

Avon Estuary Walk

Downstream from Aveton Gifford, the river Avon winds through its beautiful and secluded valley to the sea. This fine walk traces its course, and you are rarely out of sight of the river, or its rich birdlife.

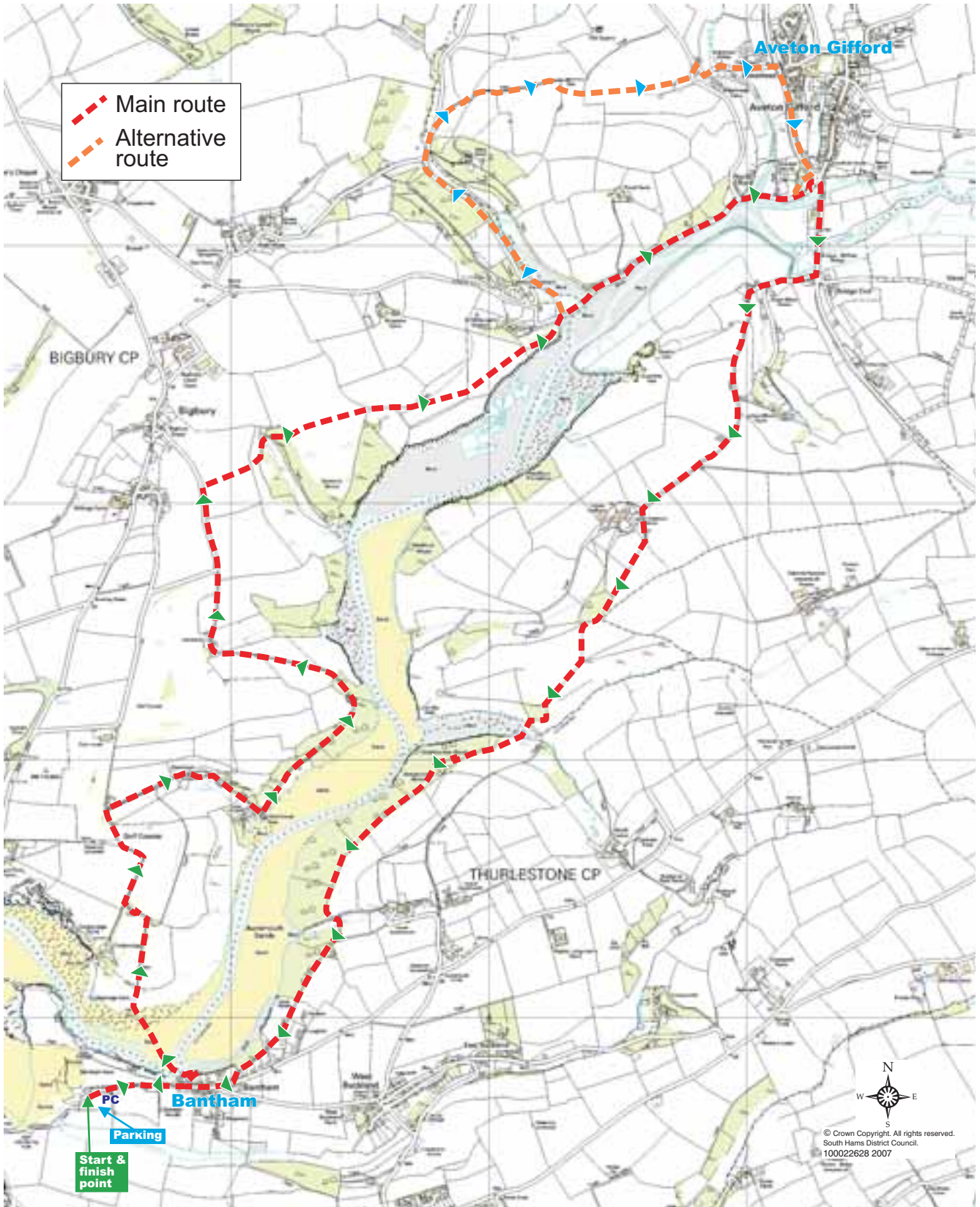
Start:	Bantham Sand car park, Bantham
Distance:	7.5 miles (8.5 miles at high tide)
Circular Walk:	Yes
Grade:	Moderate
Terrain:	Footpaths, with some muddy sections in wet weather; green lanes; surfaced roads
Obstacles & Steep Gradients:	10 stiles (+3 at high tide); 3 flights of steps (+1 at high tide); 1 steep ascent; 1 steep descent. This route is not suitable for wheelchairs or pushchairs.
Public transport:	Bus service 93 to Aveton Gifford from Kingsbridge, Modbury and Plymouth. Join route at the bridge at Aveton Gifford.
Refreshment stops:	Aveton Gifford: Fishermen's Rest pub 01548 550284; Sloop Inn at Bantham 01548 560489. Bantham Stores includes a small coffee shop, 100 metres back up the hill from the Sloop Inn
Toilets:	Public toilets at Bantham Sand car park.
Parking:	Private car park at Bantham Sand. Cost in 2006 £5.00. Free parking by bridge at Aveton Gifford; join route from there.
Accommodation:	Please contact Kingsbridge Tourist Information Centre 01548 853195 www.kingsbridgeinfo.co.uk
Other facilities:	Public payphone and village stores just off the route in Bantham. Public payphone on main street in Aveton Gifford.
OS map:	Explorer 0L20
Grid Ref:	SX 665437



