



Statement on Tunnels Beaches continued closure to the general public

Unfortunately we regretfully advise that Tunnels Beaches will remain closed to the general public visitors for the foreseeable future.

Weddings, accommodation stays and pre-booked wedding viewing appointments remain unaffected and are operating as normal.

What happened to cause the closure?

As widely reported last April, a rockfall occurred on to the slipway access to the Ladies' beach whilst we were open to the public. The site had only reopened a few weeks prior following another winter of our usual maintenance. Fortunately no one was injured at the time of the rock fall, despite approximately 50 visitors located in the area. The area affected is beyond the last of the 4 tunnels directly above the access used for the Ladies' beach and as such poses significant risk of injury.

Approximately 50 tonnes of rock fell from 30m above and completely filled a concrete catch wall, covered the slipway and pieces of rock bounced into the wider beach area.

The Ladies' beach was immediately closed whilst we cleared the debris and were able to assess the cliff using specialist rope access technicians and drones. It was discovered that a large section of cliff had come away some 30 metres directly above the slipway. Some of the debris deflected on the 45 degree angle of rock lower down – directing the debris outwards. The area was cordoned off, signs erected and diggers were used to create a 90 degree turn at the exit of the tunnel to divert visitors away from the area.

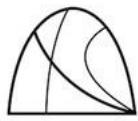
However, the following day there was another rock fall, with pieces of rock the size of dust bin lids 4" thick landing a significant distance down the Ladies' beach, which would have caused serious injury or death to any visitors in the area. The decision was therefore made that it was clearly not safe to reopen this area and we would seek further professional advice from Geotechnical engineers on possible options for making it safe. This would take several months, so the Beaches were closed to the general public for the rest of 2025.

Debris has continued to fall throughout the period of closure.

Photos of area:



Exit of last tunnel & slipway to Ladies beach



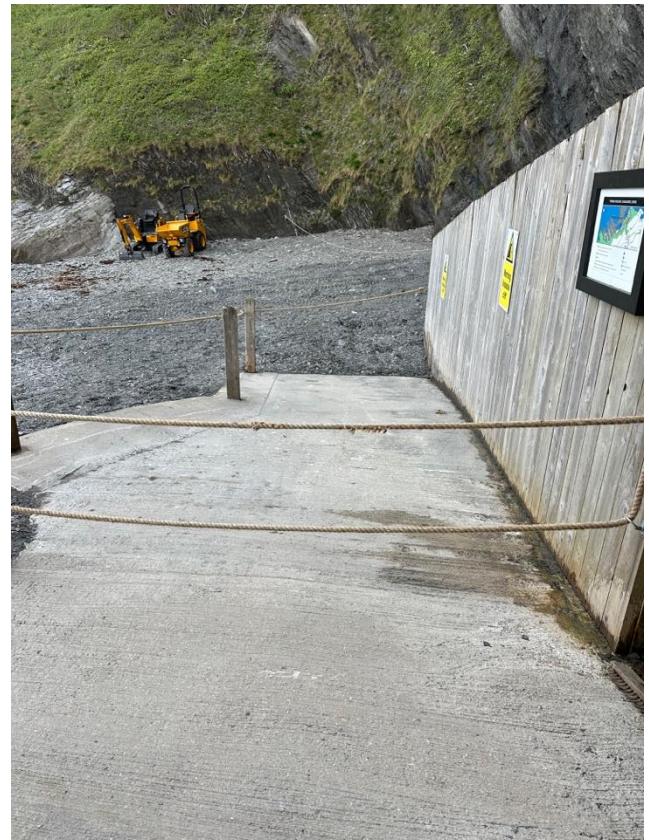
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Day of the rock fall





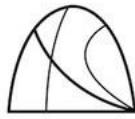
Day after the rock fall





2nd day after the rock fall & continued occurrence ever since





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What advice have we received from Geotechnical engineers ?

Possible options:

1. Removal of receptors (people) from the hazard (rockfall):

This option would require either a permanent closure of the tunnel access and Ladies' beach upper area, or an alternative means of accessing the beach (not possible due to very high tidal range). *Viable and likely the least cost (outlay) option, but with significant consequences for the business in respect of future revenue and public utility.*

2. Stabilisation by re-grading / profiling of the cliff to a stable angle:

Not practicably possible.

