

Little Dartmouth and Dartmouth Castle



Countryside and castles on the South Devon coast

Small but perfectly formed, this satisfying circuit is full of character and interest, offering glorious views from the cliffs, the tang of the sea close up on the rocky shore, the rich history of the castle and the beautiful Dart Estuary. This circular walk can also be started at Dartmouth Castle.

Start: | Little Dartmouth car park (if starting at Dartmouth Castle, begin at point 7)

Distance: | 3.5 mile

Difficulty: | Moderate. 3 flights of steps (+5 on alternative route); 2 steep descents; 2 steep ascents

Terrain: | Surfaced and unsurfaced paths.

Parking: | National Trust car park, Redlap, Little Dartmouth TQ6 0JR (or Dartmouth Castle, TQ6 0JN)

OS map: | Explorer OL20

Grid Ref: | SX 874 491

Public transport: | Buses to Dartmouth – www.travelinesw.com

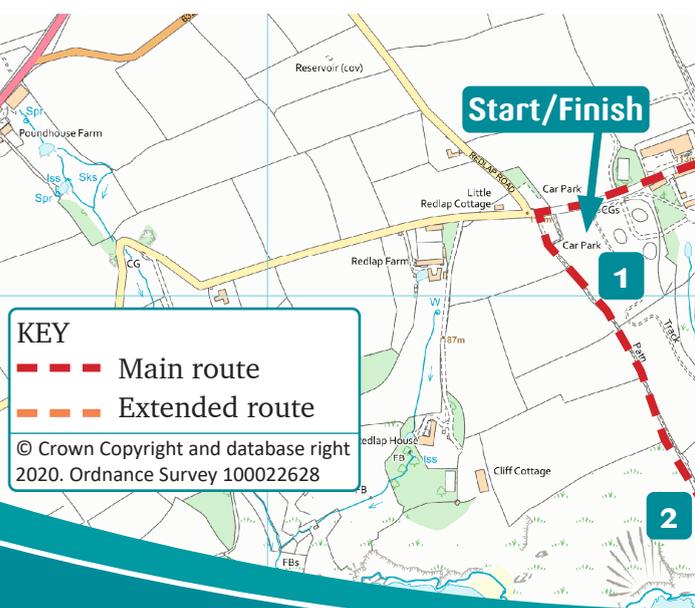
Refreshments: | At Dartmouth Castle

Toilets: | At Dartmouth Castle

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

- online walk
- downloadable PDF
- downloadable route map onto your device

Southwest coast path walking app – enhanced content with photos, audio and film.



KEY
 - - - Main route
 - - - Extended route
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Directions

- 1 Start walk through seaward side car park signed 'Link to Coast Path, Dartmouth Castle 2½m'.
- 2 Follow field edge path down. Through kissing gate, head to right of bench and bear left along coast path.
- 3 Drop down through the valley beyond Compass Cove, following 'acorn' waymarker. Towards the bottom of the valley, ignore the stile, and continue along the path, then through a gate.
- 4 Path eventually passes through woods. Bear right where path joins lane.
- 5 Here you have a choice. Option one is to continue down road. Alternatively, turn immediately right upon joining road, down footpath. Turn right at waymarker and follow coast path down steps and above sea. This route enjoys fine sea views but involves several flights of steps and some 'up and down'. The route emerges past a picnic area to the road. Turn right and immediately right again as directed below to rejoin the main route.
- 6 Turn right down steps signed 'Coast Path, Dartmouth Castle' to visit the castle, tearooms and toilets.
- 7 To return, retrace your route back up the steps and turn left along the road.
- 8 Follow the road, passing sign reading 'Access to Compass Cove Cottages and Coastguard Station'.
- 9 Where the road ends, go straight on through gate and follow bridleway.
- 10 Continue straight through Little Dartmouth Farm and back to the car park

Further Information

Heritage

The first fortification at Dartmouth castle was built in 1388. The ruins of that original castle are those that you first meet as you approach down the steps. It was built by John Hawley, a colourful character and infamous local pirate. He was mayor of Dartmouth



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14 times, M.P. twice, and is thought to have been the inspiration for the character of the Shipman in *The Canterbury Tales*. Over the centuries since then, newer defences have been added, while the older ones have crumbled.

