from the people behind The 2

INFORMATION

DISTANCE: 4 miles.
TIME: 4 hours, setting off 2 hours before low tide.
MAP: Annoyingly the walk straddles two OS Explorer maps, 111 Bude, Boscastle and Tintagel, and 126 Clovelly and Hartland. Alternatively use OS Landranger 190 Bude and Clovelly, or A–Z SW Coastpath North Cornwall Adventure Atlas.
START POINT: Northcott Mouth NT car park, SS 203 084, EX23 9ED.
END POINT: Northcott Mouth National Trust car park.
PUBLIC TRANSPORT: Bude is well served by buses: routes include the 6 from Exeter, 12 from Plymouth and Launceston and 95 from Truro.
SWIMMING: Bude Seawater Pool (SS 202 068), Tommy's Pit (SS 200 065), Maer High Cliff Beach (SS 200 077), Northcott Mouth (SS 201 084).
PLACES OF INTEREST: The Pepper Pot, Bude Canal, Bude Castle Heritage Centre.
REFRESHMENTS: Life's a Beach (LAB) is a daytime café, nighttime bistro at Summerleaze Beach, serving great seafood (EX23 8HN, 01288 355222). Rustic Tea Gardens at Northcott Mouth (EX23 9ED, 07789 283681).
EASIER ACCESS: Summerleaze (beach wheelchair hire) and Crooklets Beach are near car parks. Steps lead down to the Sea Pool and it's an uneven walk across the breakwater to Tommy's Pit.
NEARBY SWIM SPOTS: Widemouth Bay is a mile-long beach with lots of rockpools. Crackington Haven is beautiful, with fine high-tide swimming.

Minute Beach Clean initiative. They even hire out retro wooden bodyboards, so people don't have to buy the plastic ones that travel halfway across the world before being abandoned after just one use.

Bude Sea Pool 3 will soon come into view, and it's definitely worth stopping for an invigorating dip here. It is one of the few tidal lidos left in the country and is unique in that the pool is actually built into the natural environment of the cliffs. It was constructed in the 1930s to provide a safe place to swim with the feeling of being in the sea, but away from the often-wild Atlantic surf. Half of the money was put up by the locally prominent Thynne family, and their generosity helped create what remains Bude's number one tourist attraction. Swimming here definitely feels much more of an adventure than in a traditional swimming pool.

The pool is used by 50,000 people every year, and supported by The Friends of Bude Sea Pool (FoBSP). They were set up when there was threat of closure and possible demolition following the loss of council funding, ran a successful Save our Sea Pool campaign, and today help fund the three weeks of vital maintenance each year. Repairs to the sea walls and the removal of tonnes of sand and stone costs around £50,000 a year, so do consider making a donation when you are there.

The next swimming spot is a fascinating piece of social history. Walk towards the sea and the outcrop at the end of the breakwater. This is Barrel Rock, named after its beacon, a barrel on top of a metal pole that warns ships of the dangerous rock stretching out into the sea. The pole is actually the salvaged propeller shaft of the SS Belem, which was wrecked at Northcott Mouth in 1919. As you climb over the rocks you will discover Tommy's Pit 4, or more formally Sir Thomas's Pit, a magical pool that was built back in 1895.

The pool was funded by Sir Thomas Dyke Acland, 10th Baronet, whose philanthropic generosity financed several projects in Bude including the 'new' breakwater and the Pepper Pot tower. We will also be walking around a section of the Bude Harbour Canal, in which he was a shareholder. He was obviously very popular, with Tommy's Pit affectionately named after him.

Bude's first bathing pool, the Pit was originally reserved for gentlemen only – women were kept a safe distance away at Maer Ladies Bathing Beach, which is known as Crooklets Beach today. Bathers would pay the attendant tuppence to swim and were fined a further penny if they were caught swimming naked. Hence the limerick:

There once was a young man from Bude
Who fancied a dip in the nude
For a thruppenny bit
He could swim in Tom's Pit
Which included the fine for being rude!

The sea pool can only be found and used at lower tides, as at high tide there is a real risk of being smashed against the rocks or swept out to sea. With this in mind, Sir Thomas's son compiled some of the first ever tide timetables and placed a half-tide marker rock at the end of Coach Rock on Summerleaze Beach. You will also spot numbers on the wall at the sea end of the pool, which once marked the depth; don't take these as accurate today, because sand is being washed in and out all of the time. After doing a few mini-laps, you might want to also have a dip in Breakwater Beach, just off to the left. Although only a matter of metres away from popular Summerleaze Beach, it's usually deserted. Do bear in mind there is no lifeguard cover here, and there can be strong currents.

Continuing your walk across the breakwater you will pass Chapel Rock, where a chapel dedicated to

St Michael once stood. Apparently, it was originally occupied by a hermit who would keep a fire burning at this vantage point to guide mariners to safe haven. There is a staircase to the top, but we are about to walk much higher, up to the Pepper Pot 5 on Efford Down. It was built in 1835 by Sir Thomas Acland, as part of his series of ambitious development plans. He enlisted Plymouth architect George Wightwick to create the structure, which served the dual purpose of being a refuge for the coastguard and also an ornamental feature of the baronet's Efford Estate.