3. In-situ rock face stabilisation – e.g. installation of tensioned rock bolts and a high-tensile mesh facing:

Consent for works of this nature would be very time consuming, complex to negotiate, and possibly not permitted. The rock face is so loose and friable in places that there is no practicable or economic option available within likely constraints.

4. In-situ containment of rockfall – e.g. a drape netting covering the entire rock face with rock bolts to contain rockfall close to the source, but without any active stabilisation.

This would provide protection from ravelling debris between cobble size and in favourable conditions, up to several m³ in volume, but would be unlikely to contain the 10's of m³ debris that has recently fallen, or material that has a moderate to high kinetic energy.

5. Ex-situ containment of rockfall e.g. a rockfall containment barrier and trap ditch, or a rock avalanche canopy.

These physical barriers are designed to substantially contain (or deflect) high impact energy rockfall debris, and provide relatively cost-effective protection, without the high visual intrusion of netting systems. A 'no access' zone would be necessary to accommodate the trap area and deflection envelope of a barrier, potentially resulting in a hybrid solution extending the tunnel portal to a safer access/ egress location in combination with a barrier. Due to the confined area of the beach this would mean the majority of the beach area being permanently cordoned off which is unlikely to be practical from a visitor & tide perspective.

General comment:

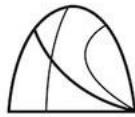
Consent for any physical works would depend on any statutory environmental and ecological designations. Whilst a Marine Management Organisation (MMO) consent is unlikely to be required for works above the high tide level, the works would likely be subject to planning and the Shoreline Management Plan (SMP2) would be the reference document in respect of planning policy around coastal cliff regression. A brief review of publicly available records shows the site falls within SMP policy unit 7D04, for which the short- medium- and long term-policy is to 'hold the line', which is defined as:

Where protection is currently provided by coastal defence structures or managed beaches, and the intention is to retain a defence along approximately the current alignment. This will involve replacing defences when needed. Defence type, method and standard of protection may be modified over time.

This suggests that for existing coastal defences, on-going repair and maintenance will be permitted.

New works would likely require detailed planning consent, and this may not be granted, depending on the scope and the planner's interpretation of the SMP.