Later, the castle became the first in the country to be designed specially to house artillery. A chain was strung across the estuary from the castle to prevent enemy ships from attacking Dartmouth.

Just below the castle, close to the salt spray, is St Petrox Church. It is named after St Petroc, a 6th century Irish prince who renounced his royal title to dedicate himself to his faith. He settled in Cornwall, where he pursued an ascetic life of great devotion and precious little comfort. He was said to eat ashes on fast days, and to recite the psalter standing up to his waist in the Camel estuary.

The squat square fort across the river is Kingswear Castle. Built in 1503, it was eventually made redundant once cannon stationed at Dartmouth Castle became powerful enough to cover the whole width of the river. Among its many comings and goings over centuries, the mouth of the Dart was the point of departure for both the second and third Crusades. The Pilgrim Fathers left from here in the *Mayflower* and the *Speedwell* after undergoing repairs, as did half a million troops in landing craft heading for the D-Day landings in 1944.

On the return leg of the walk, to the left of the bridleway above Compass Valley stands what remains of an old rocket post. Now just a weathered stump a few feet high, this post was once used to simulate the mast of a ship. Here the coastguard and rescue teams would practice using the 'rocket apparatus', which was used to fire lines from the shore onto ships in distress, and haul crew and passengers to safety using a breeches bouy.

The hill above you to your right as you walk back towards Little Dartmouth, served as a lookout point for Dartmouth as far back as records exist, and

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probably longer. Tucked away around the corner, Dartmouth has no view of the open sea. Without this 'early warning system' up on the high ground to protect it, it would have been always vulnerable to surprise attack from marauders.

Landscape

The view from the Coast Path is long and open, particularly at the point where the route first joins it. The scene looking south takes in the sweep of Start Bay, right around to Start Point and the lighthouse at its furthest tip. The first clifftop village you can see as you scan along the coast is Stoke Fleming, with Strete only a mile or two further along. Beyond this is the long shingle ridge of Slapton Sands stretching down and round to the seaside villages of Torcross and Beesands.

Straight down below where the route joins the Coast Path, the little clutch of rocks just offshore here goes by the lyrical name of the Dancing Beggars. Looking north, the rock just off the coast across the estuary is called the Mew Stone – 'mew' being an old Devon word for gull. The tower on top of the hill behind it is the Daymark. It was built in 1864 as a navigational aid for shipping and is hollow inside.

Wildlife

Birds that make their homes in the coastal scrub include the Whitethroat, a small brownish bird with – as the name suggests – a distinctive white throat, and a whitish ring around the eye. You may also spot Yellowhammers, Stonechats – whose call sounds like two stones being 'chacked' together - Linnets, and Long Tailed Tits, almost always seen in busy flocks, and looking like tiny balls with a stick (the tail) attached. Where the path runs just above the reach

of the tide beyond Compass Cove, Wild Cabbage grows at the foot of the low cliffs. This is possibly the wild ancestor of the much plumper cultivated cabbages we eat today. They have the distinctive thick stems of all brassicas, along with thick bluish-green leaves and loose spikes of yellow flowers.

Grey Seals can sometimes be seen 'hauled out' on the rocks just offshore along the route. These seals are one of nature's rare modern-day success stories: half of the world's population lives around Britain's shores, and their numbers here have doubled since 1960.

Sycamores are the first trees you meet when the route enters woods at the estuary mouth. A little further on they intermingle with Ash, and later still Beech and Oak join the mix. The sycamore is found in the most exposed positions here – out towards the open sea - because it is such a hardy and adaptable tree. It is the best able to withstand the caustic effects of salt and harsh weather. Sycamores were originally introduced to Britain from central Europe and have spread vigorously since. They have distinctive green buds, 'maple'- type leaves, smooth grey bark and winged seeds, or 'helicopters'.

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Working in partnership



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 Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.