

A Dart Estuary Walk - Coves, Castles and Coastguard Cottages

This walk has a bit of everything. It skirts the magnificent estuary of the River Dart and also explores part of Dartmouth, one of Devon's most attractive towns as well as one of its most historic and interesting. Not surprisingly, variations of this route are among the most popular walks in this part of the County.

Much of the walk follows part of the South West Coast Path and gives superb views of both sea and estuary. Those who wish to explore a little further may wish to know that Dartmouth is also the terminus of the Dart Valley Trail which gives the opportunity to delve into the attractions of the valley as far upstream as Totnes.

Fact File

Dartmouth is well served by buses from Totnes, Kingsbridge and Plymouth. Routes from Torbay serve Kingswear, linked to Dartmouth by ferry. More unusual transport access is provided by the Paignton and Kingswear Steam Railway and by River Link boat services to and from Totnes.

Remember that during the summer especially car parking can be very difficult in Dartmouth and it is recommended that, if not using one of the public transport means, visitors use the park and ride service provided.

For bus timetables contact Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit www.traveline.org.uk. For the Paignton and Kingswear Steam Railway telephone 01803 555872 and for River Link 01803 834488.

Walk Length: 9km/5.5 miles: 1 stile; two short climbs plus a longer and steeper one of 100m/330 feet. **Note that there are lots of steps on this walk.**

Facilities: Dartmouth has all facilities; there are toilets, café, castle shop and car park at Dartmouth Castle and a car park at Little Dartmouth.

The Walk

The walk starts at Dartmouth Station, next to the ferry landing pontoons.

Dartmouth Station has the unmistakable architecture of a GWR railway station, although trains never reached here. The GWR's Dart Valley line was originally planned to cross the river to Dartmouth, but the bridge was never built although the station was. Trains always terminated at Kingswear, although through tickets to Dartmouth could be purchased which included the ferry crossing.

Cross the road to the little harbour, known as the Boat Float, and walk away from the river alongside the Boat Float to the inland side, the original Quay.

The Quay was built in the 1580s. Prior to that the river had reached as far inland as the church. When the Quay was built it became Dartmouth's principal river frontage. This was all changed in the 19th century when the Embankment was built to form the present riverside. The Boat Float was constructed at the same time to allow small boats to reach the Quay.

Turn left along Fairfax Place then a little way along turn right, up Smith Street.

This is one of Dartmouth's most attractive old streets. It is in fact the earliest street in Dartmouth to be recorded by name (in the 1200s). Its name derives from the medieval smiths and shipwrights who worked building and repairing ships here, when the river reached as high as this point.

Follow Smith Street uphill as it narrows then climbs steeply to the left. At the top bear left into Above Town.

The narrow streets, steep hills and numerous flights of steps give a feeling for what old Dartmouth would have been like.

Above Town, aptly named, is an early suburb of Dartmouth. Along the road are a number of interesting and attractive houses, some originally the homes of wealthy merchants or ex-sea captains.

Keep following Above Town - attractive views open up ahead down the estuary to the river mouth. After a while the road descends steeply to join Warfleet Road. Bear right and ahead along Warfleet Road, descending slightly. At the bottom of the hill turn left into Castle Road, rounding the top of Warfleet Creek.

This creek was once the site of a busy trading quay. It has also been the site of a ropewalk, limekilns (their remains still exist), a paper mill and a pottery. Check the information board just after the creek for more details.

Where the road forks bear right. After an initial climb keep ahead along the lane and on at the end of the parking area on the lane uphill. Keep climbing to a junction by a cottage. Bear slightly right here, still uphill, and continue climbing.

This is the most energetic climb on the walk. The path steepens, but at the top is the reward of superb views over the mouth of the Dart. On the skyline above the opposite bank is the daymark. This hollow stone tower, 24m/80 feet high, was erected by the Dartmouth Harbour Commissioners in 1864 to indicate the position of the river mouth to shipping.

Keep on to pass the rear of the coastguard cottages. Continue ahead through the gate and follow the path around the top of a bowl-like feature.

From here, there are superb views along the coast westward to the prominent landmark of Start Point and its lighthouse.

Go through the gate to a hedged green lane. At the end of the green lane continue ahead through the farmyard of Little Dartmouth Farm and along the access lane beyond to arrive at a car park. At the car park turn left and go through the gate in the far right corner.

The walk has now reached its farthest point from Dartmouth. From here it follows the Coast Path back into the town. Keep an eye open for the National Trail acorn waymarks and arrows.

Follow the path towards the sea, bearing left to stay on the cliff top at the kissing-gate and bench. Continue alongside the fence.

Ahead, the mouth of the Dart appears again with the outline of the daymark beyond. The river is quite difficult to spot out at sea, hence the importance of the daymark for navigation.

