

Start Point and Great Mattiscombe Sands



Start: | Start Point car park, TQ7 2ET

Distance: | 2.2 miles

Difficulty: | Moderate. 1 stile; 2 flights of steps; 1 steep ascent.

Terrain: | Coast path with some narrow and uneven sections, surfaced road and paths. Quite exposed in poor weather.

Parking: | Start Point car park – pay on entry

OS map: | Explorer OL20

Grid Ref: | SX 820375

Public transport: | See www.travelinesw.com but no direct service

Refreshments: | At Stokenham or Beesands

Toilets: | Public toilet in car park

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Directions

- 1** From the car park go through the gate (or cross the stile beside it), to follow the Coast Path along the track running down the length of the peninsula towards the sea. Ignore the path branching off to the right above Nestley Point to stay with the track right down to the lighthouse at Start Point.
- 2** Leaving the lighthouse, retrace your steps up the track for about a quarter of a mile, to the Coast Path fingerpost.
- 3** Take the path to the left, travelling over the rocky spine of the headland. The next section of the path is rough underfoot and runs close to the cliff edge in places, so take care, supervising children and dogs.
- 4** Turn off the Coast Path to walk down to Great Mattiscombe Sand. The path is steep and is over rocks at the end near the beach so take care.
- 5** Leaving the beach, take the inland track up to the valley, following it uphill above the stream, to return to the car park at the start of the walk.

Further Information

Heritage

Start Point is one of the most exposed peninsulas on the English coast, running almost a mile into the sea. Suggestions for a lighthouse here were made as early as 1542 but ruled out in a time of conflict, because it might help enemy ships! The increase in shipping brought more even shipwrecks. Recognising the dangers the Admiralty applied for a lighthouse here in 1827. It was built to the design of James Walker, with a battlemented parapet reflecting the Gothic style of architecture popular at the time. It took 40 men 2 years to build the 92 foot (28 metre) tall tower, at a cost of £5892. In 1836 it flashed its warning for the first time. The lamp, initially oil lit, could be seen 21 miles out to sea. Originally it had two white lights, one of them revolving but the other fixed to mark the hazard of Skerries Bank.

Despite being the first lighthouse fitted with Alan Stevenson's revolutionary dioptric apparatus – a refractive lens that used prismatic rings instead of the



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traditional silvered mirrors – it was inadequate in fog and in the 1862 a bell was installed. The machinery was housed in a small building which still stands on the cliff face to the south-east of the lighthouse. It sounded 48 times every minute, the mechanism being driven by a weight which fell in a tube running down the sheer cliff. A siren replaced the bell in 1877 (the bell was transferred to the lighthouse on Plymouth Breakwater where it still hangs).

The fog siren was housed in a circular building, just to the south of the lighthouse, and sounded through a roof-mounted horizontal horn which could be turned in the direction of the prevailing wind. Around the turn of the century new equipment was installed, including a new pair of 5" sirens sounding through a pair of curved vertical copper trumpets. This was replaced by a more powerful 12" siren in 1928, in the same building, sounded from a pair of conical horns housed in a cast-iron turret on the roof. At the same time a pair of Gardner diesel engines were provided to drive the air compressors, replacing an earlier set of engines.

In 1989, the erosion of the coast caused the fog signal building to collapse. A lot of the area had to be levelled as a result and retaining walls put in place. An electric signal was instead installed on the gallery of the lighthouse, when needed the foghorn booms out to sea every minute.

The lighthouse has been powered by electricity since 1959, it flashes 3 times every ten seconds with a range of 25 nautical miles. There is also a fixed red light over The Skerries bank. It was automated in 1993 and is now monitored and controlled from the Trinity House Operations Control Centre at Harwich in Essex

Start Point Lighthouse is open for guided tours throughout the year and for school and other group visits by prior arrangement. Details can be found on www.startpointdevon.co.uk.

South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Walks

Over the years many ships have met disaster on the rocks around Start Point. The worst occurred on March 9th 1891 during the 'great blizzard'. Late that afternoon the steamer 'Marana' struck the Black Stone at full speed. 26 crew took to lifeboats but only 5 reached the shore below East Prawle, 2 of these died shortly after from exposure. Less than 12 hours later the sailing ship 'Dryad' with a crew of 22 was driven ashore above Hallsands and broke up within minutes. 2 schooners were wrecked in the same gale. In total this short stretch of coast claimed 52 lives that day.

