

Circular Walk Sixteen - Pitminster, Corfe and the Park Pale - Exploring Taunton Deane

General Information

Distance of Walk: 7.2 kilometres

An interesting walk to Pitminster and Corfe, crossing the Poundisford Park Pale.

OS map - Explorer 128, Taunton and Blackdown Hills

Terrain - Generally level with some gentle undulations

Parking - In the parking bay near the bridge on Amberd Lane, grid reference 217 216

Refreshments - The Queens Arms, Pitminster (a short distance beyond Church Lane). The White Hart Inn, Corfe (turn right instead of left when reaching the main road in Corfe) The Crown Inn, Staplehay

Landscape character of the walk - Low Vale

The walk takes you through landscape that is described as Low Vale. Rising to 100 metres in parts of the Deane, this is gently undulating landscape with small pockets of mainly broadleaf woodland, the higher ground often accentuated by copses. Ash and oak are the dominant trees, and there are many standards in the hedgerows. The underlying geology is predominantly marls, and the agricultural land is good quality, composed of arable, pasture, market gardening and orchards. The walk traverses the remnants of Poundisford Deer Park, one of a number of historic parks that were typical of this type of landscape in Taunton Deane.

Directions

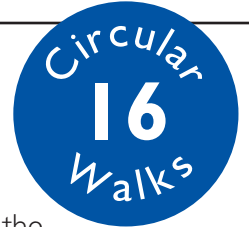
A From the car parking bay, cross the road and go over the stile (which is about 45 metres from the bridge) into the field and walk ahead with the stream on your left. Go through the kissing gate and into the next field. Continue ahead to another kissing gate, and follow the stream to the bridges in the corner of the field. Cross the right-hand bridge and continue ahead along the edge of the field and stream to the bridge and stile in the corner. Continue ahead to the bridge over the motorway.

B Walk ahead, over a stile and along the left-hand side of the field, over a further stile to continue alongside the stream to the gate and stile in the corner (walk to the left of the post and wire fence). Walk straight ahead across the field. Cross two stiles and continue ahead (slightly right), then alongside an old post and wire fence, and then between the fence and wall. Continue ahead across the fields over a further two stiles until you reach the road.

C Walk ahead along the road to the junction. Turn right, then left after 60 metres towards the parish church. At the end of the tarmac, beyond the church, go left through the gate and walk ahead with the hedge on your left. Cross small wooden bridges and take the footpath left to walk diagonally across a field to two stiles. Veer slightly left to the stile in the far corner of the next field. Continue ahead with the hedge on your left to a gate. Turn left onto the lane and proceed to the junction.

D Turn left and after about 30 metres right over a stile. Turn right to walk with the hedge on your right past the veteran oak trees to a stile by the oak in the corner of the field. Either walk half-left across the field between more veteran oaks, (or if not possible because of crops, follow the edge of the field round) to the remnants of an old pond. Follow this round to the right and into the next field. Veer slightly left across this field. On meeting the hedge continue ahead with it on your left, over a stile and round the edge of the field to a stile and the main road.

E Cross the road carefully and turn left along the pavement. Cross Mill Lane, then turn left back over the main road and up Newton Lane. Go past the village hall and playground. At the drive to Barton Grange, veer half-right across the field to a gap in the hedgerow. Turn left to follow the edge of the next field, beside a hedge at first, then old walls which you follow round to go past Grange Court. Emerge into the carpark in front of Barton Grange, turn right and follow the track down through the field. Follow this track to the road.



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F Just before the road, turn right to walk along the top of the bank. Continue over a bridge and then shortly after left over a stile to join the road. Turn right, proceed past the turning for Corfe to a track between stone piers on the left. Turn left here and walk ahead over a stile and down the track to a gate. Follow the track ahead at first, then round to the right to meet your outward route. Turn right and retrace your steps back to Amberd Lane.