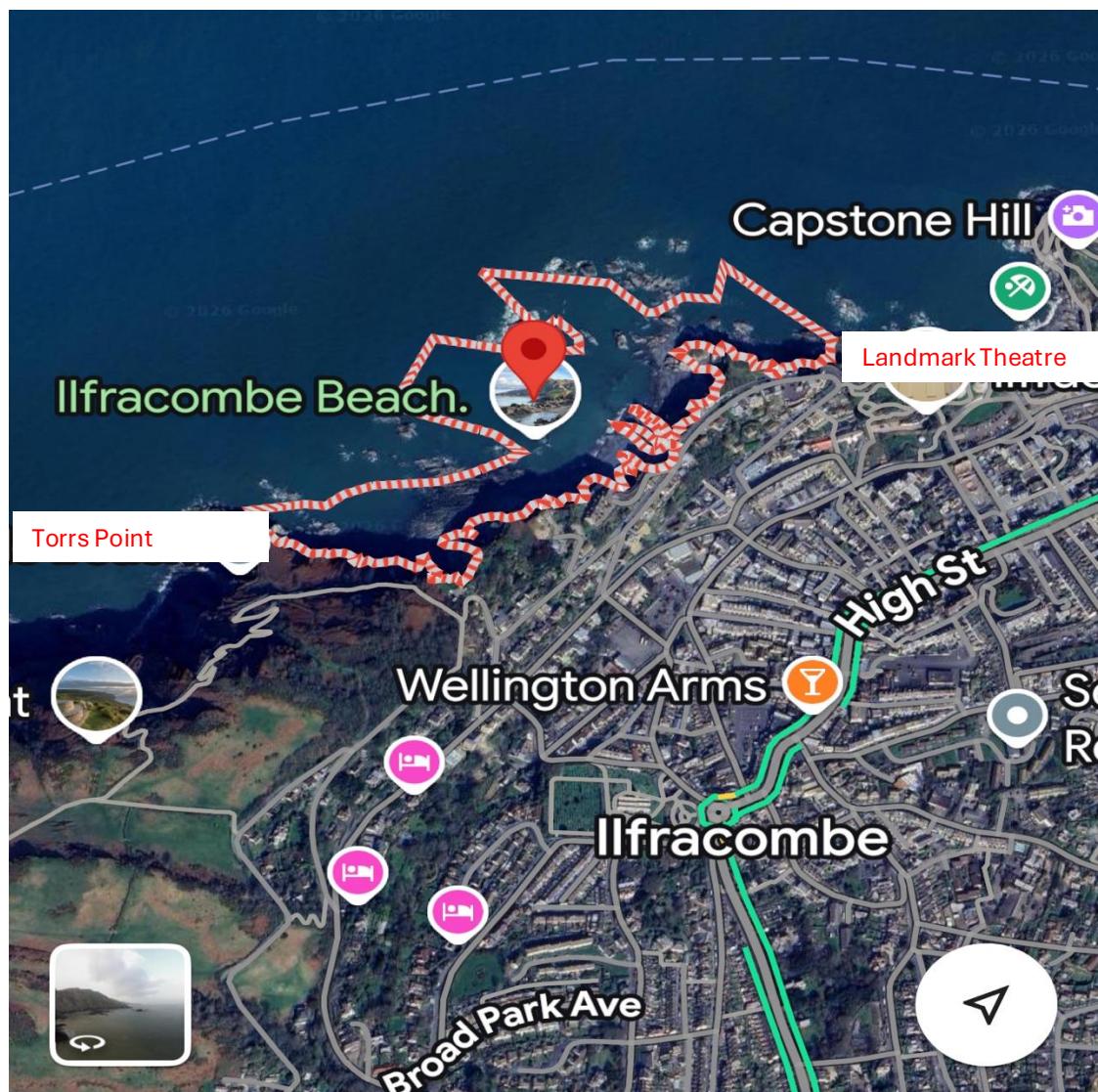
Note from Tunnels Beaches: The only current viable option is number 1 above. Option 3 is estimated to cost £750k - £1m with no guarantee that it would be allowed nor whether it would make the area safe. We also believe that the visual & environmental impact of netting a huge area of cliff cannot be justified.



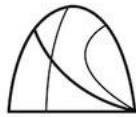
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What is the extent of Tunnels Beaches private ownership on the seaward side of the cliffs?

