

Walk No. 18 Sampling Beer with a Good Head

The wonderfully named village of Beer lies in Devon's south eastern corner. It sits in a steep-sided valley, surrounded by chalk cliffs. These physical constraints have enabled Beer to retain much of its old-world charm and attraction and it makes a fine starting point for a walk.

This route links Beer with the settlement of Branscombe a little to the west, returning along the South West Coast Path. It involves a couple of stiff climbs, but much of the route is along undulating cliff tops.

The walk is within the heart of the Dorset and East Devon Coast World Heritage Site. Often referred to as the "Jurassic Coast", this is England's first natural World Heritage Site, putting it on a par with the Great Barrier Reef and the Grand Canyon as one of the wonders of the natural world.

The Coast has become a World Heritage Site due to its outstanding geology, which represents 185 million years of earth history in just 95 miles. It displays not just Jurassic, but also older Triassic and younger Cretaceous rocks too. In fact, this walk is actually over Triassic geology around Branscombe and Cretaceous at Beer.

Fact File

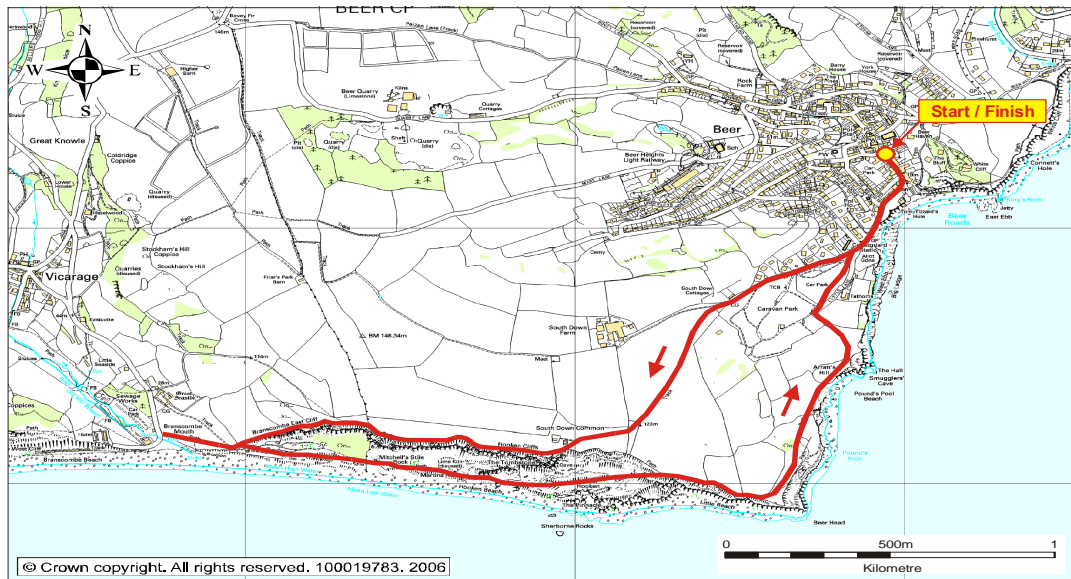
Beer may be reached by bus from Exeter, Seaton, Sidmouth and Lyme Regis.

For timetable details contact Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit www.traveline.org.uk.

Walk Length: 7km/4.5 miles; stiles: 2; 2 climbs of almost 100m/330ft.

Facilities: Beer: all facilities
Branscombe Mouth: toilets, cafe, shop, car park

The Walk



The bus stop at Beer is at the top of the village. If arriving by bus follow the main village street down towards the sea. Alternatively, if using the main village centre car park in Clapp's Lane, walk to Fore Street and turn right towards the sea.

Fishing has supplied the village's main source of income over the years, and it is worth going down to the beach where the fishing fleet is still berthed on the pebbles.

Other trades such as lace-making, quarrying and smuggling have also been important to Beer at various times. Queen Victoria's wedding dress was partly made of Beer lace, while the quarries to the west of the village date back to Roman times and have supplied stone for Exeter and Winchester Cathedrals and a range of other grand buildings such as Hampton Court, as well as many Devon churches. Smuggling was also formerly rife on this once remote coast and Beer was the home of perhaps Devon's most famous smuggler, Jack Rattenbury. Born in 1778, he became infamous for his smuggling activities in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In old age he reformed, published a book "Memoirs of a Smuggler" in 1837 and ended his days peacefully and in receipt of a pension of a shilling a week from Lord Rolle, the local major landowner.

At the bottom of the village turn right after the Anchor Inn, immediately before the steep descent to the beach, up Common Lane. As you climb, a distinctive row of flint houses is passed on the right.

This attractive row of houses was built in 1873 as estate workers' cottages by Lord Rolle.

