



# Wandering as WATER

Start seeing the world from a fascinating new perspective, with the author of *Tarka the Otter* as your extraordinary example...

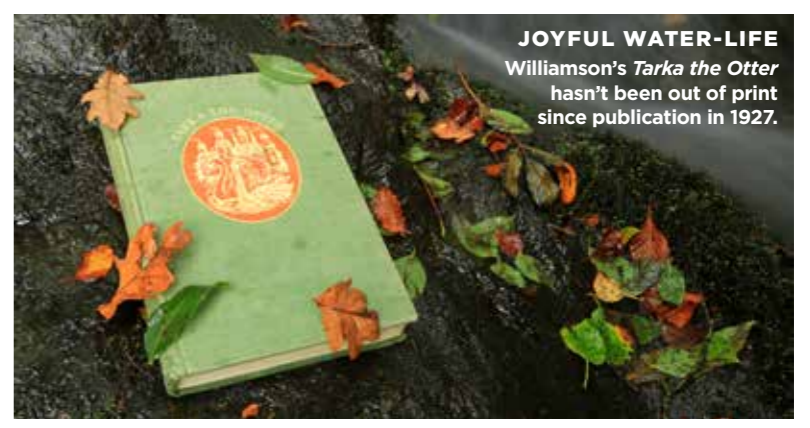
WORDS: JENNY WALTERS; PHOTOS: TOM BAILEY

**B**Y POOLS AND WATERFALLS and rilllets the river Taw grew, flowing under steep hills that towered high above. It washed the roots of its first tree, a willow thin and sparse of bloom, a soft tree wildered in that place of rocks and rain and harsh grey harrying winds.' That place of rocks and rain and steep hills is Dartmoor; the words written by Henry Williamson in his classic book *Tarka the Otter*.

I'm rock-hopping by the banks of the Taw near Belstone, along one of the two Devon rivers that star in Tarka's 'joyful water-life', published almost a century ago. Half an hour ago I was up on the chunky granite blocks that top Belstone Tor, looking across the wild moor towards Cranmere Pool where 'The river's life began without sound, in darkness of peat that was heather in ancient sunlight'. The view up there spanned south over miles of rusty tussocks, and far across the chessboard pastures north of Dartmoor too. It was glorious, but this walk isn't only about stirring panoramas. It's about looking really closely.

Few people looked as closely as Williamson. 'Good writers', he noted, 'are always observant. Their intelligence lies in their powers of observation, of eyesight... Their pages arrest and hold the attention because their detail is fresh, interesting, living.' While working on *Tarka*, which ranges hundreds of miles beside the rivers Taw and Torridge, Williamson said he 'walked every yard of the country described, once with a measuring tape'.

You can now trek this same country on the Tarka Trail, a 180-mile figure-of-eight route – on Dartmoor, Exmoor and the sandy dunescape of Braunton Burrows. I'm walking just over seven miles today, from the opening scenes of *Tarka*'s last year. Despite the distances he covered Williamson often wasn't walking at all. 'It is not he who runs, but rather he who remains still that is the best observer of wild creatures,' wrote Sir John Fortescue in the book's introduction, 'and it is easy to see that Mr Williamson has waited immovable through long hours of darkness and of



**JOYFUL WATER-LIFE**  
Williamson's *Tarka the Otter* hasn't been out of print since publication in 1927.

daylight, of fair weather and foul, with eyes, weary it may be, but always alert and vigilant.'

I find a flat-top rock and settle in to look. The chatter of the water down a bank of stones and the slow swirl of the pool below are mesmerising even if you don't spot any of the river's wildlife – the flash of a kingfisher, the bobbing yellow of a grey wagtail, or a chocolate-brown dipper walking underwater along the riverbed. If you're extraordinarily lucky, you might even glimpse an otter, or *Lutra Lutra*.

Otter numbers are far lower now than when Williamson walked here, although they are recovering. These sinuous mustelids can grow over four feet long from whisker to tail tip, and have lived in Britain since late glacial times. Hunted since the Middle Ages for their fur, and to protect fish stocks, it was intensive pesticide use in the 1950s that precipitated a decline to near extinction. They're now back hunting for eels (their favourite), other

Williamson was going to call his title character *Lutra*, but opted instead for *Tarka*, 'which was the name given to otters many years ago by men dwelling in hut circles on the moor. It means *Little Water Wanderer*, or, *Wandering as Water*'.

