

50 Fascinating and Fun Facts About Dorset

Contributed by participants on the Dorset LDWA social walk from Beaminster on Sun 29th May 2022

1. Dorset is one of only five counties that doesn't have a motorway running through it.
2. Around Dorset, builders doing renovations of old houses have found the mummified remains of ox hearts with nails in them. This was an ancient practice designed to deter witches; witches were believed to come down the chimney!
3. The Eiffel Tower is 259.2 miles from North Poorton in Dorset (a village visited on the walk).
4. In 1915 HMS Formidable sank off Lyme Regis and 540 sailors perished, the bodies were brought ashore and laid out in the Pilot Boat Inn. The collie dog at the pub licked the face of one of the corpses and miraculously the man came back to life. It is believed that this was the origin of the Hollywood legend of 'Lassie'.
5. In 1997 a 12 mile diameter crater on Mars was named after Swanage.
6. Zig-zag Hill (B3081) near Shaftesbury is the bendiest road in Britain.
7. Juthware was a beautiful Halstock girl in the 7th century, well known for her piety. She was falsely accused by her jealous stepmother of being pregnant and when Juthware's brother learned of this rumour he beheaded her in a fit of rage. The headless body of Juthware picked up the severed head and carried it to the church, placing the head on the altar before finally dying. She was martyred in Halstock soon after and became St Juthware (Judith). The village sign still depicts this event.
8. The first airman to receive the Victoria Cross is buried on a hillside just south of Beaminster and the grave is in the shape of an aeroplane.
9. In 2012 a terrible landslip at Beaminster Tunnel caused the death of two people in a car which became buried in mud.
10. Dorset is a very old county and features on the 2nd century Roman world atlas of Claudius Ptolemy. It was at this time called Durotriges and this was changed by the Saxons to Dorosaete.
11. Dorset's oldest church is over 1000 years old – St Martin's Church Wareham. It is famous for holding the effigy of Lawrence of Arabia. This effigy was sculpted by Eric Kennington, the official war artist for WW1 and WW2 and was supposed to be placed in St Paul's Cathedral. T.E. Lawrence proved too politically controversial for St Paul's, and the effigy was also turned down by Westminster Abbey and Salisbury Cathedral. Hence it was finally installed at Wareham, near where Lawrence lived.
12. Dorset used to include Poole and Bournemouth but now the councils are administered separately and Dorset Council includes fewer industrial areas.
13. Creech Barrow is the oldest place name in Purbeck and its Celtic name means mound or hill.
14. The old name of 'Dorsetshire' means the place of fisticuffs.
15. The River Jordan lies in Dorset, it is only 3.5 miles long and flows from Sutton Poyntz to Bowleaze Cove near Weymouth. Part of its former route has been recently restored by removing a section which had been turned into a mill-leet.
16. The Dorset flag is a gold background with a red edged white cross. It is also called the St. Wite's Cross after the Dorset saint buried at Whitchurch Canonorum.
17. The Famous Five books by Enid Blyton were inspired by her childhood holidays in Dorset. The castle on the fictional Kirrin Island was based on Corfe Castle.