At the junction keep going up the hill (Common Hill), keeping the car park on the left. Continue to climb this lane, soon passing Beer Head Caravan Park, then cross a cattle grid at a Private Road sign. (Do not worry, although the road is private to vehicles it is a public bridleway). Immediately after this the lane forks. Take the left-hand branch over another cattle grid onto a track, thankfully level at last.

This is South Down Common, much used for sheep and cattle grazing. If walking with a dog, it is advisable to keep it on a lead over this stretch. Looking back from this track there are superb views over Seaton and the Axe Valley and beyond, the coast to Bindon Cliffs.

Keep following the track. As it approaches the cliff top, head to the left of the Coastguard lookout tower to continue along the cliffs.

This location was used as a World War II lookout post and there were numerous other buildings here at that time. The rest of the buildings were blown up as a training exercise, but there are still some foundations to be seen.

Walk along the grassy cliff top, sea to the left.

The walk along the top of Hooken Cliffs here is a superb one on a good day. Atmospheric wind-shaped stunted trees on the edge of the cliff complement the wide sea views stretching ahead to Berry Head on the far side of Tor Bay. If it is clear, the mouth of the Exe should be visible and, nearer, Straight Point and the very prominent Peak Hill with Sidmouth at its foot.

Go through the kissing gate at the end of the cliff and continue on to the brow of the hill.

Ahead is the valley of Branscombe, running almost parallel to the coast. There is no central village but rather a scatter of hamlets strung up the valley. Some of them can be seen ahead. Towards the sea the valley bears round to end at the beach at Branscombe Mouth.

Descend the path ahead then, when the main path bears right, go left down a long flight of steps. Arriving at a field continue to descend steeply to the bottom left hand corner, then go through the gate and continue on down to Branscombe Mouth.

Branscombe Mouth has a shop, cafe, toilets and car park and is a good location for a break on this walk. Formerly quite isolated, it was another haunt for smugglers but also served as the point from which local chalk and lime, used as fertiliser, was shipped to other parts of the coast. Footpaths lead from Branscombe Mouth up the valley to Branscombe hamlets,

including “Vicarage” and further up the valley “Street”, both with much acclaimed pubs.

After a rest and refreshment at Branscombe Mouth, go back to the kissing gate at the bottom of the field and retrace your steps up the cliff, heading for the signpost at the top corner of the first field. From here, do not continue up the cliff but follow the path forking right, over the cattle grid into the caravan park.

Bear left at the first fork in the park and follow the track; just before the end of the park follow the narrower path bearing right, signposted “Coast Path, Beer”. There now follows a switchback of short climbs and descents as the path passes through the Hooken Undercliff.

The Undercliff was formed when one night in March 1790 ten acres of cliff land dropped 60-80m/200-250 feet vertically and slumped over 200m/220 yards seawards. The movement created rock columns and pinnacles still obvious today and the land was quickly colonised by nearly impenetrable vegetation. Inland there are impressive views of the cliff faces, rock strata and the scars of more recent falls. Some of the openings in the cliff face form the seaward end of the historic Beer quarries.

About half way along the Undercliff a path descends to the beach, ideal on a warm day. Beyond this, the path leaves the sea and enters the heart of the Undercliff, gradually rising until a flight of steps climbs the cliff face to a stile at the top. Cross this stile and turn right, along the cliff top.

As the path heads for the obvious white cliffs of Beer Head, look down to the beach to see evidence of yet more cliff falls. This area is the most westerly chalk outcrop in England. Associated with this chalk is flint, also the most westerly occurrence in England. In prehistoric times the flint made this an important area and during the Neolithic period Beer flints were in use throughout the South West. Possibly associated with this, traces of a prehistoric field system have been found on Beer Head. Today, flint remains in use for building, as seen in Beer.

Follow the obvious Coast Path and, after passing through two kissing gates, this bears left into Seaton Bay, following the direction of the coastline. The path leads to a green lane on the seaward side of the caravan site and car park passed on the outward leg, and so back to Common Lane and down to Beer.

Further Information

A range of information is available on the South West Coast Path; especially useful is the guide book and accommodation list produced by the South West Coast Path Association, price £6 and available locally. Alternatively, it may be obtained from Discover Devon Information Line, Westacott Road, Barnstaple EX32 8AW, telephone 0870 6085531, price £7.50 including p and p (cheques payable to Devon County Council). Quote reference DP33.

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

OS maps for this walk; Landranger (1:50,000 scale) no.192 Exeter and Sidmouth; Explorer (1:25,000 scale) no. 116 Lyme Regis and Bridport (for most of the walk) and no. 115 Exmouth and Sidmouth (for Branscombe Mouth).