

START TO WALK

Start Bay forms an important and attractive element of the South Devon coast. The major east-facing coastline in Devon, it occupies the great sweep between the Dart Estuary in the north and the jagged headland of Start Point in the south. As with the rest of Devon's coast, it is followed faithfully by the South West Coast Path. This walk explores part of the inland landscape behind Start Bay, using the Coast Path to return to the starting point. It is based on the village of Torcross, at the southern end of one of the features which makes Start Bay so unusual, the freshwater lake of Slapton Ley, separated from the sea by a narrow strip of shingle.

Fact File

Walk Length: 4.5 miles/7.5km; five stiles; two climbs, one of 50m/165 feet, one of 70m/230 feet, but neither of which are especially steep or onerous.

Facilities: Torcross - pubs, cafés, shop, toilets, car park, buses; Beesands - pub, toilets, car park.

Torcross is accessible by the regular, and very scenic, bus service between Dartmouth and Kingsbridge; some buses continue beyond Kingsbridge to and from Plymouth. There is also a Sunday service, although less frequent. For timetable details contact Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit www.traveline.org.uk.

The Walk

Start in the centre of Torcross, outside the Start Bay Stores and Torcross Post Office.

Buses stop right here from both directions. The long-stay car park is a little way along the road towards Dartmouth, next to Slapton Ley.

During World War 2, Torcross was the base for Exercise Tiger, when American troops used the area as a practice for the D-Day Normandy landings. During the exercise, many lives were lost when the troops were attacked by a German gunboat. In 1984, a Sherman tank, lost during this disaster, was raised from the sea and positioned at the village end of the car park. Have a look at the tank and the information boards before embarking on your walk.

With your back to the Stores and Post Office, turn left and cross the road.

This takes you to the end of Slapton Ley. This is the largest freshwater lake in South West England, separated from the sea by a narrow shingle bar. The bar has been raised by rising sea levels over the 10,000 years since the last Ice Age. A variety of streams feed the Ley and there is an overflow tunnel and weir to control the level; this was constructed in 1856 to prevent flooding. The Ley is extremely important for a variety of wildlife and has been designated as a National Nature Reserve. Numerous information boards around the Ley give details of the wildlife interest.

On the opposite side of the road from the Stores, the weir and tunnel overflow at the head of the Ley are crossed. Continue alongside the road to join the marked permissive path to Stokenham.

This path was set up by the Parish Council, with the help of South Hams District Council and funding from a Lottery-backed project called Life into Landscape, with the co-operation of local landowners. Note that the first stretch is alongside the road, so take care if walking with children or dogs.

The path continues alongside the road, passing Torcross Chapel, and next to the Ley, separated from it by a narrow bed of reeds. After a little while, at the Stokeley Barton Farm Shop entrance, the path leaves the roadside and proceeds between a field and the hedge.

On the right is the shallow valley of one of the streams feeding the Ley. A new pond has been created here to enhance the wildlife value of the area even more, and has been successful in encouraging dragonflies. On the far side of the little valley can be seen Stokeley Barton, originally an 18th century farmhouse.

When the path arrives at a caravan site, turn left along the drive towards the entrance, then bear right and continue straight ahead past the reception and facilities block. At the far end go ahead past the water point, cross a lane, and continue on the path ahead through a gate. A little way beyond the path reaches a field edge with the tower of Stokenham church prominent ahead. Continue ahead and the path soon enters Stokenham village at the church car park.

Stokenham church is on the right. There was a church here in the 1100s, but the present building dates largely from the 1400s, with restoration having taken place in the 19th century. During the exercises for World War 2 the whole area had to be evacuated and at that time some damage did occur to the church, although most of this was relatively superficial.

Stokenham is a very picturesque village and you may wish to turn right next to the church to look at its attractive cottages and the 17th century Tradesman's Arms. Alternatively, of course, a break may be taken at the Church House Inn, right next to the walk.

To continue the walk, on arriving opposite the Church House Inn turn left to the main road. Turn right along the verge here then immediately cross the road and take the minor lane opposite which bears off to the left. Follow this lane uphill for a short way then bear right by an old barn, along a green lane which continues to climb, signed as a Public Byway.

Initially the byway is cut deeply into the surrounding landscape, the bedrock forming the surface of the track. The South Hams is criss-crossed by a quite extensive network of these so-called green lanes, affording an ideal way to explore the countryside in a quiet and unobtrusive way. They also act as important wildlife corridors.

The byway levels out and at the top arrives at a junction of surfaced lanes. Turn left here. A little way along this lane keep left at the fork. After passing the entrance to Mattiscombe Farm, there is a junction with a narrow lane on the left. Opposite this lane, on the right, is a public footpath through a metal kissing-gate.