**RIVER VIEW**

Opposite page: Watching the Taw run through Belstone Cleave, and 'the old year's leaf-dust drifting like smoke under water.'

**ANIMATE GRANITE**

Belstone Tor is topped by chunks of granite: Williamson memorably described a badger as 'The grey waddler, animate granite.'



Belstone





“I splash into the shallows and **crouch down**; just a few feet lower and my **whole perspective alters.**”



**LOOK SHARP**

Clockwise from above: Taking an otter's eye view of the River Taw as it flows along the edge of Dartmoor; the Nine Maidens stone circle, each one a woman petrified for daring to dance on the Sabbath; a close look at Williamson's muse, *Lutra lutra*; and history in Belstone, with stocks on the village green; and the old telegraph office.



PHOTO: PRISMA, BY DUKAS PRESSEAGENTUR GMBH/LAMY

fish, worms, and even water birds on both of Tarka's rivers, but they are nocturnal, shy and nomadic – a male's territory can range along 12 miles of river. You're more likely to spot their tarry black sprint on a riverside boulder, or their round five-toed print pressed into the soft mud of the bank, than you are to hear their *yikking* or *tissing*.

Even Williamson found them elusive, and he walked with the Cheriton Otter Hunt as part of his research. It seems counterintuitive to join people trying to kill the wildlife you seek, but those hunting an animal have a deep understanding of its character and behaviour and they gave him his best chance to see and to study. And that hunt – and particularly Deadlock 'the great pied hound with the belving tongue' – looms large in the tale of Tarka.

For this is no sweet story like *The Wind in the Willows*. Many of its animal characters have names – Tarka, his mates Greymuzzle, White-tip and Marland Jimmy, Old Nog the heron – but they always act as wild creatures in a harsh, bloody, world. Williamson enriched his observations in the wild with reading – *The Life Story of an Otter* by JC Tregarthen was a particular inspiration – and by watching an orphan otter he helped rescue. His cat mothered it like a kitten, and later the cub would walk with Williamson down to the river at twilight. Until, that is, he caught his paw in a vicious gin-trap. Once freed, the otter was never seen again despite Williamson's desperate attempts to find it.

I chase the river down into the beautiful wooded gorge of Belstone Cleave, alert for any signs among the trees, many twisted as if grasping onto its steep slopes. Williamson didn't just look for otters in the landscape; he looked at the landscape *as if he were an otter*. Robert Macfarlane describes how Williamson 'crawled on hands and knees, squinting out sightlines, peering at close-up textures, working out what an otter's-eye view of West Gully or Dark Hams Wood or Horsey Marsh would be'. He often walked barefoot; often slept out under the stars.

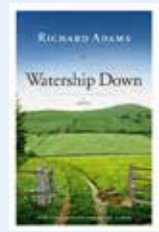
I splash into the shallows and crouch down; just a few feet lower and my whole perspective alters. Fallen leaves caught like shiny copper pennies on the mossy rocks spring into focus, and the mosaic



**IN THE SKY**

While Williamson's muse was water; another man's was the sky. Chelmsford office worker **JA Baker** spent a decade watching the Essex skies for peregrine falcons, recording every detail in 1600 pages of notes which he then distilled into a single, slim, extraordinary book. *The Peregrine* is a 'fusion of man and bird' and Robert Macfarlane likens reading it to taking LSD: 'His Essex is landscape on acid: super-saturations of colour, wheeling phantasmagoria, dimensions blown out and falling away, nature as hypernature.'

**WALK HERE:** Download a walk at Danbury, east of Chelmsford, at [lfto.com/bonusroutes](http://lfto.com/bonusroutes)



**IN THE EARTH**

**Richard Adams**, author of the famous rabbit story *Watership Down*, was one of many writers inspired by Williamson. The book began as a story he told his daughters

on long drives; they insisted he write it down. It's very different to Tarka; these rabbits talk, have imagination, and even extra-sensory perception, but much of their behaviour is natural, based on a book Adams studied called *The Private Life of the Rabbit*. And *Watership Down* is a real place, exactly as described, rising near Whitchurch in Hampshire where the author lived for much of his life.

**WALK HERE:** Download a *Watership Down* route at [lfto.com/bonusroutes](http://lfto.com/bonusroutes).

colours of the riverbed pebbles shaping the flow of the peat-tinted river, and how the running water has undercut the banks to expose knotted tree-roots. These hollows are where otters often hole up during daylight, in dens known as holts.

