

Dartmouth Castle, Gallants Bower and Compass Cove



Defending the Dart

A peaceful woodland walk up to the earthworks of a Civil War fort, then around the headland to enjoy views along the coast and out to sea.

Start: | Dartmouth Castle, TQ6 0JN

Distance: | 1.8 miles

Difficulty: | Easy to moderate. Some steps and inclines

Terrain: | Surfaced and unsurfaced paths and lanes.

Parking: | Dartmouth Castle car park. TQ6 0JN

OS map: | Explorer OL20

Grid Ref: | SX 886 503

Public transport: | Buses to Kingswear and Dartmouth – www.travelinesw.com; Steam train to Kingswear www.dartmouthrailriver.co.uk. Ferry details at www.southdevonaonb.org.uk/walks

Refreshments: | In Dartmouth and at Castle

Toilets: | Castle car park

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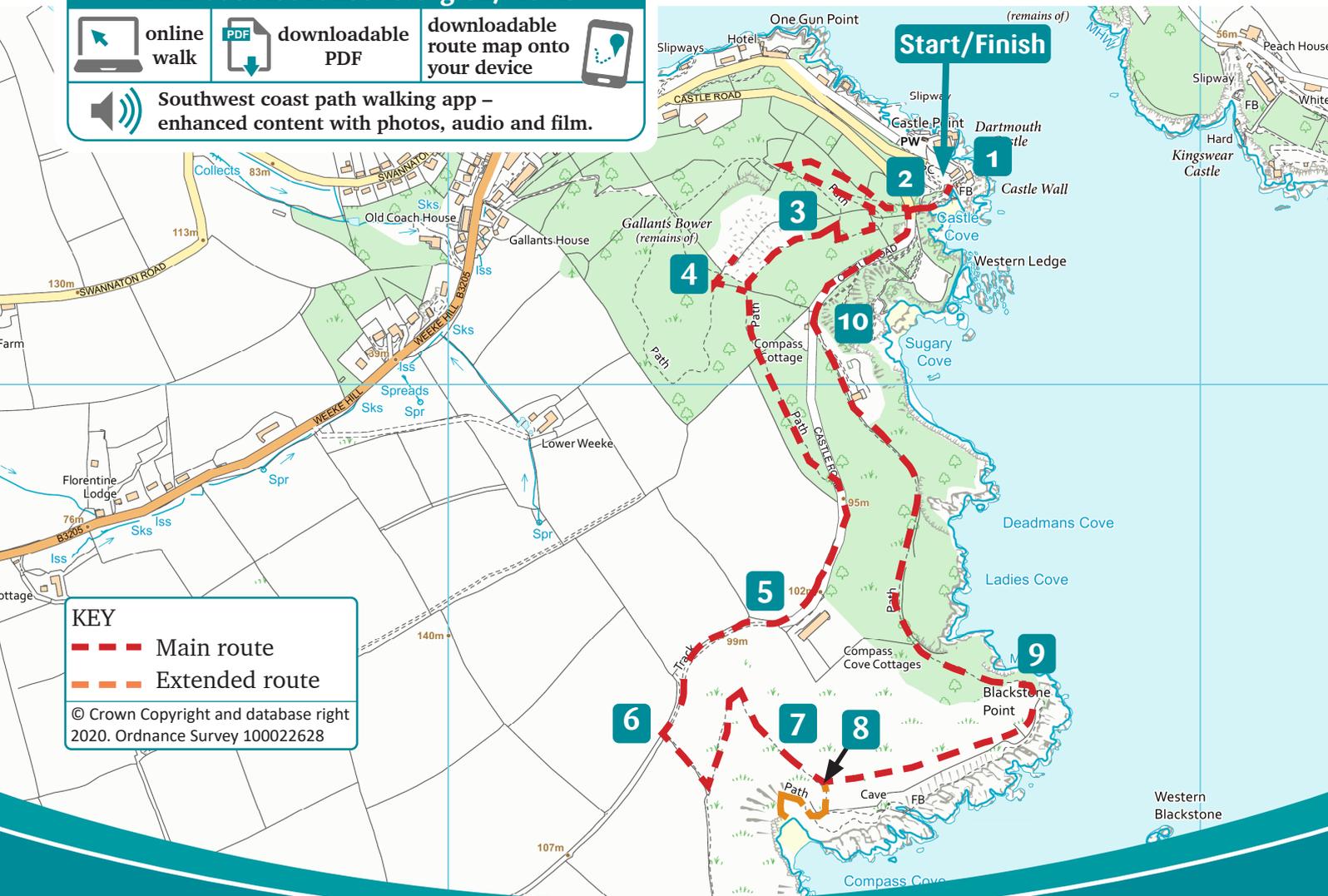


