



West Devon

Sharkham Point to Man Sands



Basic Hike: from Sharkham Point (just west of Brixham) south along coast to Man Sands before returning inland via lanes and footpaths.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure 20 – South Devon.

Distance and going: four miles at most – steep in one or two places.

This walk explores the vicinity of Sharkham Point and the wild and wonderful coast south of Brixham.

First, you must add an hour to your schedule if you are going to access this hike by driving through Torbay – which, almost inevitably, you will have to do. Even the little back-road bypass around the top of the vast urban conglomeration is a so-slow nightmare at this time of year.

Having at last found your way to Brixham, head for the old higher town and find the little road that heads up the hill above the church. It weaves about all over the place, but what you're looking out for are signs to Sharkham Point.

Do not despair when you see the lane shrink to almost nothing – you still have a right of vehicular access, but you might have a panic attack if something comes the other way. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that if you are bad at reversing, forget it – the tiny lane has few passing places and you might have to go backwards for half-a-mile.

The fearless and the patient are rewarded by a large car park which offers instant and scenic access to Sharkham Point. This is the next big headland south of Berry Head and, across the ultra-marine waters of St Mary's Bay, you are treated to a fine panorama of that imposing promontory.

We are about to enter the antidote to Torbay. The English Riviera is a pleasant enough place, but it is far too over-developed for the rural tastes of some country walkers. The coast

south of Brixham offers instant and pleasurable relief. It is wild, and it is beautiful.

Having left the car we first made a little detour out to the end of Sharkham Point before sojourning to the south. There, a few hundred yards off the tip, was Man Rock. I tell you this because we are about to walk to Man Sands, and I've been wondering who this Man could have been? If any readers know, I'd love to hear.

The beginning of the walk is more west than south, as you stroll over a great grassy down which is popular with dog-walkers and picnickers alike. You can see why, the elevated field offers superb views of the wild coast all the way down to Scabbacombe Head.

Across a stile and we're into National Trust land. We're also into orchid country – there was a profusion of early purple-spotted orchids along the wayside last week and you get plenty of time to look at them because the path does quite an Alpine job of climbing Southdown Cliff. We also saw a slow-worm – which made my companion jump because for a brief moment she thought it was something altogether more viperous and her be-sandalled feet were just inches from its nose.

At the southern end of Southdown Cliff there's a picnic spot par-excellence which offers aerial views of Man Sands far below, as well as panoramas of the coast to the south.

Now it's a matter of plunging down to those lonely sands. Man Sands is one of the fastest changing natural environments in the country - if that sounds like a rather extraordinary statement, then it's worth knowing that the National Trust recently set about deliberately "devaluing" the land behind the remote South Devon beach.

Where farmers had for decades drained low fields as best they could for agricultural purposes, suddenly there was a change of policy. What the trust wanted was for Mother Nature to have her way and, with the help of its local tenant farmer, the organisation set about letting the area flood.

However, having created a brand new 2.5-acre wetland, the trust now admits the entire area might well change again.

"If global warming raises sea levels or we get an increase in storms, then the shingle ridge might breach and then the whole area would become brackish," says the trust's local warden, Mike Ingram, explaining that this would change the local environment even more dramatically.

Lake or no lake we were very glad to be lolling about in this lonely cove for an hour or so before beginning the hot and stuffy work of finding an inland route back to the car. To do this we went up Mansands Lane, past Southdown Farm and north again to Southdown Cross. Here we turned right and made my way along Yards Lane before finding a little path which took me back down the hill to the car park at Sharkham Point.

Only three-and-a-half – four miles at the most – but a walk of airy views and with banks of flowers, seabirds aplenty and a hidden cove thrown in for good measure. What more could

an over-travelled hack ask for? And I'm sure if I can find the time – you can too.