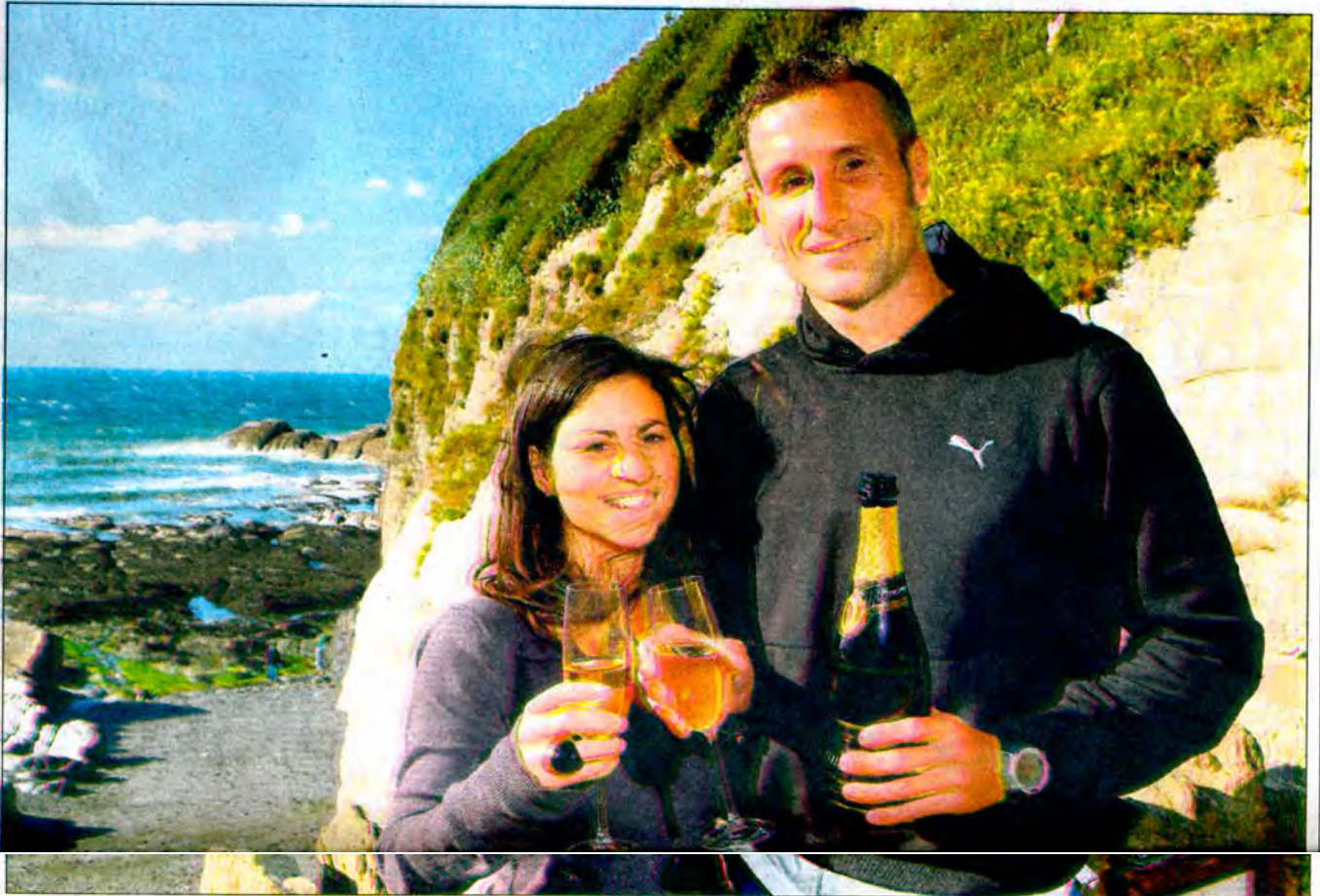


Tunnels development will mean year-round tourism opportunity



■ DELIGHTED: Jamie and Zoe McIntock celebrate getting planning permission.

Photo Mike Southon 07099403

By **KATE HELYER**

khelyer@c-dm.co.uk

PLANS for the Tunnels Beaches have finally been given the green light, sending out a "positive message to other tourism providers" that they, too, can maximise the potential of their businesses in Ilfracombe.

Taking almost a year, the drawn-out planning process involved a site visit with a boat trip along the coast for councillors, deferred decisions and a special meeting.

It finally came to a close when North Devon district planners gave the nod to plans for toilets, changing rooms and tourist accommodation inside the entrance to the Tunnels Beaches.

Delighted owners Jamie and Zoe McIntock said work would start immediately on the town-side development of a visitor centre, indoor children's play area, cafe and bar, so that the attraction could be open in time for Easter next year.

They had feared that without approval for the second stage, this first stage would also falter. Jamie said: "As from next Easter, we will be open as an all-year-round attraction."

He said that this was the argument that helped to sway planners.

"We already attract thousands of visitors during the summer season, so imagine how many more tens of thousands we could attract throughout the year.

"Not only is this good news for us, but it sends out a positive message to businesses in Ilfracombe that the bias has been lifted and they can develop for the good of the town."

The McIntocks received support from Ilfracombe Town Council and North Devon Marketing Bureau in their bid for the toilets, changing rooms and accommodation building.

But despite having approved the visitor attraction on the town side of the Tunnels, planning officers from the district council

recommended refusal for the second stage of the development on the grounds of the visual impact.

But Mr McIntock pointed out that sympathetic materials would be used to blend with surrounding cliffs, the roof would be planted with generic species — and in addition, that the building could only be seen by people who were out at sea on a boat.

Martin Wickham from North Devon Marketing Bureau said: "This is absolutely brilliant news. I'm really pleased for Jamie and Zoe and for the tourism industry in Ilfracombe, because it's a really important attraction to North Devon and any support that can be provided to the Tunnels Beaches ought to be.

"Here is an example of a young couple investing their own time and money into making a really professional, excellent family attraction.

"It is not only a benefit to Ilfracombe but to the rest of North Devon as well."