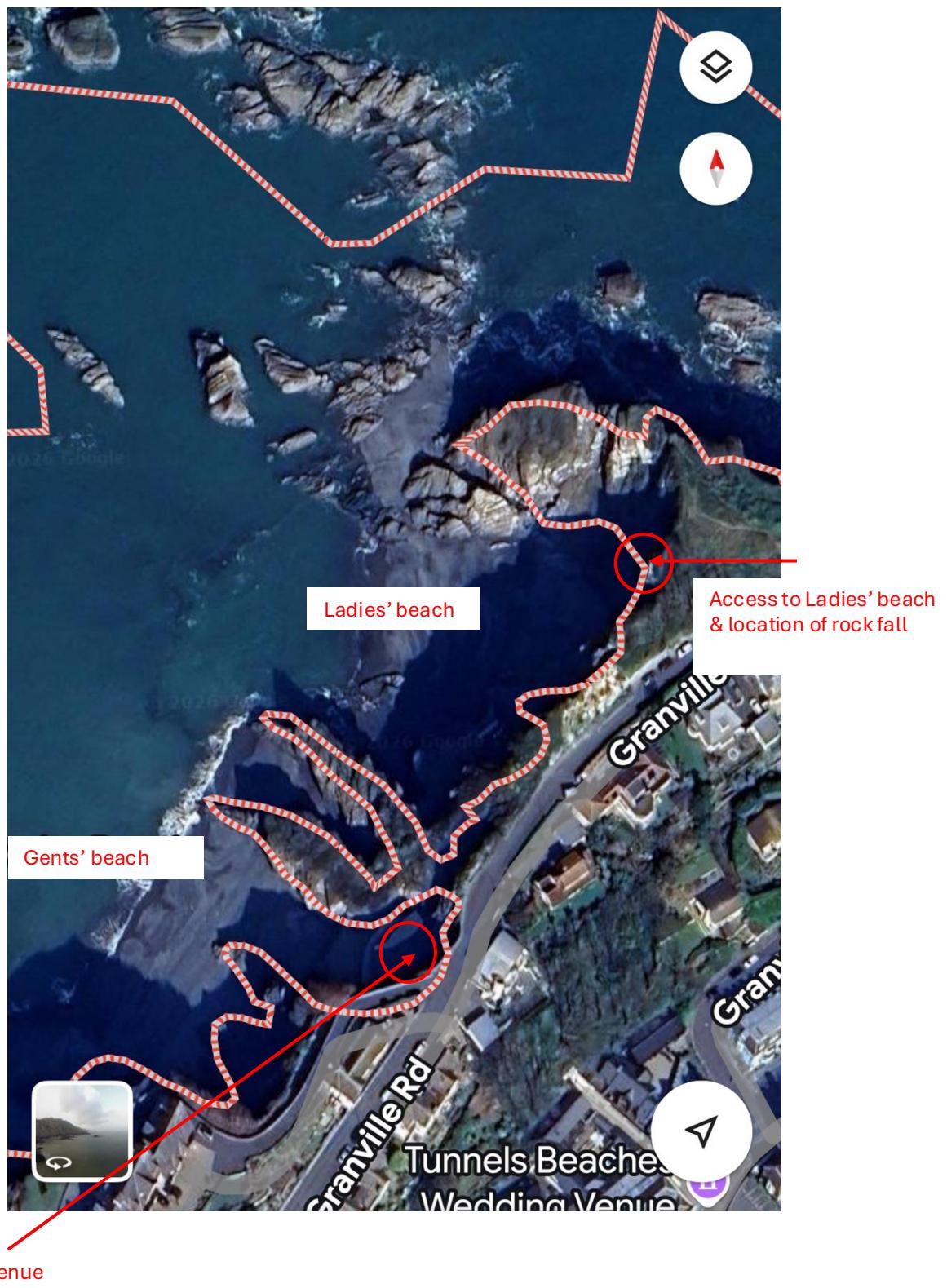
Tunnels Beaches extends from the end of the car park to the rear of the Landmark Theatre to Torrs Point to the west. Almost uniquely the ownership is down to mean **Low tide**, rather than the usual High tide mark. It is thought that the original company that created the tunnels & pools in Victorian times must have been allowed to purchase the entire foreshore in order to build the tidal pools at Mid tide point.

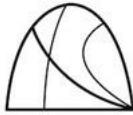


Approximate extent of Tunnels Beaches private land ownership (to mean LOW tide).
Torr Point to back of Landmark Theatre car park where old Baths were located.



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Are weddings impacted by the closure of the Ladies' beach?

No, the wedding venue is located in an entirely different part of the site with its own dedicated access to the Gentlemen's beach. The accommodation houses are located on the town side of the hillside at the main entrance to the Tunnels Beaches site.

How would wedding couples and their guests access the tidal pool?

This has not changed – couples and their guests would only access the pool via the Gentlemen's beach from mid tide onwards when the pool appears. This is nowhere near the top of the Ladies' beach where the danger area is located - that area is cordoned off and gates are kept locked at all times.

Are the cliffs ok near the wedding venue?

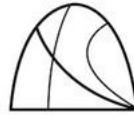
Yes – we have undertaken annual surveys and the nature of the cliffs around the venue are totally different to those at the top of the Ladies' beach. They are much lower, less steep and very well vegetated. They have not been interfered with – the cliffs at the exit of the very last (4th tunnel) on to the slipway to the Ladies' beach were heavily blasted in Victorian times which makes them far less compact and stable.

I didn't realise that beaches could be privately owned..?

A large number of beaches in North Devon are privately owned: Woolacombe, Putsborough, Croyde and Saunton to name a few. What's so unique about Tunnels Beaches is the access - it was created in 1823 by local entrepreneurs who employed Welsh miners to carve the tunnels and then build the tidal pools. The whole point was the limited access and the privacy (one beach for Gentlemen and one for Ladies – deliberately distinct & separate areas that are accessed from different directions). Access has also always been restricted to the summer season, certain opening hours and a charge levied since the tunnels were created. They have always operated as a business since 1823.

