

Wembury and Heybrook Bay



Start: | Wembury Beach car park, PL9 0HP

Distance: | 4 miles

Difficulty: | Moderate. 1 steep ascent; 1 flight of steps downhill

Terrain: | Coastal footpath, uneven and rocky in places; surfaced road; green lane; field footpath.

Parking: | Wembury Beach car park.
National Trust.

OS map: | Explorer OL20

Grid Ref: | SX 517 484

Public transport: | See www.travelinesw.com

Refreshments: | At Wembury Beach and village

Toilets: | Public toilets by Wembury Beach.

This walk is available in the following formats from www.southdevonaonb.org.uk/walks



online walk



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South West Coast Path walking app – enhanced content with photos, audio and film.

KEY

— Main route

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Directions

- 1** From Wembury beach car park, head down to the beach and cross the footbridge to follow the South West Coast Path along the clifftop.
- 2** About $\frac{3}{4}$ mile ahead, (before the Coast Path starts to pull out around Wembury Point), turn right at the fingerpost signed Public footpath 30 Spring Road $\frac{1}{4}$ mile'. Halfway up the hill, turn right at the waymark on to the footpath, which becomes a green lane. At the top bear right onto Spring Road.
- 3** After Prince's Cottage turn left onto the footpath along Smockpark Lane, heading towards Heybrook Bay.
- 4** Before reaching the houses turn right on the path to Heybrook Bay to follow the steps down to the coast.
- 5** Rejoining the Coast Path, turn left to walk back to Wembury beach

Further Interest

Heritage

Once you climb up inland, you get tremendous views out over Plymouth Sound. With its natural harbour and surrounding geography, Plymouth has a rich and important maritime history.

Plymouth docks was one of the three principal historic dockyards of the Royal Navy, along with Portsmouth and Chatham, and was set up in the 1690s. These dockyards were crucial for the maintenance of the Fleet, which was Britain's first line of defence. They also became important industrial sites, often being technically innovative. Because of this, their protection from attack was vital.

Many attempts have been made on Plymouth Sound and the dockyard including the Spanish Armada in 1588, Napoleon in 1803-5 and German forces in 1939-45. Plans were drawn up to protect Plymouth from bombardment from the sea, and from enemy forces attacking landwards. As the range of destructive power of guns increased, so the successive rings of fortifications became more complex.

The main period of fortress building was in the 19th century, especially after the Royal Commission of the Defences of the United Kingdom report in 1860, but there is a sequence of surviving defence works going back to the 15th century and onto the end of the 16th century.

24 forts were built encircling Plymouth in two rings, to protect from seaward and landward attacks. They were planned and constructed during the 1860s at a cost of around £3,000,000.

There were three forts covering the seaward approaches to Plymouth. Fort Picklecombe, in Cornwall covered the western side, the Breakwater Fort covered the central area and Fort Bovisand guns covered the eastern side of the breakwater and entrance to the Sound.

The breakwater was built by Sir John Rennie, to protect ships from prevailing winds and protect the entrance to the harbour. Nearly a mile long, the breakwater was constructed between 1812 and 1841 using $3\frac{1}{2}$ million tonnes of limestone from the Breakwater Quarry at Orestone, purchased from the Duke of Bedford for £10,000. The total build cost was £1.5 million, equivalent to around £98 million today!

The lighthouse on the western end of the breakwater was built using white granite from Luxulyan, in Cornwall, and was first lit in 1844. It was originally planned to put a lighthouse on the eastern arm as well, but a beacon was erected instead the following year.

As you walk around Wembury Point today, only the odd clue remains to its busy and varied past. Before WWII, this was the location for two holiday camps, with nearly 200 wooden chalets. The concrete remains of the old seawater swimming pool can still be seen on the small beach as you round the Point. Both camps were closed at the outbreak of WW2 when the MOD requisitioned the land at Wembury Point.



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During WWII it became one of the noisiest places imaginable, when HMS Cambridge, the most important naval gunnery school in the country, was sited at Wembury Point. It remained in use until March 2001 when it was decommissioned. The site was bought by the National Trust with the help of 30,000 individual donations. The buildings on the site have been demolished, and the Trust now manages the area for conservation.