The Pepper Pot is modelled on the Temple of the Winds in Athens, and the views are outstanding: on a clear day you can see down towards Padstow to your left and Morwenstow and Lundy Island to the north. It stands at what is now known as Compass Point, since each side of the octagonal tower has one of the points of the compass carved in as a frieze. The tower was dismantled and rebuilt further inland around 1900, due to the eroding cliffs, and apparently it is now seven degrees out of alignment, just in case you were checking with your compass against it. There are plans afoot to move it again, due to further erosion, so perhaps this time they can correct the small mistake from the last century.

The walk now takes us back down towards the beach and the Bude Canal 6 and its unique sea lock. The canal was built in the 1920s to transport lime-rich sea sand inland to be used as manure on farms that suffered from acidic and unproductive soil. It was planned that other cargoes could include coal, slate, iron, bricks and timber, with farm produce also being exported. The canal was never a major success for the shareholders, although it did prove invaluable for the farms it was initially built to support. Trade declined dramatically when the railway reached Bude in 1998, with the canal closing just three years later. The Bude Canal Regeneration Project was set

up in 2006 and restored the first two miles of the waterway up to Helebridge.

We cross the lock to walk along the canal to Lower Wharf. The warehouses that would have supported the workings of the canal have today been transformed into funky eateries and craft shops. Even the canal itself is busy once more, although today the barges have been replaced with rowing boats, swan boats and VW Beetle-style pedalos. Beside the warehouses we pass Bude Castle Heritage Centre 7. This was the home of Victorian inventor Sir Goldsworthy Gurney, who managed an impressive engineering feat when he built his 'castle' on the shifting sand dunes.

Amongst his many inventions was a method of lighting for his home that used the injection of oxygen into an oil flame. This created an extremely bright light that was then reflected by a series of mirrors. So successful was the invention, known as Bude-Light, that it was used to illuminate Pall Mall, Trafalgar Square and the Houses of Parliament. His experiments with steam also helped power Stephenson's record-breaking rocket, while his other illuminating experiments led to the development of limelight, which was used in theatres and music halls across the globe.

Following the path past the conical Bude Light sculpture, created in 2000 to commemorate Gurney's invention, we turn left to cross Nanny Moore's Bridge 8, a packhorse bridge that dates back to at least the 18th century. Originally known as Town Bridge, the Grade II listed structure was renamed after Nanny Moore, who lived in one of the Levens Cottages next to it. She was a 'dipper' or bathing machine attendant, providing a valuable service for those women wanting to enter the sea with their modesty intact. Why a bridge was named after her seems lost in the sands of time, although we may assume it was because she was either lovely and highly respected, or a tyrant. We would like to think it was the former. The bridge is a prime spot to watch the annual duck race that takes place on Lifeboat Day over the August Bank Holiday weekend.

The walk follows Summerleaze Crescent and then drops back down onto the beach and below the seawater pool, to make your way below the cliffs back towards Northcott Mouth. It's a lovely walk at low tide, with the dramatically eroding cliffs towering above you on one side, and the roaring Atlantic Ocean on the other. The seemingly endless sand (the tidal range is 7 metres) is broken up by the rocky fingers of the Bude Formation. These upended strata provide plenty of rockpools to explore and places to hang your clothes before a dip. The water colour here is extraordinary, and it's a great place to play in the surf before continuing the walk back to Northcott Mouth. This beach is owned by the National Trust and marks the start of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty that continues right up to the Devon border.

If you have time, it's worth exploring the northern end of Northcott Mouth near Manachurch Point, to see if the wreck of the SS Belem is visible in the sand. The steamship ran aground in 1917, although thankfully all 33 men were safely rescued. The remains include the propeller shaft – a section of which was used for the beacon at Barrel Rock, next to Tommy's Pit – and the boilers.

It's then just a short walk back up to the car park, although we would highly recommend a stop at the Rustic Tea Gardens for a cream tea. Open between March and October, the tea garden has been run by Margaret Frost (and her mother Louise before her) since 1963. Many people make the bold claim that it's the best Cornish cream tea in the county and we would probably have to agree. Just remember, its jam first and then the cream. Obviously.

DIRECTIONS

1 Leave the car park and turn left onto the track. Go through the gate onto the coast path, with the sea on your right. Keep following it.
0.9 miles

2 You reach Crooklets Beach, where you can stop for a swim if you like. Stay on the coast path, around the rear of the beach, past the beach huts and concessions.
0.2 miles

3 Bude Sea Pool on your right is another potential swim stop. After your swim, head onto the beach and bear left towards a mast with a barrel on top and the causeway.
0.2 miles

4 Tommy's Pit is near the mast. Take a dip in the seawater pool and perhaps the little beach to the south. From the little beach, walk back to the causeway and turn right along it in the direction of the tower on the hillside. When you reach the end of the causeway, turn right to follow the coast path up.
0.3 miles

5 From the Pepper Pot, follow the path down to the right-hand side of the main beach and descend the steps onto the road. Follow the road about 150 metres then cross the lock gates.
0.2 miles

6 With the canal on your right, follow it inland towards the converted warehouses ahead. Bear left through the Wharf car park and walk along the road.
0.3 miles

7 You can divert off left to the Bude Castle Heritage Centre. Head back to the road and pass the conical fountain with flower beds on your left.
0.2 miles

8 Cross Nanny Moore's bridge, turn left along the road, then drop down onto the beach and walk to the left of the sea pool. Walk along the beach all the way back to Northcott Mouth, stopping for swims wherever takes your fancy. Follow the path in front of the Bude Castle Heritage Centre on your left and then the conical sculpture on your right. Turn left at the road and follow it to the footbridge.
1.8 miles