

Walk No. 39 Brixham and Berry Head Fish, Penguins and an Unusual Lighthouse

Berry Head is a prominent feature on the South Devon coast, marking the southern end of the great coastal feature of Tor Bay. Across the Bay it gives views as far as the East Devon coast, while in the opposite direction the coastline heads off towards the Dart Estuary and the South Hams.

Within Tor Bay, next to the headland, and largely sheltered by it, is the ancient fishing port of Brixham. The South West Coast Path links Brixham with its neighbouring headland, and this walk uses the Coast Path to give a feel both of the open coast and also of the fishing port. To make a circuit, there is an inland link taking in part of Brixham's hinterland.

Fact File

Brixham is served by regular bus services from Torquay and Paignton and also from Kingswear, for the ferry connection with Dartmouth. For timetable details call Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit www.traveline.org.uk. There are also plentiful car parks.

Walk length: 5.5 miles/9 km; 4 stiles; no steep climbs.

Facilities: Brixham has all facilities; Berry Head has a seasonal café, toilets and visitor centre.

The Walk



Start at the statue of William of Orange, close to the Tourist Information Centre and the replica of the Golden Hind on the Strand.

The statue was erected in Victorian times. It commemorates the landing at Brixham in 1688 of William of Orange, King William III, together with his wife Mary, the daughter of the deposed King James II, on his way to London to take the throne.

From the statue turn up Fore Street, next to the Blue Anchor. Use the pedestrian crossing and walk up the pedestrianised part of Fore Street.

This is the centre of the coastal fishing port. But the original town was based further inland, and even the harbour was inland of where it now is. The old harbour has now been built over and is occupied by the modern car park and bus station area over to the right.

At the traffic lights at the end turn left into Bolton Street. Continue to another set of traffic lights and keep ahead here on Greenwood Road.

Ahead can be seen Higher Brixham church, marking the original centre of the town, positioned away from the coast for protection.

Pass the hospital, then take the next turning on the left, Castor Road. Follow Castor Road as it climbs until it levels out at the junction with St Mary's Road - there is a large tree in the middle of the junction. Turn left here, along St Mary's Road.

Follow St Mary's Road to the left, then fork right at the junction just after South Bay Holiday Park. Keep on ahead when the road becomes an unsurfaced green lane. Follow this lane, keeping ahead through a kissing gate when the track turns left and narrows. Through the kissing gate bear left and then right over an open area to a prominent gate.

The walk has now reached the South West Coast Path, and this is followed back to Brixham. Here, we are on the south side of Sharkham Point, and this spot gives views back along the coast to Scabbacombe Point. Nearer are Scabbacombe Sands and Mansands, with its old coastguard cottages.

Follow the path around Sharkham Point.

Sharkham Point is now a superb spot, with views, picnic facilities and car parking. However, in the past it has been the site of iron mines, quarries and later, a tip site.

Rounding Sharkham Point, the obvious promontory of Berry Head becomes clear ahead. Cross a stile onto a green lane and turn right. Follow this path, signed to Berry Head, as it climbs steadily up the cliff and skirts the rear of the bay between the two headlands, St Mary's Bay. On reaching a stone stile ahead do not cross but turn right, to continue skirting the rear of St Mary's Bay.

St Mary's Bay was once known as Mudstone Bay, probably because of the soft and crumbly nature of the cliffs and rocks here, but the name was dropped once tourism became important to the area.

Follow the coast path, keeping right at a junction to continue along the cliff top, behind the large slab of Durl Rock. After crossing a wooden

stile, the path rises towards some stone ramparts ahead. Arriving at a path in front of the ramparts, turn left. Follow the path to another T junction of paths.

The walk has now arrived at the South Fort guarding Berry Head. It was built as part of the fortifications of the headland for the Napoleonic Wars, when Brixham and Tor Bay were important for servicing the Navy. If you turn right here into the Southern Fort there is an information board just inside the entrance giving more details of what can be seen.

To continue, at the T junction of paths turn left (or if you have visited the fort, return to the junction and continue ahead). Follow the path along the cliff top.

The walk now continues towards the main headland. Berry Head is important as a nature conservation site, principally because it is an extensive area of limestone grassland. It supports many nationally rare plants. The cliffs are well known for the largest colony of guillemots in southern England. These distinctive birds are known locally as “Brixham penguins” because of their distinctive appearance.

Walk towards the entrance to the main fortifications on Berry Head.

The apparatus over to the left is a radio navigational aid, forming part of the UK’s Air Traffic Control system, covering a range of 80 nautical miles.

At the junction at the fort gate, turn right into the fort.

The main headland was occupied by a cliff “castle” in Iron Age times, and the name “Berry” derives from the Anglo Saxon word for a fortification, so there is a long history of defence on the headland. The defences now seen form the Northern Fort of the Napoleonic Wars, built 1794-1804 to protect Brixham and Tor Bay from French attack.

Walk to the end of the headland for some outstanding views.

On the left is Berry Head lighthouse. Built in 1906 it has the reputation of being the highest and lowest lighthouse in the country - highest because it is built at a height of 60m, or nearly 200 feet and lowest because it is only 45m or 15 feet high, to avoid being obscured by mist and low cloud.

The views from the end encompass the whole of Tor Bay and beyond to the red cliffs of the East Devon coast. In the opposite direction, views can be seen back to Sharkham Point with Scabbacombe Head beyond.

Return to the fort entrance, follow the path ahead and at the junction bear right, signposted to Brixham. Follow round the rear of old quarries as the path becomes gravelled and descends through woods and down some steps to a road. Turn right here.

The circular area was a limestone quarry and area of lime kilns, where lime was burnt to produce fertiliser.

The hotel was built as a military hospital during the Napoleonic period. Later, it became the home of the Reverend H F Lyte, vicar of Brixham, known as the writer of the famous hymn “Abide with me”.

Keep along the road to the Shoalstone car park. Turn right here, through the parking area and down the steps to the path above the swimming pool. Follow this path until it climbs back to the road, then turn right along the road.

Watch out for some steps opposite the Devoncourt Flats and go down these and on down to the end of the Brixham breakwater.

The breakwater is a considerable feature, with a length of some 3000 feet or 914m. It was built in 1893 and extended in 1909 and 1912.

At the breakwater turn left and follow the path through the parking area behind the marina (signed to Town Centre). Continue to the Inner Harbour.

The main fishing harbour is seen opposite. Fishing has always been important to Brixham and in the 1840s the town was home to some 270 fishing vessels. Although numbers are now much reduced, Brixham remains one of the premier fishing ports in the whole country.

Follow the path round to the right to return to the William of Orange statue.

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 £6.00 and available locally. Alternatively, it may be obtained via the Discover Devon Holiday Line, Westacott Road, Barnstaple, EX32 8AW, telephone 0870 608 5531, price £7.50 including postage and packing. Quote reference DP33 and make cheques payable to Devon County Council. There is also a free introductory leaflet on the Coast Path, available from the same address; quote reference DP86.

There is also a brochure on Coast and Countryside Walks in Torbay. Published by Torbay Countryside Trust, this is available at local Tourist Information outlets, price £0.50p.

For information on the wider network of walking routes in Devon, a free brochure - “Discover Devon Walking” - is available at local Tourist Information Centres or at the above address. Information is also available at the website address www.discoverdevon.com.

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