



South Devon

Start Point

In the Westcountry it's easy to go headland happy, peninsula potty, cape crazy or even become a foreland fanatic. And why not? The south pointing headlands in particular are the finest jewels in our coastal crown - places where you can get a last blast of the intense bright light that comes bouncing off the sea.

That's what happens on the handsome protuberances of England's underbelly. These great bastions of land stretch out into a cauldron of light and the stuff comes bouncing up at you from three magnificent, glaring, sides.

Lizard, Dodman, Rame and Prawle - the names are enough to send happy shivers down any Westcountry walkers spine. Start Point is no exception in this illuminated roll of honour. Moreover, like all promontories, it makes for ideal walking territory although you need a good head for heights.

Oddly enough, given all this joy and light, our route begins at a place that is both melancholic and forlorn. Indeed, the lost village of Hallsands is probably one of the Westcountry's saddest sights - if you consider it was once a merry, thriving fishing community.

But it was doomed. You realise this as soon as you park down by the pleasant little beach. A big, boarded-up hotel dominates the hillside as if to advertise the sorry fate of the village that once lay beyond. The dilapidated pile is perched just feet from the sea. Part of its drive has disappeared over the cliff-edge.

Many Devon-lovers will be aware of the story of Hallsands. Basically the community was condemned thanks to the actions of man - indeed, the Royal Navy may as well have turned up with a couple of destroyers, shelled the place and had done with it. It was a gigantic dredging operation to supply gravel for the development of the Naval Dockyard at Devonport, that probably caused the 37 houses in the village to slip into the sea. Half-a-million tons of the stuff was taken from an area called Skerries Bank just offshore.

Consequently the beach level dropped four metres in a few years leading up to 1904 - and the natural sea-defences were gone. After a series of storms, the village went the same way as its beach. The worst incident occurred in January 1917 when 24 of the remaining houses were destroyed.



Basic Hike: from Hallsands to Start Point - west to Lannacombe Bay before returning inland over the ridge.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure 20 - South Devon

Distance and going: four miles, easy going - although one section has scary drops.

One or two intact cottages still cling to the narrow ledge and beyond them are the remains of a few others. But the path down to the houses is barred and bolted and you have to peer from a viewing platform where an interpretation board tells you about the disaster. Copies of old sepia photos show a bustling place (women in aprons, boys with barrels, washing lines, smoking chimneys) although you can see how the sea wall is already falling asunder. One picture shows a family evacuating a cottage, carrying their bits of furniture amidst the rubble of what was once a main street.

One little known fact about this lost community is that they used to keep Newfoundland dogs here and the creatures were specially trained to swim out beyond the breakers so that they could return holding the end of a boat's rope in their teeth. At least, this is what someone has told me - and I'd be interested to hear from readers as to whether or not the story is true.

From the lost village the coast path begins its gentle ascent along a curving, bracken covered hillside, towards Start Point.

The path is a delight - which ever way you look there are stunning views. Over your shoulder Devon's coast marches north past Beesands and the great blonde thread of Slapton Sands to Dartmouth and the hills of Brixham beyond. To the south Start Point stabs the channel like a serrated dagger.

We reach a stone stile at the top of the ridge and this introduces us to the Trinity House lane that hugs vertiginous slope until it terminates at the lighthouse. And here we were met by an angry group of mums.

«Outrageous,» snorted one lady, leading a toddler up the lane. «We read the lighthouse was open and we've walked all the way down there with the kids. Imagine their disappointment when they found the place closed.»

The lighthouse is a bit of a detour - but you owe it to yourself to go down there to the end of the point. We detoured and did indeed find the lighthouse closed. Why the place should have been advertised as open the day we were there, I cannot say.

The light was built in 1836 and has a range of 20.8 miles. Start Point used to be a killing ground for ships - the list of wrecks is frightening - in March 1891 no fewer than six vessels came to grief in the vicinity in just 30 days.

When you see the speed of the tide-race this comes as no surprise. It's like gazing at rapids in a fast-flowing river. A powerful motor launch would have difficulty fighting the worst of it, let alone some old sailing boat.

We climbed the serrated ridge from the lighthouse and made our way inland - which was exciting and no doubt dangerous. Above a steep slope called The Warren we rejoined the coast path (which actually has a sign warning you of the dangers of the particular section) and turned west around an area known as The Benches.

The path weaved its aerial way to reach Great Mattiscombe Sand where a footpath headed inland up a valley to reach the stone stile we climbed earlier. So now it's just a case of retra-

cing our footsteps down to Hallsands to complete what is a lasso-shaped hike.

You could though, continue to Lannacombe Beach, which is a tremendous idea. From there you'd make your way via inland lanes back to Hallsands.