During a storm in March 1866 Samuel Popplestone from Start Farm, who was later awarded the first Albert Medal for gallantry, rescued survivors from the 'Spirit of the Ocean'. She hit a reef 100 yards offshore and was driven onshore by a southerly gale. Sending someone to alert the coastguard Samuel lowered himself down the cliff on a rope and managed to save 4 men. Stokenham Church has a stained glass memorial in memory of the 28 men who died in that wreck.

The Clipper Lalla Rookh, laden with 1,300 tons of tea & 60 tons of tobacco was wrecked in 1873. All but 1 of the crew survived but it is said that for some while afterwards there were ridges of tea some 11ft high piled up on Slapton Sands!

Great Mattiscombe was once known as 'More Rope Bay'. According to local legend, a ship was lured to shore by wreckers looking for plunder, and less villainous residents attempted to rescue its unfortunate crew by lowering a rope down the cliffs to the rocks where they were stranded. In vain the survivors called for more rope.

For many generations, the sea had provided a livelihood for villagers along the length of Start Bay. Although the only commercial fishing that happens here nowadays is for shellfish, apart from a small amount of line fishing for local restaurants, in the past it was a much bigger industry locally. At the end of the 19th-century, before the general decline in stocks of fish, there were dozens of fishing boats working here, catching eel and cod as well as the crabs and lobsters.

Landscape

The name "Start" derives from an Anglo-Saxon word steort, meaning a tail. This word also appears in the names of birds with distinctive tails, like the redstart. The rocks which make up the promontory are greenschist and mica-schist, formed by metamorphism of Devonian sediments during a period of mountain building towards the end of the Carboniferous period.

The jagged ridge of this headland is mirrored by dangerous rocks lying under the water including Black Stone rock.

The line of breakers, or 'white horses', about a mile offshore are caused by the Skerries Bank. It runs for 6.5km off Start Point and at low water it is only around 2m below the water. As the tide rises, however, the incoming water is channelled between the Bank and the shore and in rough weather, the speed of the riptide makes for treacherous waters (hence the need for a separate marker on the lighthouse).

There are a number of rocky outcrops visible on the beach at Great Mattiscombe at low tide, as well as the shelf of a wave-cut platform, the base of which is composed of the same schists which form the high cliffs. These 'wave-cut' platforms are a coastal feature left over from a time around 100,000 years ago before the last ice age, when temperatures and as a result sea levels were also higher. Over the years the platform was made by waves continually breaking on it. As temperatures fell and sea levels also dropped the platform was left above sea level.

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Wildlife

A large part of Start Point has been designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). This designation recognises how nationally important this promontory is for its geology, lichens and invertebrates, and a good variety of rare flowering plants, breeding birds and an intertidal area of major biological importance.

The flowers around the coves attract butterflies, and the species to be seen here include green hairstreaks and clouded yellows. It is a great area for bird-watching too. Listen out for the ciril bunting, making a comeback in South Devon thanks to the efforts of the RSPB and other local landowners. Other spring and summer songbirds include tree sparrows and corn buntings, as well as chiffchaffs, goldcrests and firecrests. Ravens and buzzards wheel over the rocks, and sometimes red-legged partridges can be seen, or a little owl, even in daytime. Winter migrants include great northern and black-throated divers, as well as gannets, kittiwakes and auks. Oyster-catchers and curlews scavenge along the tideline, as well as sandpipers, grey plovers and redshanks. Occasionally you can see groups of eiders, and in stormy weather flocks of thousands of great black-backed gulls are sometimes seen flying westwards, and a few skuas.

Dolphin and porpoise are passing marine visitors, grey seals are resident and can often be seen bobbing about in the surf and hauled out on the outer reefs, especially around at Peartree Point. In late winter and spring, you may be lucky enough to see one or two white pups with them.

The Skerries Bank is a large stretch of mobile sand and is host to flat fish including sole, plaice, various species of ray and large shoals of sand eels which live in the coarse sand and gravel that drops away steeply in dramatic waved dunes. Many crabs also find a home here.

There are also rocky reefs around Start Point with chimney sponges, scarce finger sponge and dahlia anemones.

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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.