Williamson plunged in even deeper for his later book *Salar the Salmon*. It tells the long journey of Salar 'the leaper' from the deeps of the Atlantic Ocean up through Devon rivers to his ancestral spawning grounds. 'Before starting on the book,' he said, 'I had to get the 'feel' of the water. I spent altogether 5000 hours simply watching the pools and eddies until I 'knew' the stream.' He started a hatchery to watch the fish grow and read every new issue of *Salmon and Trout* magazine. He called this intense fishy immersion 'keeping 'under water'.

Williamson's fascination with the wild started young. He would cycle off from school to look for birds' eggs in Holme Park Woods in Kent, keeping

Best known for Tarka, Williamson wrote more than 50 books including his 15-volume, semi-autobiographical *Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*.

**TAKE TWO**

This is a walk of two halves: one up on the wild, bracing uplands of Belstone Tor, one down in the deep river cleave below, and both utterly beautiful.





### ◀ PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

'To me,' said Ted Hughes, 'he always resembled a fierce otter facially – that fierce, fiercely alert, bristly look.'

## “Try writing about a walk to find how it can both focus and expand your gaze.”

the details of all he saw in nature diaries. Even in the trenches of the First World War he noticed the animals in the murderous din: 'Partridges flying from gunfire; larks in the sky. The guns, the light, the great roar.' A private in the London Rifle Brigade, he was sent to Ploegsteert Wood on the Western Front, and witnessed the Christmas Truce of 1914 when English and German soldiers ceased firing and met to play football in No Man's Land. Writing to his mother a few days later he described how he was sitting in a trench with a pipe: 'In the pipe is German tobacco... From a German soldier. Yes a live German soldier from his own trench.' The amnesty, and the realisation enemy soldiers were human too, was a profound moment in Williamson's life.

By 1921 he was living in Devon, up in the north of the county in the village of Georgeham where he'd stayed with an aunt before the war. He first lived at Skirr Cottage, named after the screech of the barn owl, later building a writing hut up the hill at Ox's Cross, with views to the sea and Braunton Burrows. The vast dune system features heavily in *Tarka*. Walk its sandy hillocks in winter and you can feel the icy accuracy of Williamson's words: 'Then came a north wind which poured like liquid glass from Exmoor and made all things distinct... The spines of the marram grass scratched wildly at the rushing air, which passed over the hollows where larks and linnets crouched with puffed feathers.'

It wasn't just seeing that obsessed Williamson; it was expressing it precisely. He rewrote *Tarka the Otter* 17 times. Chapter 11, starting at Cranmere Pool and tracing the Taw down here through Belstone Cleave was reworked 30 times. He often turned to local vernacular to exactly capture what he observed: 'The icy casings of leaves and grasses and blades and sprigs were glowing and hid in a mist of sun-fire. Moorfolk call this morning glory the Ammil.' Williamson once said the manuscript for *Tarka* 'was chipped from the breastbone'. You don't need to be a professional author to use words to see more; try writing about a walk to find how it can both focus and expand your gaze.

Words from *Tarka* are now chipped into the wood of a bridge over the Taw, which I cross on my way to Sticklepath, before starting back down the other side of the cleave. I want another chance to study the waterway as 'It wandered away from the moor, a proper river with bridges, brooks, islands and mills.'

Williamson's insight went far beyond the particular moments he saw on his walks: he fits



### RUNNING FREE

'Over and under and past boulders of granite, splashing upon mosses whose brown-red seeds on the tall stalks were like bitterns standing with beaks upheld.'



### ◀ TOUCH WOOD

Williamson's words are carved into a bridge on the Tarka Trail. The otter also lends his name to the scenic Tarka Line railway from Exeter to Barnstaple.

### ▼ COLD SANDS

Head north to walk at Braunton Burrows, where Tarka spent an Arctic winter.



each action into a complex ecosystem, even down to the impact that a bullock stepping on a young oak sapling will have 300 years later. It's almost overwhelmingly fascinating: the more you see, the more you realise there is to see.

Not all of Williamson's views were clear-sighted though. In the 1930s he became a follower of Oswald Mosley, leader of the British Union of Fascists, and once described Hitler as 'the great man across the Rhine'. Locals were appalled, and many found him difficult. He was known to throw apples at passers-by and one neighbour, the writer Negley Farson, nicknamed him 'Tarka the Rotter'.

