



Branscombe West Cliff and beach chalets

Branscombe is a seaside beauty spot on the south-Devon coast mid-way between Sidmouth and Seaton. It is reached by minor roads from the A3052.

Branscombe beach is in the care of the National Trust. It is in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and part of the Dorset and East Devon Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site. The South-West Coast Path runs along the cliffs.

TARGET SPECIES
Wood Whites, which may be seen from the beach. Inland, behind the cliffs, you should find many other mainly grassland species.

Branscombe was front-page news in January 2007. A huge container ship was disabled by rough weather and taken under tow to Portland for repairs. When it appeared that safety could not be reached, the ship was beached at Branscombe. Wreckage from some of the containers was washed-up along the beach and attracted a vast number of souvenir hunters. The last of the ship-wreck was only removed in 2009 when the 14 ton ship's anchor was left behind on Branscombe beach as a permanent memorial.

The south Devon cliffs near Branscombe have long been an attraction for butterfly seekers because they are the unlikely home of a colony of Wood White butterflies.

Precisely why the cliffs here prove hospitable to Wood Whites is not known, but the scrubby undercliff areas east and west of Branscombe mouth have been used by this species for a very long time. And Wood Whites are also found along the coast in both directions, as far as the grassy undercliffs at Weston Mouth (to the west) and at Seaton at the bottom of Haven Cliff (to the east).

I have not been here at the right time of year, but have been told by those who have been that you would be unlucky not to see some Wood Whites if you go on a fine day between mid-May and early June. Your number of sightings will probably be in single figures, but try walking along the beach and scanning the hillside both sides of Branscombe Mouth. Go as far west as the last beach chalet. Then try going east to the last chalet on that side and this time further beyond, checking particularly the hollow area past the last chalet. If the tide is out, and you have the energy, you can walk along the beach towards Sidmouth, as far as Weston Mouth (about 3 miles) and look from the beach at the grassy faces under Dunscombe Cliffs. Allow enough time to get back. Another plan is to drive or cycle to Seaton and look from the pathway under Haven Cliff, which is east of the mouth of the Axe. Caution: I have been told that grassland at the base of all these cliffs is breeding ground for sheep ticks, so it is advisable to protect your feet and ankles and check carefully after returning. Should you be unlucky enough to have been bitten by a tick, do seek medical advice straight away.

Why are there Wood Whites by the seaside here? We know that their favoured habitats are normally open, sunny rides in dense woodland, quite different from the seaside at Branscombe. But is there really such a huge difference? The south-facing cliffs here are topped by quite dense woods. Perhaps Wood Whites at Branscombe treat their undercliffs, which are open to the sunshine, as if they were a sunny woodland ride. That is purely my speculation, but it seems a possible explanation? Is there a better one?

The exposed cliffs from Exmouth to Studland Bay provide a complete picture of geological rock formation through the Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous periods of geological time, stretching back an astonishing 250 million years. That is why they have been designated by UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) as a World Heritage Site. The layers of rock slope towards the east, with the oldest at the Exmouth (west) end and the youngest at Studland (to the east). At Branscombe, the principal layer of this geological cake, which gives the area its characteristic red cliffs, is red mudstone. This was originally red, sandy mud but under huge pressure and millions of years it has become a layered rock. Above it there are strata of greensand and chalk, which is why there is chalky downland on the top of the cliffs.

There is a municipal car park with toilets at Branscombe Mouth and a busy café, and there are two pubs in the village. One of these, the Mason's Arms, has a 19th century painting of an old gypsum mill. Gypsum was mined at Branscombe and used to manufacture plaster-of-paris and to spread on the fields to improve soil fertility. Water power from the streams that flow into the sea at Branscombe Mouth was used by the water-mill to crush gypsum. Another industry that once thrived here was lace-making. Although that has now also gone, the "Branscombe Point" style of lace-making is still practised by lace-makers round the world.



West Cliff and chalets



Anchor of the ship-wrecked Napoli



Branscombe beach looking east



Branscombe village



Branscombe church from West Cliff



Wood White (m), at Quoditch, Devon



Bluebells on the cliff top in May



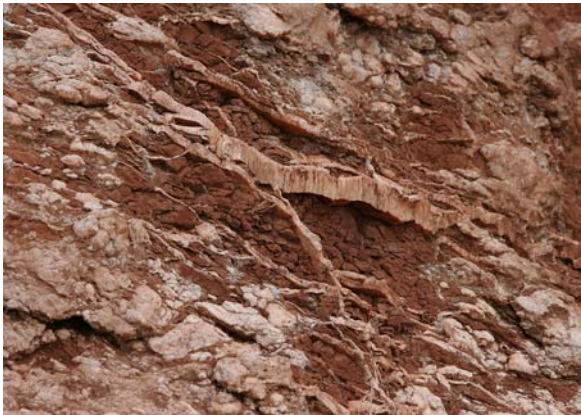
Fishing boat on Branscombe beach



Walk through West Cliff in May with wild garlic and bluebells



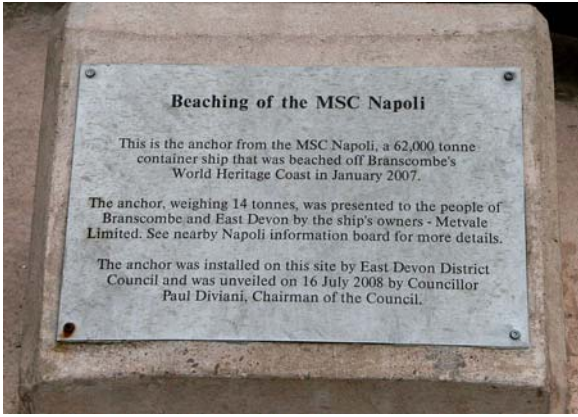
Sidmouth from Branscombe Head



Close-up of a section of the red mudstone cliffs at Branscombe



St Winifred's Church, Branscombe



Plaque commemorates the beaching of MSC Napoli in January 2007



West Cliff vegetation above the chalets



Red campion in the woods



Entrance to woods at West Cliff from the Sidmouth side



Wild garlic in the woods



Branscombe mouth

LOCATION

Explorer Map 115: Exmouth and Sidmouth and
Explorer Map 116: Lyme Regis and Bridport
(Branscombe is on the edge of Explorer 115)
Landranger (pink) Map 192: Exeter and Sidmouth
Parking at Branscombe Mouth is at SY207882

Branscombe is a tiny village mid-way between Sidmouth and Seaton. It can be reached by several minor roads which run south from the A352 Sidmouth to Lyme Regis road (which passes north of Seaton). All the minor roads are narrow and require care, but the road through Branscombe village is exceptionally narrow. The municipal car-park has ample parking with toilets and a licensed café. There are some disabled spaces, but the beach is shingle and so access is necessarily restricted. There is a hotel and there are two pubs in Branscombe.

Cautions: You need to be aware about the potential danger of falling rock – on no account climb on the cliff face – and of the danger of sheep ticks in grass at the base of the cliffs (see the comment above). Lastly, take care not to be caught by the rising tide!