Go through the gate into the field and cross directly ahead. Continue ahead next to the wood, keeping it to your right, and through another metal kissing-gate at the top. At the surfaced drive turn left for just a few metres then bear off right along a path into trees and shrubs. This path emerges at a stile into a field.

This area is part of the estate of Widdicombe House. Although the house is not visible from the path, it does have a number of claims to fame, including that it was said to have been once owned by Captain Cook, the explorer. More recently the house and the estate was used by General Eisenhower during the Second World War as his headquarters and as a centre for US servicemen while they were in the area training for the D-Day landings.

Go ahead along the left-hand field edge to another stile. Cross this and continue ahead downhill along the left side of the next large field.

Superb views now open up ahead of the Widdicombe Valley. The valley is drained by a stream which is blocked off from the sea by another shingle bar which creates a smaller version of Slapton Ley. This, Widdicombe Ley, will be seen later in the walk. On the opposite side of the valley is the little village of Beeson.

Descend to the gate in the bottom left-hand corner of the field and go through. Bear right then almost immediately left, keeping the farm building to your right. Continue down the track then take the right hand of two gates ahead, into a green lane.

At the bottom the path crosses the Widdicombe stream, the feeder for Widdicombe Ley.

The path then climbs and meets a wide track which soon leads to the attractive little village of Beeson.

More a hamlet than a village, Beeson has a number of 18th century farmhouses. Like so many of the earlier settlements, it was established a little way inland, out of the way of both storms and pirates, both of which could be deadly.

At the first junction in the village turn left, downhill, and follow the lane round to the right. At the next junction turn left.

Although not a busy road, it is busier than any other length of the walk so take a little care on this stretch. On the left will soon be seen Widdicombe Ley, the smaller version of Slapton Ley.

The road descends, turning right then left. At a sharp right hand turn after the double bend, by a metal gate, bear off left to a stile. Cross this then follow the right-hand field edge down towards the sea. Go across another stile and at the bottom of the next field, a third. Now cross the green ahead to the track next to the boulders. The walk has now arrived at the South West Coast Path.

To the right along the track is the village of Beesands - those in need will find public toilets and a public house, whichever is preferred. There is also a good view from here around the southern end of Start Bay to Start Point and its lighthouse. The point gets its name from the Saxon word "steort", meaning a tail, and a very good description it is for the distinctive jagged headland.

To the left the view goes all the way round to the mouth of the Dart. On the skyline beyond can be seen the distinctive shape of the Daymark, built in the 19th century to help mariners find the Dart Estuary from out at sea.

The whole sweep of Start Bay is very vulnerable to easterly storms and that is the reason for the boulders being positioned along the top of the beach since they offer protection for the low-lying area behind.

The walk now returns to Torcross along the South West Coast Path, guided by signposts and the National Trail acorn symbol.

Walk along the track next to the boulders, sea to the right. Continue to the end of the track then follow it inland, to the left, next to the cottages as it becomes a footpath.

This is the site of Beeson Cellars, the original site of the fishing settlement here. Now superseded by Beesands, this spot was once renowned as a centre for crabbing.

Follow the path behind the cottage garage and start climbing steadily.

Towards the top of the climb there is an excellent viewpoint, showing Widdicombe Ley, the whole valley and Beeson and the sweep of the bay down to Start Point. At this point the path is inland of an old slate quarry. One of the several such quarries formerly found in the area, it was worked from the 1300s until the 1800s. Records show it was offered for sale in 1855 together with a steam engine, slate planing machine and pump. Production stopped when higher quality Cornish and Welsh slate became more widely available.

The path starts to descend and passes through a gate to cross a field, heading back towards the sea.

As the path descends the sweep of Slapton Sands and Slapton Ley come into view ahead. This is a particularly good vantage point to appreciate the scale of the shingle ridge, known

locally as the Slapton Line, and its importance as a means of communication to and from the area following the building of the road in the 1860s.

Go through the gate at the end of the field and follow the path ahead, keeping to the Coast Path as it turns right, left then right again. The path arrives at some steps down and under a little tunnel to emerge at the end of the beach at Torcross.

Torcross grew in the 19th century as a holiday destination - notice the date on the Torcross Hotel on the left. It has also had its share of storm damage over the years, and the modern sea defences dating from 1980 are testament to the need to prevent such occurrences.

Turn left alongside the Torcross Hotel to the Start Bay Stores and the walk's starting point.

Further Information

For details of the South West Coast Path, an annual guide including an accommodation list is published by the South West Coast Path Association, price £6 and available in bookshops and Tourist Information Centres. It may also be obtained from the Discover Devon Information Service, Westacott Road, Barnstaple, EX32 8AW, telephone 0870 608 5531, price £7.50 including post and packing - quote reference DTY/DP33.

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

OS maps for this walk:-

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