Yet his *Tarka the Otter* endures, with its forensic, poetic portrait of life on the Devon rivers that Tarka called home – and that you can walk beside with the same aim to see nature truly. Since publication in 1927 *Tarka* has never been out of print and in 1977 it was made into a film narrated by Peter Ustinov. Williamson died on 13th August that year, on the same day they filmed the death of Tarka, and he now lies buried in Georgeham churchyard. Rachel Carson, author of conservation classic *Silent Spring*, said she would choose Tarka and Salar as her desert island reads. Nature writer Roger Deakin spoke of the 'beauty and ice-clear accuracy' of this 'great mythic poem'. And at Williamson's memorial the poet Ted Hughes said of *Tarka the Otter*: 'It is something of a holy book, a soul-book, written with the life blood of an unusual poet.'

## WAYS OF SEEING: THE ARTIST

Little makes you look as keenly at a landscape as trying to capture it on paper. You can't sketch it without understanding the precise angle of its lines; you can't paint it without realising the staggering number of tints in a scene. **Charles Tunnicliffe** (1901-1979) – whose first book commission was to illustrate *Tarka the Otter* – was as meticulous in his research as Williamson. He measured 'feather maps' from the plumage of dead birds and combined them with quick live action sketches to give his pictures the accuracy, and vibrant life, for which he became internationally renowned. Working in watercolour, oils, and woodcuts, he illustrated many books including Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, and *Salar the Salmon*, where the often-prickly Williamson tried – incorrectly – to fault the accuracy of one of Tunnicliffe's pictures. Millions more knew his work on the Brooke Bond Tea Cards and in the Ladybird *What to look for...* books. Tunnicliffe grew up on a farm in Cheshire, but spent many years on the Isle of Anglesey where Welsh painter Kyffin Williams was a neighbour and friend. 'His work was done for love: love of birds and of animals, of the wild flowers on the rocks above the sea, of the wind, of the sun and of the changing season...When the world of art was arguing to decide what was art and what was not, Charles Tunnicliffe just lived and worked.'

**WALK HERE:** Download a walk at **Newborough Sands** near where Tunnicliffe lived at Maltreat, at [lfto.com/bonusroutes](http://lfto.com/bonusroutes) – and pack a sketchbook!

## Plan your trip

### WALK HERE

Turn to **Walk 1** in this issue for your Belstone route. Download a walk at **Braunton Burrows** from [lfto.com/bonusroutes](http://lfto.com/bonusroutes).

### GETTING HERE

The walk starts from Belstone, just south of the A30 near Okehampton. 670 bus from Okehampton on Thursdays only, or the 6/6A Bude-Exeter stops at Sticklepath (point 6 on the route) 7 days a week. Train station at Exeter.

### WHERE TO STAY

Country Walking stayed at **Meadowlea Guesthouse** ([meadowleaguesthouse.co.uk](http://meadowleaguesthouse.co.uk), 01837 53200) in Okehampton – a really welcoming B&B on Station Road, with a guest lounge, the all-important drying cupboard for wet kit, and seven thoughtfully-furnished bedrooms, four of them ensuite. Owners Mark and Lesley cook up a delicious full English too; perfect for a bracing day on the

moor. Single rooms from £38; doubles from £70. Up at Georgeham in north Devon you can rent **Skirr Cottage** where Williamson once lived. Sleeps three, from £200pn, [airbnb.co.uk](http://airbnb.co.uk).

### WHERE TO EAT

Good food at Okehampton's **Fountain Inn** ([thefountainokehampton.co.uk](http://thefountainokehampton.co.uk)) with excellent vegetarian and vegan options. Both Indian restaurants in town are highly recommended too: **Rajpoot** ([rajpootindianokehampton.co.uk](http://rajpootindianokehampton.co.uk)) and **Ma'ida** ([maidaonline.co.uk](http://maidaonline.co.uk)). Plenty of choice on the walk, including **The Tors Inn** ([thetorsinn.co.uk](http://thetorsinn.co.uk)) and **Old School Tearoom** (Fri-Mon, see Facebook) in Belstone, and a National Trust tearoom, pubs and a village-store-cum-café in Sticklepath.

### MORE INFORMATION

See [visitdartmoor.co.uk](http://visitdartmoor.co.uk) or call Okehampton information centre on 01837 52295.