



# old world meets new age

Totnes is one of Britain's oldest towns. It has survived centuries of change without losing its character, and remains a busy town packed with interest.

## old world charm

Totnes was established as a fortified town in the 10th century. It occupies an important position as the lowest point on the River Dart where the river can be crossed, and was an important port where skins and tin were exported.

When the Normans invaded in 1066, the town was given to one of the invaders, Judhael, who built walls around the town and built a castle. Over the next few hundred years the town enjoyed great wealth from weaving and selling high-quality cloth, from building ships and from quarrying stone. By the 16th century, Totnes was the second richest town in Devon, and wealthy businessmen built some of the finest town houses in England in the town. Unfortunately for the businessmen, the town's fortunes declined rapidly. Luckily for the town, the lack of money meant that the town was not modernised and remains one of the most important examples of a Tudor town in the whole of Britain.

The loss of trade did not innovation: Charles Babbage, who was schooled at

Totnes, invented the first calculating computer in 1822 and went on to design the system that makes lighthouses flash.

## new age spirit

Totnes has a reputation as a haven for 'new age' thinking and hippy culture. The town is home to lots of people who follow unconventional ways of life, embracing everything from pagan religions to vegan diets. There are also many environmental campaigners and peace activists. This mix of cultures is reflected in the town, with lots of shops selling 'alternative' goods such as 'healing' crystals, homœopathic medicines and self-help books and charms. You will probably see people dressed in rather odd clothes too! Totnes was an early advocate of wholefoods and organic produce, and there are several good shops and cafés selling natural foods and products.

## individuality

Totnes has mostly avoided the erosion of its shops by the national chains you can find anywhere in Britain and it is still possible to buy almost anything you need in the town. There are lots of unique stores, with a mix of everyday necessities and ideal gifts, local food, including unusual cheeses, sweets and organic produce, and there are fashionable clothes too: you can even get made-to-measure shoes.

## explore

Don't be put off by the steep main street! Totnes is a great town to explore on foot. You will need to keep your eyes peeled to spot all its features.

If you come to Totnes by bus, you will alight next to the Royal Seven Stars Hotel (1). The hotel was once an important stopping point for coaches to London, and has been here since the 15th century. From this point you can go up the town's main street, which is full of interesting and useful shops.

About half-way up Fore Street, on the right you can find a rather insignificant-looking rock marked as the 'Brutus Stone' (2). It used to be believed that this stone was the first place that a man landed in Britain. The story goes that Brutus, fleeing from the Trojan wars, landed in Totnes and said, "Here I sit and here I rest, and this town shall be called Totnes." He then went on to



Old timber warehouses

found the British nation. Unfortunately it is more likely that the stone has come from the French word 'bruit', meaning noise, because this has always been the place where important announcements have been made.

The most obvious feature of Totnes is the clock over the road. This is the East Gate (3), and marks the entrance to the original town. The clock and arch were re-built in 1990 after a fire.

Just under the arch, on the right, are some steps. Go up these steps. You are now on the old Ramparts, built between 1066 and 1089 to protect the town. Look out for a window on one of the houses which offers a glimpse into the past (4). At the end of the path is the Guildhall (5), built in 1553. It has been used for many things, including a prison and a school. It is now used for Council meetings, but you can look inside on most days.

The church (6) next to the Guildhall is a typical example. It was built during a period when communities competed to build the best churches. The 'exotic' red stone outside and magnificently carved screen inside were a statement of the town's wealth and faith when the church of St Mary was built.

Further up the main street you will find two rows of unusual buildings. The houses over-hang the shops and are

supported on pillars, which form a sheltered 'colonnade' on each side of the road. This was a clever trick to allow the houses to be made bigger without blocking the pavements! It had the useful side-effect of giving a shaded area where perishable foods such as meat and milk could be sold. This is why the shops on the church side are called the 'Butterwalk' (7) and the shops on the other side the 'Poultry Walk'.

Walk down the road next to the Barrel House bar. This will take you to the castle (8), which is one of the best examples of a motte-and-bailey (hill and fence) castle in Britain. The hill was man-made, and the castle is built from stone made of volcanic ash – Devon was once full of volcanoes. From the top of the castle you can see the whole town and many miles around.

When you walk back to the main street, don't be tempted to go back down hill. Turn right and explore the 'Narrows', which has many more interesting shops and cafes. These include Grey's Dining Room, the very model of an English tea shop which serves a huge range of teas and mouth-watering cakes, and Willow, a popular vegetarian restaurant.

If you visit on a Friday or Saturday you can visit the open-air market in the Market Square (9) when you come

back, which is a great place to pick up a bargain.

As you walk back down hill, take a look at the buildings. Most of the buildings are from the 15th century, but were covered up in the 18th and 19th centuries to make them look more modern, and the large windows are a typical feature of this period. Many houses in Totnes are covered in slates, sometimes arranged in attractive patterns. This was a cheap-and-cheerful way to cover up the old wooden buildings. Some were covered with extraordinary plasterwork, including 26 and 28 High Street (10), which feature fake columns, stones and colourful faces! The fascinating Museum (11), by contrast, has retained its Tudor style, with exposed woodwork and plastered walls, plus strange carved figures.

Next to the Anne of Cleves café you can see a tiny lane, which leads to lots of houses, built behind the main street to fill as much space as possible. A little further on is the red brick Mansion (12) which has a cheap café.

Set back a little way from Fore Street is the Gothic House (13), an unusual house which has a footpath running right through it!

At the bottom of the town is The Plains, which features a memorial (14) to another famous townsman, William Wills. He tried to make the first crossing of Australia from south to north, and is believed to have succeeded. However, he died on the return journey. You, however, have survived, and are now close to where we began. Enjoy the shops on the plains or take a stroll on Vire Island across the town's bridge before heading home.

*BUS: Stagecoach 200 or X45 (covered by bus passes), or First X80/X81*