Landscape

The green lane travelling up from the shoreline, Spring Lane, is also known as Seaweed Lane. Devon has many green lanes which cover a staggering 300km, and the same lanes have been in use for many thousands of years since people first started using them in prehistoric times. Seaweed Lane leads to rich pastureland on the hillside above. Farmers used it to transport seaweed from the beach to spread this on the fields as a fertiliser, as well as enriching the mineral content of the soil, the salt is thought to deter slugs!

Dominating views of the shore around here is the Great Mewstone, the inspiration for Turner's famous 'Mewstone' watercolour painting. It is one of many mewstones around our coast in South Devon, the name coming from 'Mew' - the old name for a gull.

In 1744 a local man was found guilty of a minor crime and sentenced to be 'transported' to the island for seven years! He stayed there with his family for the entire time, not once returning to the mainland. His daughter, known as 'Black Joan' chose to remain on the island, eventually marrying and raising a family of three children on the Mewstone.

Later, in the early 1800s, Samuel Wakeham and his wife Ann set up home on the island. They enlarged an existing house and cleared a garden to grow food and keep a couple of pigs and some hens. As well as looking after the warren, Sam offered boat trips from Wembury beach to the Mewstone. Sam might have stayed on the island for the rest of his days, had he not been caught out supplementing his income with

a little light smuggling! He was lured into a trap by a crafty excise man disguised as a smuggler and had to leave the island. The ruins of the cottage in which he and his wife lived still stand. No one has lived on the island since.

The island was sold in the 1927 sale of the Langdon Estate and bought by Mr Stansell of Heybrook Bay for £500. He sold it on a year later to a Miss Goldman of London for £575, who then presented it to her brother as a wedding present!

After World War II the Great Mewstone was bought by the Ministry of Defence as it lay in the line of fire from HMS Cambridge, then on Wembury Point. Today access is restricted and it is managed for wildlife by the National Trust.

Wildlife

The coast around Wembury and Plymouth Sound is very special and is a Marine Conservation Area. The sea cliffs provide nesting and roosting sites for seabirds. The beaches and sea caves provide a haven for marine wildlife and underwater are cliffs and reefs which can rival any of more tropical climes! Plymouth Sound is also protected under the European designation, Special Area of Conservation. This is the highest level of protection given to nature conservation in the UK and is testament to the amazing variety of marine life in the seas just offshore here.

The sea along this walk is bursting with life. A peer into the water might reward you with a glimpse of an Edible Crab or the exotically named Velvet Swimming Crab. Only a foot or two below the surface, amid the kelp and rocky reefs swim Wrasse, brightly coloured fish which look almost tropical. Unusually for fish, they sometimes lie on their sides underwater while resting. The tiny fish you may get a flash of darting about in the rock pools are likely to be Gobies or Blennies. Among the offerings washed up by the sea are Mermaid's Purses. These little black bladders with delicate curled 'strings' at each corner are actually the egg cases of dogfish or skates. Spongy balls of sandy-coloured 'bubbles' are the egg cases of whelks. The rocks offshore are favourite places for Cormorants, and their slightly smaller, slimmer cousins, the Shags, to perch. They have black plumage, and a rather prehistoric look to them, and both birds often stand



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with wings hung out half- open to dry. At first glance all gulls often look much the same, but a closer look may identify the Great Black- backed Gull standing watchfully on the rocks. It is a big bruiser – the world's largest gull – with distinctively dark plumage, and a broad yellow bill.

You have a good chance of seeing a Stonechat perched on top of a branch of gorse or blackthorn scrub along the low cliffs. This little bird has a black head, a white throat stripe and rust- red breast, with a distinctive call that sounds like two stones being 'chacked' together. Wildflowers along the coast include perky bobbing heads of pink Thrift, Scurvy- grass with its clusters of small white flowers and fleshy leaves and stem, and the bright white Stitchwort with its deeply notched petals. Also abundant in their season are Violets, Red Campion, and yellow Celandine in bright flushes along the coast path.

Along the coastal cliffs are areas of dense Gorse scrub, whose blooms give off billows of delicious coconut aroma on warm days. The old country saying goes that 'when gorse is out of bloom, kissing is out of fashion'. A convenient choice of plant for this adage, as gorse flowers right through the year. Butterflies to look out for along the coast include the delicate Common Blue, bright yellow Brimstone, and Marbled White with its striking black and white mottling.

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The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development: Europe investing in rural areas has supported Explore South Devon to promote circular walks within the South Devon AONB using the South West Coast Path National Trail.

