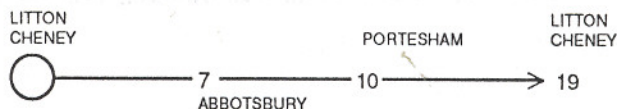


West Dorset Enigma

This is a varied walk that will let you savour the captivating charm and tranquility of the five Dorset villages of Litton Cheney, Puncknowle, West Bexington, Abbotsbury and Portesham. Combine this with the exhilarating views of the Dorset coastline and you have the perfect ingredient for a super walk to map read and one that you may well want to repeat.



LITTON CHENEY is a deceptively large village that lies in a hollow in the Bride Valley and is best approached from the main A35. Turning left by a small sign pointing to Litton Cheney, the road is quite steep and runs straight between beech trees. At the junction turn right and drive on through the village passing the church of St. Mary higher up on your right, taking the first left where you should find ample room for parking down a street flanked by stone cottages.

After sampling the atmosphere of what village life is like early morning whilst kitting up, walk down the road towards Litton Cheney's only pub — the White Horse. Here you leave the road opposite a Youth Hostel and head SSW along a well marked through the Bride Valley. First cross a small footbridge and turn immediately left over the stile heading for the corner of the hedge to your left before striking out for the opposite corner of the field where you will cross the River Bride. Continue sharp left into the next field then SW looking for the gap approx. half way down the hedge. Continue SW following the yellow footpath signs. Eventually you will reach a field that depending on which time of the year you are doing this walk could find yourself navigating a way through 8ft. high sweet corn! Follow a SW compass bearing to an opening half way along the hedge opposite and into the last field where you will exit by a gate in the top right corner. Go up the road and turn right into the main street of Puncknowle — pronounced 'Punnel' by the locals. This is a typical old English village, complete with school, pub, Manor House, church and farm — all seemingly on the main street. Note the village school on the corner. Continue west down the street, passing the olde-worlde charm of the village pub — The Crown Inn (a most recommendable hostelry to drive back to and round off in style a great day). Opposite on the left is the Manor House, once the home of Colonel Henry Shrapnel — inventor of the Shrapnel Bomb. Just past here look for a footpath sign on the left that will take you to Clay Lane and West Bexington. Climb steadily and where the track broadens look carefully for a small gate on the left in the trees (it can easily be missed). Go through this and continue climbing steadily south following the track round SE to eventually join Clay Lane. In approx. 400yds. a small detour can be taken by a path on your right past the

Knoll Plantation to the crest where the remains of a small square stone coastguard lookout stands. Originally it consisted of a one up and one down and has the most staggering of all views — and well worth a visit!

Rejoining Clay Lane continue on to the top, crossing the B3157 and taking the track opposite that will take you down into West Bexington. Continue on down this track, eventually coming out at the top of the village where you can always buy home-grown fresh organic vegetables from a garden wall, placing your money down a drainpipe that must obviously run to the cash register! Pass the Egon Ronay rated Manor Hotel on your left (another first class venue for a nosh albeit a little expensive) and continue down the hill to join the Dorset Coast Path. Turning left you now have almost a three-mile stretch of this foreshore to complete before turning inland towards Abbotsbury. High on the sky-line to your left is the Abbotsbury Hill Fort — your objective for mid-afternoon.

Visitors to Abbotsbury come from all over the world to see the famous Swannery. The village itself is a charming huddle of stone houses — many with thatched roofs. Keep to the path as it skirts around the chapel of St. Catherine, standing all alone on Chapel Hill. Do not take the first or second exits on your left, but keep to the main path with the chapel in your sights on your right. Shortly you will reach the main junction. Here another detour is possible if you wish to visit the chapel, otherwise turning left will bring you into this delightful village. A good time to take a well-earned break as a local store stands at the end of the path ready to serve ice-creams and drinks.

Follow the main road through the village, passing the Ilchester Arms on your right. Keep to this road following it round to the left and out of Abbotsbury towards the Swan pub. Just about opposite and past the last of some newly-built stone cottages take the track left and on following it round you will see the start of the dismantled railway section that runs to the left of a private house — complete with appropriate sign. Continue eastwards, looking for the “ghost train” and passing derelict buildings of a by-gone era, until you eventually reach the road at Portesham. Turn left here and it is only a short walk to the Kings Arms for an idyllic pub lunch. Take time to look at the house once belonging to Thomas Masterman Hardy. It’s the one guarded by a pair of stone lions just below the pub garden.

After a good beverage continue north through the village to the Village Stores on the right hand corner. Just opposite is one of the most picturesque village duck ponds that I have seen. Continue on round the corner taking the footpath on the right marked to Hardy’s monument. Follow this track up the hill to the very top (very easy to make the mistake of following a wide path into a field on the left). This is a steepish climb, but the views from the top all around are quite superb. At the top turn left and follow the wall round to the right where you will eventually join the main track descending towards Black Down Barn — where I have sheltered from many a storm. Bearing left just afterwards will put you back on the Inland Coastal Path. Cross over the stone stile and keep the wall to your left. Towards the end of the second field look for another stone stile on the left. This will take you on another short detour to the Hell Stone — an ancient burial chamber and well worth a visit. From here you can either retrace your steps to the original path or cross the field diagonally behind the Hell Stone, exiting at the corner. Here you are faced with two styles. Take the right one and proceed across the field to exit on to the road.

Turn left and cross the road to pick up the track on the right that takes you up by a wood, keeping the fence or wall to your right. Views along this section are quite dramatic as they

unfold before you. Continue on through gate passing an ancient stone circle until you eventually reach a "new" metallic gate and can see the road ahead. Don't go through this, but take the style just before to your left and follow the path through the shrub until you reach the road.

Bear left on the road and after a few yards go through the gate on the right heading SSW. Strike due west on reaching the footpath sign, walking parallel with the wood on White Hill Plantation. Super views abound here over Abbotsbury with Golden Cap in the distance. Continue west until you eventually reach a lane which is directly beneath the Iron Age Fort of Abbotsbury Castle, built between 550 BC and AD 50.

Follow this lane down northwards. Where the track bears right towards Ashley Chase continue along the path ahead, gradually descending to Park's Dairy Farm where superb cheeses are made. Pass on through the farm until you reach Rowden Bridge and a T-junction. Cross the road and climb a new-type style heading for a gap almost in the middle of the field at the top. Exit this field between a gap in the cottages — if you miss this gap you can still exit by climbing a style that will take you through a small allotment. Out on the road take the lane due west (almost opposite). If you have exited from the allotment, turn left and climb the hill to reach same lane. This lane will bring you back to your starting point and another 19 miles under your belt.

Depending on the time of year, the ice-cold stream is a delight to cool your feet off in before heading off for that well earned meal at The Crown in Puncknowle!

FACT FILE

Distance — 19 miles

Time — Allow 7/8 hours

Maps

OS Pathfinder SY49/59 OS Pathfinder 1331

OS Pathfinder 1332 Outdoor Leisure 15

Start/Finish Parking

Litton Cheney — Grid Ref 550905

Terrain

A good long walk using field paths, tracks and dismantled rail track

Refreshments

Local store/pubs at Abbotsbury

Kings Arms, Portesham

Crown Inn, Puncknowle

White Horse, Litton Cheney

Toilets

Coastal Path, Abbotsbury, Portesham

Accomm: — YH at Litton Cheney

Tourist Information

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