

Double VISION

With a location and history that are inextricably linked, the North Devon villages of Lynton and Lynmouth offer Victorian seaside charm and the perfect base for exploring the Exmoor National Park, writes **Bob Chaundy**

There's nothing chocolate-box about Lynton. It has no quintessential village green or duck pond, its buildings are not even that old. Yet together with its twin village Lynmouth (the former lies less than 200m above the latter in a steep gorge and they are in practical terms synonymous), it commands one of the most spectacular settings in England. Perched on the northern edge of the Exmoor National Park, it offers visitors an enchanting combination of sweeping moorland and steep wooded cliffs that plunge into sheltered bays. The villages and their surrounds are a Mecca for ramblers. The

nearby Valley of the Rocks has a rugged beauty with its contrasting lush bracken and gorse-covered slopes and bare fossil-rich granite outcrops with names like The Devil's Cheese Ring and Rugged Jack. Exmoor ponies and feral goats roam here freely. Beyond, the Lyn rivers tumble through deep valleys in a series of small waterfalls, and meet at Lynmouth. This fact, as we shall see, was almost the village's undoing in 1952.

POET'S CORNER

It was the Victorians that made Lynton and Lynmouth. Not originally, of course, but there are a few buildings left that pre-date

the Victorian era. The area's remoteness largely isolated it from sightseers. From the earliest times, it was almost entirely confined to farming. In 1086, the population of Lynton and Lynmouth was 425. By 1801, it had only risen to 601. By the end of the 18th century, word began spreading of the region's natural beauty at the same time as the Napoleonic Wars were ravaging Europe, which prevented many of the wealthy gentry from making the European 'grand tour'. So many came here, among them the romantic poets Shelley, Wordsworth and Coleridge. Shelley honeymooned at Lynmouth with his bride Harriet Westbrook. The house he is said to

Here: the Torrs looking over the river mouth and Lynmouth harbour. Right: thrift grows among the jagged cliff tops at the Valley of the Rocks. Bottom right: the Victorian-built, water-powered cliff railway connects Lynton with Lynmouth during the summer months



GLEN LYN GORGE

See the power of Lynmouth's waters at the scene of the town's disastrous 1952 flood

To see the destructive power of the 1952 flood that subsumed Lynmouth it is possible to pay a visit to Glen Lyn Gorge on the banks of the West Lyn River, where you can take a riverside walk to see the boulder fields left behind by the flood waters, which have since been designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest. If you extend your walk further up the gorge this will take you past a series of waterfalls to a ravine where you can see the 1952 flood level mark.

Today, the powerful waters that rumble down the valley and once caused so much devastation have been harnessed to power turbines 77 metres below. This hydroelectric plant, along with a powerful water canon that fires water back into the river both form part of a Power of Water exhibition, showing how this natural resource could play a significant role in creating sustainable energy in the future, with displays illustrating how tidal power can be used.

Just a short walk away from the exhibition hall is the Lynmouth Lifeboat which was involved in a dramatic rescue in 1899 when the local lifeboat men hauled it 13 miles over land to Porlock to rescue the crew of *The Forrest Hall*, a ship foundering in the bad weather and stormy seas that prohibited the lifeboat launch at Lynmouth.

have stayed at, now known as Shelley's Cottage, still stands. The visit inspired his epic poem *Queen Mab*:

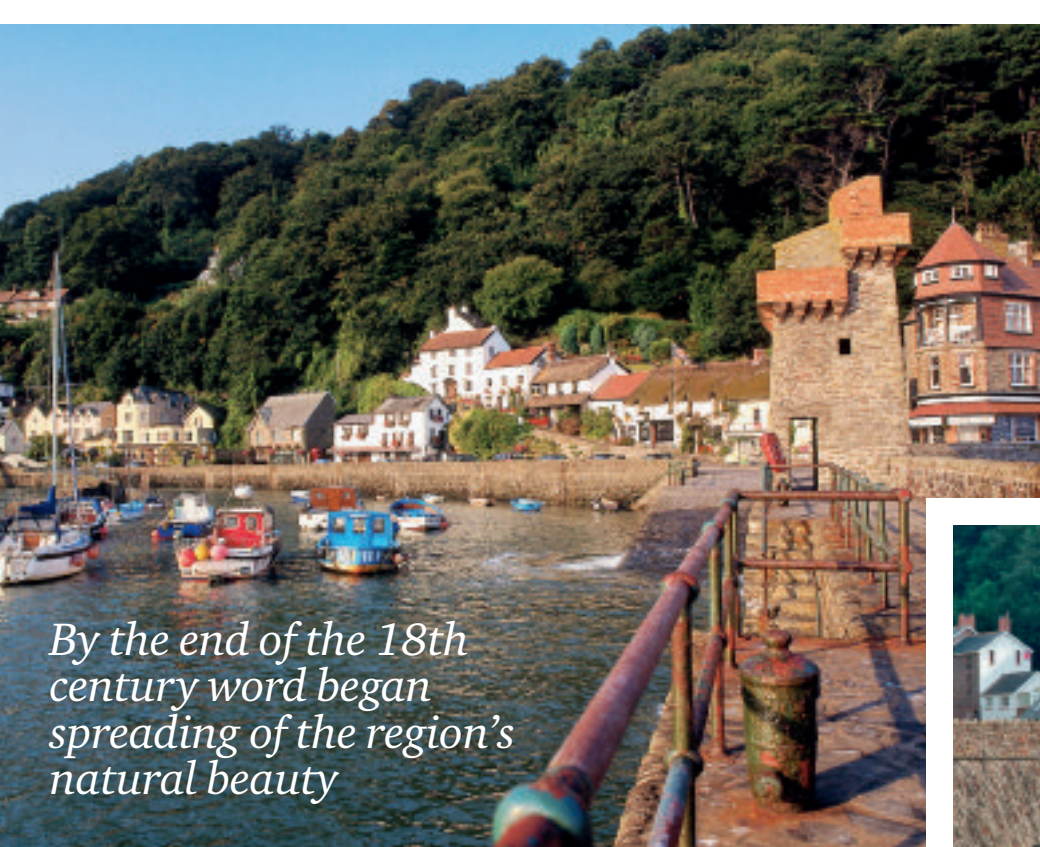
'Hark! Whence the rushing sound?
'Tis like the wondrous strain
That round a lonely ruin swells.'

