



West Somerset

West Somerset Coast Path



Three years ago in this newspaper I was calling for an extension of the South West Coast Path to run east along the West Somerset shoreline to reach the mouth of the River Parrett - thereby linking it to inland routes that stretch all the way to its southerly leg on the English Channel. Now it has been done we ought to flaunt the fact that this region boasts the biggest circular walk in the world by making it a marketing opportunity.

As a bow to this 630-mile circular route, we begin this walk at the famous map sculpture on Minehead seafront where West Somerset Coast Path meets the coast path proper. We turn east, not west, and walk a mile along the prom to the golf club on the other side of the bay.

Soon the madding crowds of Butlins - Europe's largest holiday centre - give way to the relative silence of Madbrain Sands. That's the skerry which lurks under the waves just off Warren Point. Round this point on the new coast path between the golf course and the sea, and you are well on your way to an altogether more beautiful section of the Westcountry littoral.

If the tide is out you might spot two or three of the country's only remaining working medieval fish-weirs - 'V' shaped walls that have been catching the Bristol Channel's rich haul for centuries.

The footpath leads along the coastal length of the golf course to Dunster Beach. That's where you'll see some wonderful old-fashioned seaside chalets like the ones they used to build

Basic Hike: from Minehead east along coast to Watchet, then inland to Williton and up the hill to St Audries.

Recommended Map: Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure 9 Exmoor - but the walk is easy to follow thanks to the new ammonite waymarks.

Distance and Going: 10 miles, easy going, not steep but can be muddy in latter stages.

when people drove about in cars with attractive names like Humber Snipe and Bullnose Morris.

Behind the chalets you'll catch glimpses of a lake called The Hawn. It's all that remains of the old port of Dunster. Mariners of yore used to call in here and go up to the church in the mediaeval village to thank a merciful God for allowing them safe-landing. To leave their mark, they'd climb onto the church roof in the main village and scratch a line around their boot in the lead and leave their name. The marks are still there, and what is remarkable is how small those old seamen must have been, judging by the size of their feet. A diversion up to ancient Dunster is one of the excellent opportunities offered by the new path - and well worth the while.

The path continues along the edge of the shore to Blue Anchor, but most people simply walk across the wide sweeping beach if the tide is out. Don't go too far though, or you'll find out why the anchors around here are hauled up blue. You'll still be finding traces of the fine, smelly mud weeks later.

We continue east around Blue Anchor Bay until we reach the point where the new sea wall ceases. Then we climb the ramp and head up the hill past the pub until we see a footpath on the left. This is a permissive part of the new right of way and allows walkers to get off what is a rather dangerous section of road. It leads up to the woods before heading down through the trees towards the cliffs, where it turns right for Watchet.

Now there's a wonderful couple of miles walked in true South West Coast Path style: i.e. the clifftop route pops up and down like a roller coaster all the way.

It's an isolated and picturesque piece of coast and the newly refurbished path is easy to follow as it continues past Cridlands Copse, Crow Covert and Fox Covert before making its way up to Daw's Castle where you get your first view of Watchet.

We descend into town by walking down the narrow, busy road. It's a pleasant dawdle to the harbourside once you've reached the safety of the pavements - but, after the port, the new path undergoes one of its low points. It's only low point, I should add. Because of problems with landowners, the new right of way now leaves the seaside to head inland to the village of Williton. The ammonite marker signs are easy to follow as they direct you up through the housing estates - but soon it is hoped they will continue along the coast, at least as far as Doniford.

But even when and if that property agreement is reached, I'm told the new path will have to pass inland around the holiday parks of Doniford and St Audries. This does seem a pity - though the inland route does have bonuses. It is hoped that the future path will go directly across the fields past a place called Egrove to reach the eastern edge of Williton (unlike the present route which circumnavigates the whole northern edge of the village). From the Highbridge end of Williton, you cross fields to begin the climb to Lower Weacombe.

We are now on the lower slopes of the Quantock Hills and soon the new path is offering stupendous views of the Vale of

West Somerset and of the entirety of the coastal route you've just walked. This week we stop at the Windmill Inn - but next Friday we will be continuing all the way to the mouth of the River Parrett.