18. There used to be an army camp in the small village of Litton Cheney and in 1943 General Eisenhower visited to award the troops medals.
19. New Zealand can be found in Dorset; it is in Bridport.
20. The Monmouth Rebellion was an attempt to overthrow King James II and began at Lyme Regis.
21. England's oldest active post-box is at Barnes Cross, Bishops Caundle.
22. The film 'African Queen' starring Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn was partly filmed in Dorset. In some scenes supposedly depicting the 2920 mile long River Congo, you actually see Dorset's River Piddle.
23. Dorset has historically had two 'highest points'. Pilsdon Pen (277m) was once thought to be the highest point, but more recent digital data shows that Lewesdon Hill (279m) is actually the county top. Dorset also has 4 Marilyns but one of them is a 'fake' Marilyn. Can you find out which one?
24. Brownsea Island is where the scouting movement began in 1907, founded by Lord Baden Powell.
25. The Jurassic Coast was the first ever natural site to be listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.
26. The first fossil shop in the World was opened in 1826 by Mary Anning. She was a self-taught fossil expert and struggled to gain recognition for her work as a result of her gender. She was the inspiration for the tongue-twister "She sells sea shells on the sea shore".
27. Bridport was registered as *Brideport* in 1086 Domesday book. The town was the location of a mint which produced silver pennies marked with 'BRIDIAN'.
28. The Dorset Naga Chilli is one of the hottest chillis rated at 923,000 on the Scoville Heat Scale.
29. On the 10th July 1967 electric trains first ran between Bournemouth and Waterloo.
30. A well known national food company sells a cheesecake called 'Litton Cheney' which is 4 tiers high, serves 90 people, weighs 4.6 Kg and costs £74.99.
31. The delightfully named village of Shitterton near Bere Regis means the settlement on the river used as a sewer. It's much more pleasant today!
32. Catherine Parr (6th wife of Henry VIII) used to live in Marnhull.
33. A lady came on a Dorset fossil walk in 2015 and found a unique fossil of a starfish. There has still not been another one found anywhere in the World. Unfortunately the lady left without realising that she could have asked for the species to be named after her, and she could not be traced.
34. Sir Frederick Treves was a renowned surgeon who went to school in Dorchester. He is credited with saving the life of King Henry VII by treating his appendicitis 2 days prior to the coronation. At the time, surgery for appendicitis was associated with a very high mortality rate, but Treves decided that the future king would die anyway if not treated. Treves was subsequently awarded the Freedom of Dorchester. Ironically Treves later himself died of appendicitis.
35. The Black Death or plague first came to Britain in 1348 through the port of Melcombe Regis, carried by rats aboard a French ship.
36. Bridport had 43 pubs in 1800, as water was polluted. Only 3 out of 10 children survived to age of 10, or even less.
37. The original Posy Tree at Mapperton marked the spot where the local plague victims were collected prior to removal to a burial site away from the village. It was so named because mourners carried posies of flowers to mask the smell and, they thought, to

- protect themselves against infection. It may have been the origin of the nursery rhyme “Ring a ring of roses, a pocket full of posies, A-tishoo! A-tishoo! We all fall down”.
38. Thomas Hardy (author) is buried in Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey but his heart is buried in Stinsford near Dorchester which is where Hardy himself wanted to be buried. The surgeon who removed the heart left the body unattended for a moment and a cat came in and ate part of the heart. It was decided that the cat should be killed and buried alongside Hardy’s heart.
 39. The South-West Coast path is currently England’s longest national trail is 630 miles long and runs along the coast of Dorset to terminate at Poole.
 40. John le Carre, pen name of the famous author was born in Poole, named David Cornwell.
 41. There were three renowned men from Dorset called Thomas Hardy (or Hardye)
 - i. Thomas Hardye, after whom the 2ndary school in Dorchester is named, was born in the 1500s at Sydling St Nicholas and gave money towards the teaching of local children.
 - ii. His distant relative Vice Admiral Sir Thomas Hardy (no e) was born in 1769 at Kingston Russell House, Long Bredy and went on to command HMS Victory at the Battle of Trafalgar.
 - iii. Thomas Hardy poet and author was born in 1840 at Stinsford near Dorchester. He wrote many novels based around places in Dorset.
 42. St Wite was an Anglo-Saxon woman who lived as a hermit on the cliffs and was killed defending Dorset residents against a Viking raid. King Alfred the Great built a church to honour her. Her remains at Whitchurch Canonorum was once a shrine of popular pilgrimage, in fact it is one of only two shrines to have survived the destruction of Henry VIII, the other being St Edward the Confessor in Westminster Abbey.
 43. Dorset’s Jurassic Coast is a UNESCO World Heritage site and represents the best fossil record for 185 million years of history (250 – 65 million years ago) anywhere in the world.
 44. Benjamin Jesty was a farmer who lived in Yetminster. In 1774 he realised that milkmaids who caught a mild illness called Cowpox did not catch Smallpox. He took the brave decision to ‘vaccinate’ his wife and 2 children with puss from an infected cow and thus carried out the first vaccination (22 years before Edward Jenner, who has been widely credited).
 45. Many old fingerpost road signs in Dorset include the grid reference on the post.
 46. Arthur Conan Doyle is said to have been inspired to write The Hound of the Baskervilles after a stay at Parnham House near Beaminster when a creature howled all night. It is known locally as the Beast of Beaminster.
 47. Dorset is the only county with an Ordnance Survey recorded place name of ‘Scratchy Bottom’ (near Lulworth). It is of some relief to know that there is also a place nearby called ‘Happy Bottom’ (near Corfe Mullen).
 48. Sir Walter Raleigh, one time favourite of Queen Elizabeth I built Sherborne New Castle.
 49. Bridport was planned by Alfred (who became King Alfred the Great) to defend against Viking attacks that were happening in the North. Bridport was never attacked.
 50. The Dorset Horn sheep is the only British breed of sheep that can naturally breed all year round.