The author RD Blackmore's famous romantic drama *Lorna Doone* was set in Exmoor, and he wrote part of it in Lynmouth's Rising Sun Hotel, a former 'herring house', where herring plucked from the Bristol Channel were dried and smoked. The herring trade finished in the late 1700s when fish stocks declined.

The increasing numbers of tourists needed places to stay. There was only one small public house, The Crown Inn, at the foot of Lynton's Sinai Hill, a hill so steep that walking up it feels like you're climbing a ladder. A local man, William Litson, realised the commercial opportunities and quickly built two

additional inns, The Globe and The Valley of the Rocks Hotel. Many others followed. In the meantime, the wealthy began building holiday homes. They included the banker Samuel Cootes and, most importantly, Sir George Newnes, publisher of the Sherlock Holmes books, *Strand Magazine* and *Titbits*. Newnes paid for the construction of the spectacular Cliff Railway, the longest in Britain and one of the major attractions of Lynton and Lynmouth. Prior to this packhorses and donkeys were required to ferry goods and people up the steep gradient that separates the twin villages. For a burgeoning tourist





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trade, this was a real problem. The Cliff Railway, completed in 1890, solved it. The railway works on a water balance system and is the only one in the world that uses a natural water supply. It has worked continuously since it opened, commands a dramatic view and, much to the relief of the countless visitors who use it, has a 100 per cent safety record.

Newnes also gave Lynton its town hall that stands in the centre of the village and which contains the Tourist Information Office. It's a curious mixture of Gothic, Tudor and 'English Manorial' architectural styles, reflecting the concept of his *Titbits* magazine. Now Grade II-listed, it is regarded as one of the top 10 town halls in Britain. Next door is a former Methodist church, which has since been reinvented as an arts and crafts centre.

In Market Street stands Lynton's oldest complete building – a Grade II-listed 17th-century cottage that houses the Lyn and Exmoor Museum. The museum illustrates facets of Lynton's history and is said to be haunted.

Above: Lynmouth is known as Devon's 'Little Switzerland' owing to its hilly nature. Above right: the Lyn & Exmoor Museum displays domestic, agricultural and personal history. Right: River Lyn, a scene of calamity in August 1952



The earliest part of the parish church of St Mary the Virgin on nearby Church Hill dates back to Norman times. It was from here that the BBC broadcast a memorial service to the nation in September 1952 to those who died in Britain's biggest river flood disaster.

TROUBLED WATERS

The flood is Lynmouth's biggest claim to fame and attracts many visitors and school trips to the village. On the night of 15 August 1952 after days of torrential rain, the two swollen rivers, the East and West Lyn, hurtled into Lynmouth causing utter devastation in their wake. Sixty buildings, including houses, cottages, shops and hotels, were swept away killing 34 people.

The story is told in the Lynmouth Flood Memorial Hall by the harbour. As well as blown-up facsimiles of newspaper accounts of the tragedy, it contains a model of the village as it stood before the fatal flood took place.

The flood reinforced an existing strong sense of community among the 2,000 villagers. The beaches are all rocky which deters bucket and spade holidaymakers, and tight planning regulations together with the distance from major centres have prevented large-scale commercial development. As a result, Lynton and Lynmouth have remained largely untouched for the last century, giving them an enduring old world seaside charm that is hard to resist. **db**

PLANNING YOUR VISIT



GETTING THERE: By road, follow the A399 from Ilfracombe and Combe Martin, or head north from the A361, then take the A39 towards Lynton and Lynmouth. By bus there are a number of services from nearby towns, including Barnstaple, Ilfracombe and Combe Martin. Alternatively, you could always

arrive on foot as the South-West Coast Path runs through Lynton and Lynmouth. **WHERE TO STAY:** Set in five acres of land overlooking Lynmouth, The Tors Hotel is just a five-minute walk from the heart of the village. Double rooms start from £120 on a bed and breakfast basis. Tel: 01598 753 236.

www.torshotellynmouth.co.uk **WHERE TO EAT:** Le Bistro in Lynmouth serves a menu of home cooked classics with a French twist using locally sourced ingredients. Book early to guarantee a table. Tel: 01598 753 302. www.lebistrolynmouth.co.uk **DON'T MISS:** a water-powered ride up the sheer hill

separating the two villages on board the Cliff Railway. **MORE INFORMATION:** The Lynton and Lynmouth Tourist Information office in Lynton's Town Hall has a wealth of information on the attractions to be found across Exmoor National Park. Tel: 01598 752 225. www.lynton-lynmouth-tourism.co.uk