Directions

This route follows the blue 'Avon Estuary Walk' waymarkers.

1. Walk back to the turning circle by the car park entrance and turn left down to the quay. Take the ferry from here across river (the ferry operates a seasonal service, see the ferry information panel at Bantham for further details).
2. From ferry information panel at Cockleridge head inland and up steps. Follow field edge up, and then to left, then bear right up road alongside and across golf course.
3. By a turning bay and waymarker on left, turn right over cattle grid and down drive. Walk through houses at Hexdown, then bear right down footpath. Turn left at the bottom to follow private drive.
4. Just before you meet road, turn right into field and follow 'Permissive Footpath' fingerpost along field edge. Half way across second field, turn right across field signed 'Milburn Orchard 1 1/2m'.
5. Bear left over the stile, and left again at a fork in the woods. Follow waymarked path along field and terrace, dropping gradually downhill.
6. Turn left along the foreshore, and then right along tidal road to Aveton Gifford.
7. Alternative route at high tide: Turn left along foreshore as above, but go straight across at road onto public footpath over stepping stones and through grounds of Milburn Orchard above creek. Turn right along a track, bear right where you meet a fork, and turn right along the road. After 200m bear right up green lane signed 'Drunkard's Hill'.
8. At top of rise, bear right onto footpath across field, round field edge, and down through the dip. Turn left along the lane, then sharp right by Skipper's Hill Cottage. Cross at the main road and take the path opposite, bearing right onto path above road.
9. At the bottom turn right through the underpass into the car park. Turn left out of car park onto road.
10. At mini- roundabout turn right along main road over river. Cross by Bridge House onto permissive path alongside road. Rejoin road again over bridge, then path once more, to finally cross road and follow lane opposite at Bridge End.
11. At the top turn right along lane. At Higher Stadbury bear left onto footpath, and bear left again where you join a further footpath.
12. Follow path along right hand field edges and then down between fences. Turn right through the gate and follow right hand field edge. Just before the next field gateway, leave the well- walked path and drop down the field to the left. Bear right at the bottom.
13. Through two gates, cross Stiddicombe Creek via footbridge to left. Turn right through gate then bear up through field past waymarker post. Cross stile into wood, and follow waymarkers.
14. Follow path along field edges above river. Cross a track and continue. Turn right along the next track after stile and steps.
15. At road turn right down through Bantham and back to the car park.



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Further Interest

Heritage

Bantham was home to one of the most infamous smugglers in South Devon, named Nat Cleverly. The contraband booze ferried aboard his fishing boat was bought in the free port of Roscoff across the Channel. Cleverly was eventually brought before the courts, but found not guilty and released - by one of his best customers, the local magistrate.



