

# Ilfracombe

The ladies' beach  
with its tidal pool



## *Life at the end of the Tunnel*

**Neville Stanikk** discovers why the bugler's job at Tunnels Beaches was so popular, and muses on the prospect of 'fancy swimming'





**W**hen Jamie and Zoe McIntock wanted to find a way to make a living in their native North Devon, they decided on a novel solution – to buy a beach. Admittedly, it helped that Zoe’s grandfather owned the beach, but although it was up for sale, he didn’t want to sell it to them. This may have been because, at that time (in 2001), the Tunnels Beaches in Ilfracombe had become basically a tunnel, with an admission price, to beaches that only the locals knew about. And the only advertising ploy was to put flyers under windscreen wipers whenever anyone had the time to do a tour of Ilfracombe’s car parks. As Zoe’s grandfather said: “You won’t be able to afford to advertise. We never have!” Even now,

many people in neighbouring Barnstaple, let alone further afield, are unaware of the beaches.

But thanks to Jamie and Zoe’s hard work, and their backgrounds in graphics and marketing, both aspects are changing. Their distinctive blue and white corporate identity crops up wherever local attractions are advertised and they have worked tirelessly to get the beaches better known on both a local and a national level. The irony, though, is that at one time the Tunnels Beaches were the focus of Ilfracombe – they were the reason the town existed.

Ilfracombe is basically on a steep hillside running down to the sea, but a stream has cut a valley in this hill, parallel to the coast. The outermost side of the valley is a tall, thin spine, its seaward side





**Above** The gentlemen's beach in the foreground; the ladies' with the tidal pool behind  
**Inset** Professor Parker, proponent of 'fancy swimming'

comprising steep cliffs with beaches below.

When sea bathing first became popular at the beginning of the 19th century, ladies would bathe at Wilder's Mouth beach (below the current Landmark Theatre) and gentlemen would be boated round the corner, to the left. Obviously, a tunnel straight through the cliff to the beaches would allow much easier access

and so, in 1823, the aptly named surgeon Dr Thomas Stabb, together with six others, formed the Ilfracombe Sea Bathing Company and dug out the first tunnel. They also built two large tidal pools to allow segregated bathing, with a bugler sitting on the rocks in between to warn of any unwelcome incursions by men onto the women's beach. Presumably, the job of bugler was much sought after.

In 1836, the tunnel entrance gained a heated seawater bath-house which, although currently unused, still stands as the most obvious 'front door' to the beaches.

Thirty years later, the railway had arrived and steamships called daily at Ilfracombe. The Tunnels Beaches became even more popular when rock-pooling became a national interest and the naturalist William Henry Gosse, the founder of the world's first aquarium, spent several summers at Ilfracombe discovering half a dozen new species in the beaches' rockpools. Thereafter, the Tunnels' leading light was

the National Swimming Champion, Professor H Parker, 'winner of 150 prizes in swimming', who advertised 'Diving and Fancy Swimming Taught'. The mind boggles...