Follow the path left through the gap in the wall at the end. Shortly after passing a pond follow the path as it bears to the right, then keep on to the right-hand end of the field. Continue along a path between fields and the cliff edge.

The path passes high above some almost hidden coves here, the haunt of peregrine falcons who hunt these cliffs.

After some undulations the path descends to a grassy valley which heads down towards the sea. Turn right down this valley. Approaching the bottom, bear right along the narrower path to a stile. Cross this then turn left to descend to sea level at Compass Cove. Cross a footbridge spanning a rocky inlet.

This little ravine and the cave it ends in can make a spectacular show on a windy day or at high tide. At any time, however, this is a superb spot for a rest or to contemplate nature. The pools in the rocky platform here are also fascinating.

Follow the path alongside the rocky platform. It then begins to climb next to the mouth of the estuary.

On the opposite bank can be seen Kingswear Castle. It was built around 1500, just after the larger Dartmouth Castle, to be passed a little later, on this side of the river. At one time a chain was stretched across the river between the two castles if danger threatened.

Continue climbing, steeply at times, into woodland. The path then emerges from the woodland onto a surfaced lane. As this starts to descend, bear off right on a path descending through more woodland. At the junction at the bottom turn right, the path then zig-zagging steeply down numerous steps until it arrives above the scenic Sugary Cove.

For those who wish to explore, there are steps down to the cove.

To continue the walk, climb the steps on the far side of the cove and continue above a grassy picnic area on a wide tarmac path. At the end the path meets a lane by a parking area. Turn right here, down more steps, to arrive at Dartmouth Castle.

The castle dates largely to the 1480s. It is said to be the first castle in England designed to be used with artillery. The white tower now used for the castle shop and ticket office is more recent. It was built in the mid-19th century as a lighthouse to guide shipping into Dartmouth Harbour.

Walk down the steps next to the café and bear left at the bottom to St. Petrox church.

Although usually regarded as being closely associated with the neighbouring Dartmouth Castle, the origins of the Church are older, being medieval. There is a theory that its site is a very early Christian one, and it is dedicated to a Celtic saint. The present church dates largely to around 1640.

Pass the church and continue on the tarmac path.

For a different means of returning to Dartmouth a ferry can be taken from here back to the town during the summer.

At the road at the end of the tarmac path turn left then immediately right onto a footpath above the road.

The house on the right here is Gunfield, so called because the Royal Artillery once used to practice their firing across the river from here.

At the end of the path continue ahead along the road, retracing the walk's outward steps around Warfleet Creek. At the junction with Warfleet Road turn right, cross to the footway, and follow the road towards the town.

The road becomes South Town. Although now largely lined by Victorian villas built by wealthy 19th century Dartmothians, it was actually the town's earliest suburb, being first mentioned in 1328. It was included within the borough in 1463. It also offers superb views up the river, the Britannia Naval College prominent above the town.

Approaching the town, look out for some steps descending on the right almost opposite number 4 - there is a Coast Path sign pointing down. Turn right down these steps, which lead to Bayards Cove Castle. Remember to duck your head as you pass into the castle!

This is a little later than Dartmouth Castle, built in the 1530s. It was most unusual in being built by the town Corporation, rather than by the King or a powerful lord who were the usual castle builders at that time.

Continue beyond on to the quay at Bayards Cove.

This is the original quay area for Dartmouth. One of its claims is that it was visited by the Pilgrim Fathers in 1620 en route for New England. Note the date of 1665 built into the cobbles. It is lined by picturesque old houses, including the Old Custom House.

Continue ahead past the Dartmouth Arms then turn right to follow the Embankment back to Dartmouth Station and the Boat Float.

Further Information

A range of information is available on the South West Coast Path. Especially useful is the guidebook and accommodation list produced by the South West Coast Path Association, price £7.50 and available locally. It may also be obtained from the Discover Devon Information Service, Westacott Road, Barnstaple EX32 8AW, telephone 0810 608 5531. Quote reference DTY/DP33 and make any cheques payable to Devon County Council.

An information pack on the Dart Valley Trail (Totnes/Kingswear/Dartmouth) is available from local Tourist Information Centres price £2 or from the above address price £3.50 including post and packing. Quote reference DTY/DP42.

For further local information, there is a National Trust leaflet "Walks around Dartmouth South Devon" available from NT outlets price £0.75. The Tourist Information Centre also carries other local walks leaflets, including "Six favourite walks from Kingswear" and "Walk this way - a guide to Walks and Trails around Dartmouth and the lower Dart Valley."

For information on the wider network of walking routes in Devon obtain the free leaflet "Discover Devon-Walking" from local Tourist Information Centres or the above address. Alternatively, visit the website www.discoverdevon.com which has all the walks information.

OS maps for this walk:

Landranger (1:50,000 scale) no. 202 Torbay and South Dartmoor
Explorer (1:25,000 scale) no. OL20 South Devon.