Lime kilns, like little grottos, can be seen close to the water's edge at Stiddicombe, and below Milburn Orchard. Limestone brought upriver on barges was burnt in these kilns to produce lime. It was spread on the fields, and also used to produce lime mortar, and limewash for cottage walls.

Before the tidal road was constructed to Aveton Gifford, a line of irregular stepping stones known as the 'dog biscuits' followed the stakes across the marsh.

The car park by the bridge at Aveton Gifford was at one time the site of a saw mill. In those days the cutting was done with long double handled saws, worked by two men. One stood above, while the poor soul who drew the short straw worked from a pit beneath, getting showered with sawdust.

Landscape

'Avon' means 'river' in the Celtic tongue. The Avon makes a 22-mile journey from its origins high on Dartmoor down through the wooded valley it has carved, to where it meets the sea by Bantham and Bigbury.

The river is tidal below a weir 4 miles upstream from Aveton Gifford. The 'ria' type estuary was formed when rising sea levels flooded the river valley after the last ice age.

The creek at Milburn Orchard is a wonderful example of salt marsh. This important habitat is formed on low coasts where the ground gets flooded by sea water. Cord Grass traps silt from the tide, which eventually raises the level of the marsh. Salt marsh is becoming increasingly rare as low-lying coastal land has been reclaimed for agriculture.

Wildlife

The estuary is fabulously rich in birdlife, attracting all sorts of waders, gulls and wildfowl. The waders are to be found probing along the shore and water's edge. There are too many to mention all of them here. However, upstream towards Aveton Gifford, where the mud is muddier, they include Curlew, Lapwing, Redshank



and Greenshank – named after the colour of their legs – and Common Sandpiper, with its white underparts and mottled brown back, straight bill and large dark eyes.

Dunlins are smallish birds, and like many waders have different plumage according to the season. One of their folk names is 'sea- mouse' as they are said to resemble a mouse with long legs, scurrying about on the shore. Their dull grey winter plumage gives way to rich chestnut, black and white streaking during the summer.

Similarly coloured, but smaller and with a shorter bill, the Little Stint is a rare winter visitor.

The Dabchick – or Little Grebe – is a small diving bird found on the estuary. A little round ball of a bird, without a tail, it dives for fish, insects and snails.

Further downriver, the sandier it gets the more gulls and oystercatchers are to be found. Up to 500 Black Headed Gulls are found on the estuary's mudflats, along with the large, mean- looking Herring Gull, with its yellow beak and eyes. You may also see the (not so very common) Common Gull - smaller and slimmer than the herring gull and with a dark eye.

The Avon estuary is South Devon's best for swans. In the winter Mute Swans gather here from as far away as Abbotsbury in Dorset. There are often 50 or more, and the stretch of river around the boathouse at Bantham is a good place for a sighting.

It is a complex job to try and describe the ducks of the estuary, as the colouring of a single species usually differs between male and female, and summer and winter plumage. The best bet is to get hold of a pocket guide before setting out. On the river you may see Mallard, Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler and Pintail.



Herons, and brilliant white Little Egrets are common sights, and the sharp- eyed may spot a Kingfisher. Ravens nest in the pines at Milburn Orchard. The Raven is the world's largest crow, with a distinctive dry, rattling 'crronk' call.

Stiddicombe Wood contains some Beech and Sycamore, but it is unusual in that the majority of the trees are Sweet Chestnut. This species of tree was introduced to Britain by the Romans, who harvested the nuts not only to roast and eat as they are, but to make chestnut flour.

The lower reaches of the river Avon are a nursery site for Sea Bass, a silvery sea fish of shallow waters that grows up to a metre long.

The sands at Cockeridge support the increasingly rare Sea Holly. A short but spectacular plant, it has pale blue, holly- like leaves and bright powder blue flowers. Also found here is Sea Spurge. Familiar to gardeners, this is one of the wild ancestors of the larger garden Euphorbia. Its small, fleshy oval leaves are clustered thickly up the reddish stems, some of which are topped with pale green flowers in summer.