The other very rare fact about Tunnels Beaches is that the entire foreshore to low tide is privately owned.

The original company (The Ilfracombe Sea Bathing Company Ltd) put the site on the market in the late 1990s and did not have any interest from local businesses, the councils or the National Trust. It was clearly not deemed a valuable or viable opportunity. The current owners – Zoe & Jamie McLintock purchased the site in December 2001. Both were born in Barnstaple and lived in Ilfracombe nearly all their lives – attending all the Ilfracombe schools. They researched all the history information and created the historic tourist attraction as well as building cafes, toilets, a beach shop, the wedding venue, full restoration of the Bath House & Runnymede House amongst many other projects. Indeed only 2 winters in 25 years have not seen significant development or maintenance works take place. Locals are understandably disappointed with the closure, but this is more than shared by the owners that have spent over half their lifetimes working, reinvesting (we have never received a grant) and developing the whole site into what it is today. The diversification into weddings came about due to the unsustainable nature of the core beach attraction business. A new café-bar with ground floor wet rooms, toilets & showers was due to be built at the end of the 2025 season.



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Have other paths & beaches been closed?

Yes - it is a common occurrence. Broadsands Beach near Combe Martin is closed, Lyme Regis, Dawlish, North Wales & Bedruthen steps in Cornwall to name a few.

Will the tunnels reopen to the general public and if so, when?

We simply do not know. The options we have been given are not currently viable other than the current closure.

Is the closure for the benefit of the wedding business?

No. Weddings on the Gentlemen's side have coexisted with being open to visitors to the Ladies' side since we started holding them in 2009 and over 1500 have been held without any issue whatsoever. Couples have always booked weddings on our site on this basis. There is no financial gain for the wedding business, only significant lost income from ticket & shop sales.

Can't the general public just access the Ladies' beach from the Gentlemen's side?

The access to the Gentlemen's beach is through the middle of the wedding venue. Weddings are booked many months and years in advance and they are held on the vast majority of days throughout the season. Couples travel from all over the country (and indeed the world) and bring thousands of wedding guests to the town. The odd available day here and there would need to coincide with favorable tide times and weather so it's not practical.

Why is it not viable to repair the cliffs?

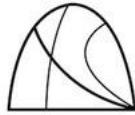
As explained by the Geotechnical engineers, the area of cliff in question is very loose and the common "fixes" seen on other cliff areas are either not possible or prohibitively expensive with no guarantee of success, plus significant ongoing maintenance requirements.

Can't the wedding venue just pay for the repairs?

Even if the netting and bolting solution WAS deemed to be a credible and appropriate solution, a cost of £750k - £1m needs to be paid for by the visitors. To put this in perspective: a £1m bank loan (which would not be granted for such works anyway!) would need an additional 200 daily adult visitors every single day (or 38,000 EXTRA full paying visitors in the season) just to cover the loan repayments... Our records show that outside of the school holidays many days will see less than 20 visitors, with a "good" midweek day attracting around 100. The price of tickets and season tickets would also need to rise significantly.

How many season ticket holders are there?

According to our records we average around 250 adult season ticket holders each summer season. This represents approximately 2% of the Ilfracombe population and an income of around £4500. Luckily we live in an area blessed with lots of other beautiful coves and beaches that can still be enjoyed by all.



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How have you managed to hold the annual Royal Devon Hospital Charities Topless Swim event if the public can't access the tunnels?

This highly successful event was organized meticulously by their team around our closed season and tide times and utilised our wedding wedding venue with access to the tidal pool from the Gentlemen's beach. We were thrilled that they raised another £40,000 on top of the previous year's total of £50,000... and they will be repeating the event this winter!

We have decided to include all this information on top of the basic facts detailed on pages 1 -3 as we are aware of some negative comments and disinformation being spread by some locals on social media. Hopefully this provides some clarity to those that do not fully understand our site and business and we thank those that have continued to show their support during this time.

Jamie & Zoe.