



## West Dorset

### Abbotsbury

Because of its geological make-up, East Dorset provides an entirely different walking environment than any other area in the Westcountry, and Chesil Beach is unlike anywhere else in the world.

The best centre for introducing anyone to the famous shingle ridge is the picturesque village of Abbotsbury situated at the western end of the eight-mile long lagoon known as The Fleet.

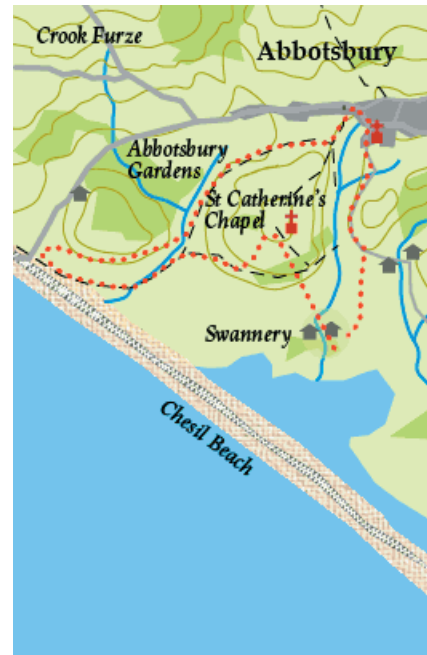
A treeless, grassy and steep-edged limestone ridge runs parallel with the English Channel, a mile or so inland. Its vertiginous flanks descend into a sea-borne vale, which is bordered to the south by The Fleet. Between the Fleet and the sea is Chesil Bank.

It is a landscape formula born in heaven, especially at the Abbotsbury end. The village is tucked just under the steep ridge and it is one of those picture postcard, chocolate-box, affairs. Every ancient house is built of a wonderful honey coloured stone and almost every building is thatched. To go with all this attractiveness there are, of course, the requisite galleries, antique shops, et al.

There is also the Swannery, and it was from this estimable establishment that this walk begins. If you don't want to visit the big white birds, you could always attack this walk from the other end – i.e. by going down the lane past Abbotsbury Tropical Gardens to the car park on the beach.

Anyone who has been to this delightful corner of the south coast will know St Catherine's Chapel. It is the marvellous old building that sits upon the crown of the dome-like hill just west of the village – a seaside version of Glastonbury Tor. It was built by the abbots referred to in the name Abbotsbury and it is one of the only buildings that remain of their once splendid estates.

It was my first port of call. By leaving the Swannery car park I was able to join the South West Coast Path and start to climb St Catherine's Hill. After a few hundred metres the coast path swung left to traverse the lower slips of the grassy eminence, but another path veered off to the right and ascended to the summit. This is well worth doing because you can enjoy spectacular views of both the entire length of the Fleet and of the village. You also learn that St Catherine was the patron saint of spinsters. A Dorset rhyme makes the following plea:



*Basic hike: from Abbotsbury Swannery up to St Catherine's Chapel and then west along coast path to Chesil Bank – returning via the bridleway to Abbotsbury village.*

*Recommended map: Ordnance Survey OL 15.*

*Distance and going: very easy going – steep in just one short section.*

*For more information on the Swannery phone: 01305 871858.*

Sweet St Catherine send me a husband  
A good one I pray.  
But arn-a-one better than narne-a-one  
Oh St Catherine, Lend me thine aid,  
And grant that I never may die an old maid.

There was a large Benedictine Abbey at Abbotsbury (hence, obviously, the name) but it was almost entirely destroyed during the Dissolution. This lofty chapel is one of the only bits that remain. It's built entirely out of local stone (including the stone slates) – and was saved from ruin because it was an extremely useful landmark for mariners crossing dangerous Lyme Bay.

I headed south-west back down over the hill to rejoin the coast path which crossed a few fields to enter a rather lovely and lonely valley. In the very bottom of this unspoilt vale I turned left along a tamarisk-lined track which led to the giant shingle ridge and the sea.

There always seem to be lonesome anglers dotted along the ridge – and the fishermen at this western end park their vehicles in a car park just behind the beach. Behind it a small lane leads up the hill past the tropical gardens and you could go that way to follow a number of footpaths inland back to Abbotsbury.

But I returned to the tamarisk valley and walked back up to the point where I'd joined it. There, instead of turning east across the fields back to the Swannery, I continued up the valley along the bridleway, past the farm, to reach the outskirts of Abbotsbury. A lane took me along the backs of gardens until it introduced me to the very centre of the village and I strolled about for a while, admiring the huge tithe barn and a few other remnants of the abbey as I went.

It is a truly stunning part of the world to visit, and it reminded me that east is just as good as west when it comes to walking in the wonderful Westcountry peninsula.