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Directions

- 1 Follow the path up to the left of the old ruined castle, signed 'Coast Path Stoke Fleming 3 ½ m' and go up the steps .
- 2 At the top, cross road to left and take the path up to the right into the woods, past the National Trust 'Gallants Bower' sign.
- 3 Follow the path which climbs steadily as it wends its way up through the woods, until you emerge into the open and reach the old earthworks. The site is fairly small and easily explored.
- 4 Retrace your steps then take the next path on the right to lead back down to the lane, turning right to follow it along.
- 5 After 400m, past the old Coast Guard cottages, go straight on through the gate ahead and around the top of the scrubby field.
- 6 Just before the gate at the far end of the field turn left and follow the hedge down for 100m then turn left again along the Coast Path
- 7 The path drops steeply down the field. Towards the bottom bear left following the Coast Path waymarker along open area. At the fingerpost you can follow an optional detour right down the footpath and steps to Compass Cove. Retrace your steps
- 8 At the fingerpost go straight on. Go through the gate into the wooded area and follow the rocky path up the hill.
- 9 Follow the path as it begins to climb again, and passes through woods.
- 10 When you meet the road turn right. After 300m turn right back down the steps to Dartmouth Castle

Further Interest

Heritage

For over 600 years Dartmouth Castle has guarded the narrow entrance to the Dart Estuary and the busy, vibrant port of Dartmouth. This fascinating complex of defences was begun in 1388, to protect



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the town and harbour against French raids during the Hundred Years War. It was built by John Hawley, privateering Mayor of Dartmouth and the prototype of the flamboyant 'Shipman' in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. The ruins of the building behind the castle, on the other side of the car park are the remains of the original building, a 'fortalice'. This first castle was only used in times of danger and so had few permanent buildings. A length of stone wall and a circular corner tower are all that survives.

About a century later the townsmen added a new tower containing guns nearer the water, probably the very first fortification in Britain purpose-built to mount 'ship-sinking' heavy cannon. A great iron chain once spanned the 250m opening of the Dart estuary to defend Dartmouth from enemy warships. The chain, which was probably first installed around the 1480s, could be raised or lowered with the tide to stop ships mid-river - making them an easy target for gunfire from the castle. The tower contained the winding mechanism and the chain was secured close to a defensive tower at Gomerock, on the other side of the estuary in Kingswear. The defences were eventually completed around 1493 and the gun tower became the heart of Dartmouth Castle.

The castle has defended the town and coastline over six centuries, including during the Civil War. During the First World War, the castle was used to protect Britannia Naval College and prevent fast gunboats and torpedo boats from entering the harbour. During the Second World War, the castle housed military troops and played a strategic role in the war effort.

St Petrox Church at the mouth of the river is the oldest of the three parish churches in Dartmouth, the earliest reference being in 1192 when it is thought to have been referred to in a deed as the 'monastery of St Peter'. Believed to have provided a light at the harbour entrance, as well as being for the use of residents in South Town (between Bayards Cove and the harbour mouth) this area was at one time part of the parish of Stoke Fleming. The church was incorporated into the complex of 15th-century

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buildings that became Dartmouth Castle, and for centuries it was used by the castle garrison. It backs onto the early Tudor gun battery and is a stone's throw from the later Victorian battery.

Gallants Bower fort was built by the Royalists during the English Civil War, with six circular bastions sited around the walls. When the Parliamentary troops recaptured Dartmouth, almost a thousand Royalist soldiers fled to this fort, though they soon surrendered.

