

The Tunnels of Love

Ilfracombe's Tunnels Beaches are now a prime wedding venue, as GILL HEAVENS discovers



The idyllic setting for a wedding

There is nothing new about the Tunnels Beaches in Ilfracombe; in fact they have been a tourist attraction for almost two centuries. What is new is that over the last few years The Tunnels have been given a new lease of life and been transported, in all the best possible ways, into the 21st century.

At the beginning of the 19th century Ilfracombe was becoming a fashionable holiday destination and swimming was an increasingly popular pastime. The stunning Crewkhorne Cove would make an ideal bathing spot if only access could be improved. This was no simple undertaking, several tunnels needed to be carved through the North Devon cliff to allow passage to the bay below. So with typical 19th century resolve hundreds of Welsh miners were imported to excavate six tunnels and construct three separate bathing pools. The cove was renamed Tunnels Beaches and our hero was born.

The rocky coast in this part of Devon has excellent water quality; the steep cliffs act as a barrier to contamination, the result

being unrivalled water clarity. There is excellent rock pooling in this area and perfect conditions for kayakers. It is also a wildlife hot spot with peregrines, porpoises and seals. The surviving tidal pool, refreshed by the sea twice daily, provides a safe haven for young children and is also ideal for adult swimming.

Fast forward two centuries and we have a similar tale of enterprise. Jamie and Zoe McLintock purchased the beaches from Zoe's parents in 2001; including a beach shop, a bathhouse in need of renovation and storage sheds. This was not as reckless as it might sound; they had some favourable talents to bring to this daunting project. The tunnels had been in Zoe's family for two generations and she is a trained graphic designer, Jamie has a business degree and worked as a marketing consultant. Most importantly they had enthusiasm and could see the potential.

It all started positively, the McLintock's first full season was a sunny one; and then the rain began.

After several wet summers they realised that in order to survive they would have to diversify and they set about creating the Courtyard Building. The brief was to create somewhere for children to play in a safe environment and for adults to get a decent meal in pleasant surroundings, indoors and out. Over the winter of 2007/2008 they built the beautiful weather boarded oak-framed building, which certainly fulfils the brief, guarded by a spectacular pirate play ship.

There was more change to come. In 2010



Above: Mixed bathing was not introduced until 1905
Left: The entertaining Professor Parker



The bespoke wedding venue

the construction of the bespoke wedding venue commenced, in a prime position overlooking the Men's Beach. This new facility, with its curved design elegantly embracing the cliff behind, is cantilevered to preserve the spectacular view. Located in the arms of a tranquil bay, with gourmet barbeques and designer deckchairs; secluded except for the odd bull seal attracted by the music provided by an integral sound system. It is not hard to understand why this venue is proving so popular. What is ironic is that a place originally so intent on keeping the sexes apart - mixed bathing was not introduced until 1905 - is now a prime marriage location!

In 1836 the Ilfracombe Sea Bathing Company built a bathhouse for the local population, fed from the bay below by use of a wood fired boiler. Bathing in sea water was encouraged at this time, mainly for reasons of health and hygiene as opposed to pleasure (the Victorians seldom encouraged pleasure!) The obvious next step was to renovate this building. So under the watchful eye of the Listed

Buildings Officer, Zoe and Jamie have created a characterful nine bedroom house for both wedding guests and private use.

Jamie has spent many hours researching the site's history including the antics of Professor Harry Parker. A champion swimmer and eccentric, he gave exhibitions of "ornamental swimming" in the 1890's. Harry Parker Junior's

'Harry Parker Junior's programme included imitating an octopus, smoking under water and submerged revolver shooting'

programme included imitating an octopus, smoking under water and submerged revolver shooting, all rounded off with a little escapology.

The Tunnels are steeped in history, timelessly beautiful, sensitively developed, with something for everyone to enjoy whatever our weather may throw at us. ■

Gentlemen of The Press

A correspondent complains of an indecent intrusion perpetrated one day last week on the ladies' bathing cove at the Tunnels, by two men, during the prescribed hours. The persons referred to swam round the points, and not only mounted the rocks but plunged into the basin while the female bathers were engaged in their ablutions. **North Devon Journal 22 September 1859**

The ladies' bathing place is a perfect model. It is a capacious bay, approached only by tunnels through the rocks, at the mouth of which watchful guardians warn off all of the other sex. The naiads there paddle or dive, or swim, or disport themselves as they please. No mud discolours the water, no nasty waves tumble their dresses; there are no treacherous deeps, and there are no impertinent gazers.

North Devon Journal 13 August 1863

A word must also be said for the lessee of the beaches, but, who is there that has paid a visit to Ilfracombe and does not know Professor Parker, the winner of over a hundred and fifty cups and medals? He is well known as the "Amphibious", and his aquatic performances at the Tunnels are the talk of all those who witness them. The visit to the Tunnels should certainly be included in the programme of every visitor to Ilfracombe.

Ilfracombe Gazette & Observer, Arrival list & Advertiser, 24 July 1903

Vital Statistics

Work started in 1832 and took two years to complete.

The Welsh miners were paid 8d (3.5p) daily

In 1832 it cost 8/- (40p) to travel on deck by steamer from Bristol to Ilfracombe

A hammer head shark, captured in 1865, measured 13ft 7in in length (4.15m)

The cost of a swimming lesson with Professor Parker was 2/- (10p)

The Tunnels was voted 3rd best rock pooling beach by BBC Wildlife Magazine

It took 28 hours to travel from London to Barnstaple in the 1830's

In August 2013 they performed 29 weddings in 31 days!

The total length of the tunnels is 160m

Nine hundred tonnes of soil was moved to build the Courtyard Building