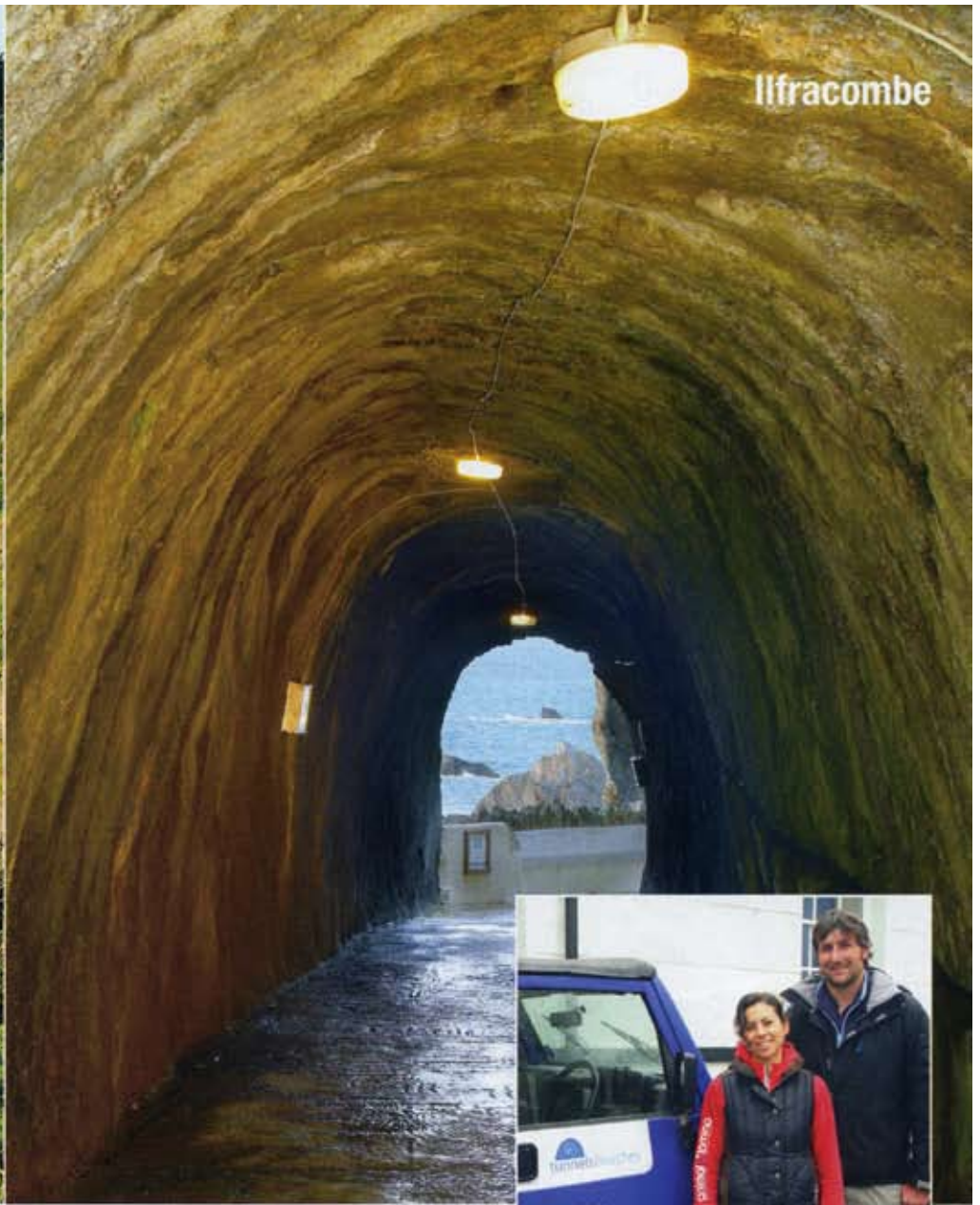
Today the McLintocks have completely refurbished not just the facilities, with an indoor and outdoor café and a children's play area, but have made it into a living museum with fascinating displays of the beaches' history.

"After people have paid their £1.50 entrance fee," Jamie said, "some of them see the old sign which states that entrance is 3d for adults and 1d for children, and they try to make a light-hearted attempt to get most of their money back. So I point out that the sign was written in 1901 and that 3d then would be worth £5.96 now – so, actually it's quite a bargain!"

Ilfracombe's focus has moved down to the harbour over the years and it's easy to miss the Tunnels Beaches as you head that way. From the Landmark Theatre's car park very little is visible and not much more can be seen from the Seven Tors cliffs the other side, so you do wonder quite how much can be tucked in there.

The answer is, lots. I suggested to Jamie that it was a bit Tardis-like, this small Victorian entrance with the cliff face and tunnel behind, and he agreed. "But as you walk down the tunnel and the bright light grows, you realise you're emerging on to a wonderful sunlit beach with a spectacular view of Bull Point and Lundy. People come here not





knowing what to expect, some even saying they won't like it, and emerge eulogising about it. Because the beaches are sheltered by arms of rock and there's no fine sand, the water can be incredibly clear. People have said to me that it's like the Greek Islands."

With visitor numbers between 100 per day at the start of the season and 2,000 in mid-August, Jamie has noticed that not everyone comes for the beach. "Many people come here, visit the café, read all the displays, see the tunnels and admire the beaches and go away well satisfied without swimming or even sitting on the beach." This is a testament to the McLintocks' desire to make as much as they can of their acquisition and their belief that it's a genuinely interesting site.

Only the Ladies' Pool remains, but Jamie has plans not just for the restoration of the Gentlemen's Pool but of the bath-house at the entrance, with its heated seawater pool, and also for more indoor space to accommodate the growing numbers of visitors and school parties who come, even on wet days.

I suspect that what would make him happiest, though, would be visitors considering that no trip to North Devon, let alone Ilfracombe, was worth it without visiting the Tunnels Beaches, just as they did almost 200 years ago. □

For more information, ☎01271 879882, website: [www.tunnelsbeaches.co.uk](http://www.tunnelsbeaches.co.uk).

OLD PHOTOS: COURTESY OF JAMIE MCINTOCK

**Above the tunnel dug in 1823**  
**Inset Zoe and Jamie McLintock, current owners of the beaches**  
**This picture Bathing in earlier days**

PHOTOS: NEVILLE STUBBS