At that time these slopes would have been kept treeless, but even now there are great views. Upstream you can see the Britannia Royal Naval College sitting above the town of Dartmouth. Completed in 1905, it is a training centre for naval officers. Before its construction trainees were housed and trained on two old hulks moored on the river.

Looking across the Dart from Gallants Bower, the squat square fort low to the water's edge is Kingswear Castle. Built just over 500 years ago, it was a cutting-edge castle designed to house all-new ship-sinking cannon. But before long guns developed that could cover the whole river from Dartmouth Castle, and Kingswear Castle became redundant.

It did, however, have one more moment in the spotlight during the English Civil War. Some Royalist soldiers retreated there when General Fairfax took the town for the Parliamentarians at the end of the war. There they held out until they secured honourable terms of surrender.

On the high ground across the estuary mouth in Kingswear, is the Daymark - a hollow tower built as a daytime aid for navigation at sea. It was built in 1864 and is a grade 2 listed building.

As you walk around the top of the field beyond the coastguard cottages, to the left of the path stands a weathered wooden stump in a metal socket. This is a 'rocket post'. It was used to simulate a ship's mast for coastguard services practising sea rescues.

A 'rocket apparatus' fired lines from shore onto ships in distress. Those lines would be lashed to the mast and the victims could be hauled to safety.

Up to the right above the 'rocket post' field is Compass Hill, used as a lookout point for Dartmouth for centuries. During the era of steam ships Dartmouth was an important coal bunkering port. At that time the hilltop lookout would signal the approach of a ship, and down in town men would rush for a ladder. The first to swing his leg over the top rung would earn the right for his gang of 'lumpers' to supply the ship with coal.

Landscape and wildlife

The Dart rises 550m above sea level on the high moors of north Dartmoor and meanders for approx 52 miles (75 km) down to Dartmouth. The estuary of the Dart is tidal up as far as the weir at Totnes, the bridging point 12 miles upstream. Like most other estuaries of the South West, the Dart estuary is ria formed. The original deep river valley being inundated by later sea level rise, with the tide flooding in to create the characteristic deep waters and steep sided banks of a ria.

The Dart transforms from an almost entirely freshwater system in its upper limits to a largely marine habitat at its mouth, and along the way has developed some characteristically important habitats, such as saltmarsh and reed beds. The Dart estuary supports a wide variety of wildlife including birds, fish, crabs, shellfish, grey seals, otters and the occasional dolphin. Not to mention the extremely important worms, snails and bacteria on which many other species depend.

Just offshore, past the mouth of the Dart, is a rock called the Blackstone. You will often see large, dark prehistoric-looking Cormorants here. These seabirds dive for fish, but their wings are not waterproof. They compensate for this design flaw by standing on the rock hanging their wings out to dry.

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Across on the Kingswear side sits a larger rocky island called the Mewstone - a well-known haul-out for Grey Seals. Half the world's population of Grey Seals live around the shores of the UK. They are one of nature's rare modern day success stories; Grey Seal numbers have doubled since 1960.

Down at Compass Cove the rock pools are full of life. Here you might find the small, delicately spiralling shells of periwinkles. Look out for both the pointy-tipped Common Periwinkle and the stubby Flat Periwinkle. As they move, you might see the periwinkle's feelers peering out from under the shell. These feelers are all-in-one sensors which detect light and touch and have smell receptors built in.

You'll also find silvery patterned Topshells, with a mother-of-pearl sheen on the inside of the shell. Topshells roam the rocks grazing on algae, which they scrape off using a single ribbon-like strip of 'teeth'.

Communities of grey Barnacles encrusted on rocks are a common sight but have some uncommon characteristics. They are actually related to crabs and lobsters, even though they don't look much like them. Stuck on their rock, barnacles feed using modified legs, which they poke out into the water. The legs beat rhythmically to draw food into the shell.

Wild Cabbage grows amongst the vegetation on the low cliffs. Look out for the distinctive thick stem of a brassica, along with thick bluish- green leaves. These loose-leaved plants may be the ancestor of the cultivated cabbages we eat today.

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