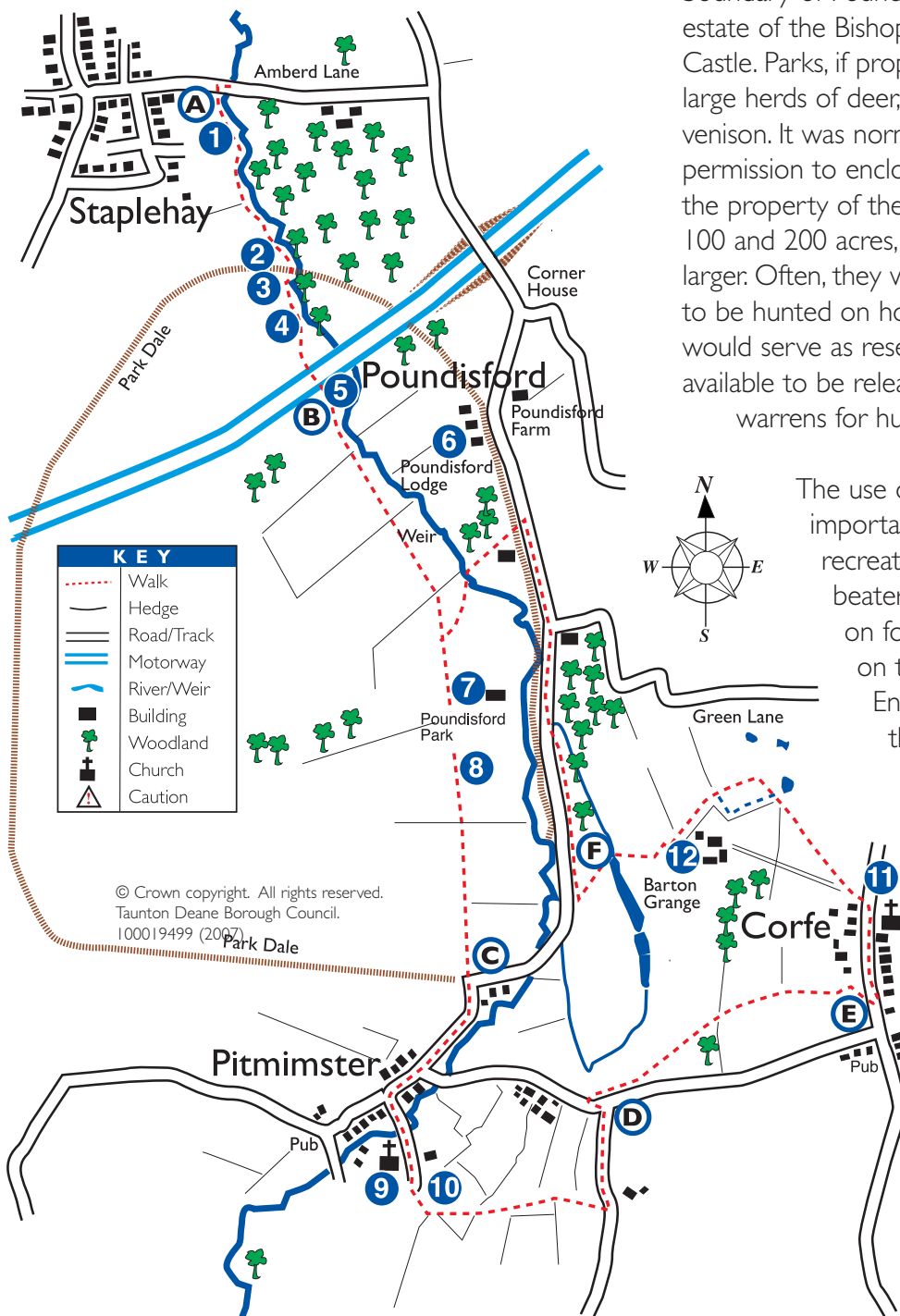
Points of Interest

1 Sherford Stream

You start the walk by following the Sherford Stream which rises in the Blackdown Hills and flows through Pitminster down to Taunton and the River Tone. The stream is well covered by a variety of trees such as alder, sycamore, ash, field maple, hazel, hawthorn, beech and oak.

2 Poundisford Park Pale

Here is your first encounter with what was the boundary of Poundisford Deer Park. This was the hunting estate of the Bishop of Winchester who held Taunton Castle. Parks, if properly managed, were able to support large herds of deer, and were efficient producers of venison. It was normally necessary to obtain royal permission to enclose a park as deer were held to be the property of the king. Parks were normally between 100 and 200 acres, although some were considerably larger. Often, they were not large enough to enable deer to be hunted on horseback within their bounds, but would serve as reserves to ensure that game was available to be released into open forests, chases and warrens for hunting.



The use of parks as live larders was more important than their occasional use for recreational hunting. Deer would be killed by beaters driving them past archers standing on foot. Deer parks had a long tradition on the Continent, and a few existed in England under the last Saxon kings, but they multiplied rapidly after the Norman Conquest. Increasing numbers are recorded in the 12th century, but the peak period of creation was between the second half of the 13th century up to the time of the Black Death. It has been estimated that around the year 1300 some 3200 deer parks existed, covering two per cent of England's area. Before the Norman Conquest, Britain contained two types of deer, the red and the roe. Fallow deer were normally used to stock deer parks.

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Although fallow deer were present in interglacial times, they did not return after the last Ice Age, but were re-established successfully by the Normans. Since fallow deer are very difficult to contain, the perimeter fences needed to be particularly strong, with tall paling of cleft posts, dense

hedging or a stone wall often set on a large earth bank. Efforts were made to allow wild deer to enter but not leave the park, by having a ditch on the inside of the bank.

The labour and expense involved in maintaining these boundaries meant that the optimum shape for a deer park was a circle, to minimise the length of the boundary, and Poundisford Park comes close to this ideal. Parks were particularly numerous in the Vale of Taunton Deane. It was the intermediate land below the uplands and above the marshes, particularly where there was also significant amounts of woodland and wood pasture, which tended to attract the most parks. They were often located at the edge of estates, some distance from the castle, palace or manor house to which they belonged, so as not to conflict with the needs of agricultural production. You will cross the park pale at two further points during the walk.

3 Black Poplar Trees

There are a number of these trees along the route. Some have fallen but are still impressive on the ground. The Black Poplar is nationally rare (approximately 10,000 trees have been recorded in Britain) but Taunton Deane has a relatively high number. It can reach a height of 30 metres, growing rapidly until reaching maturity in about 100 years. Many of these old trees have been pollarded in the past - a regular cycle of removing the branches above browsing height to gain useful timber.

This process can increase their lifespan. They are usually found growing in the alluvial soils of river flood plains, and have traditionally been planted beside wet ditches, farm ponds and wells, and on parish boundaries. All black

poplars are dioecious, ie. male and female flowers are on different trees. Nationwide, however, only 5% of trees are female. The trees along the route are all male.

4 Veteran Trees

You will see a number of very old trees on this walk. At this point, for instance, there is a lime tree with a girth of over six metres at chest height. Veteran or ancient trees are important for the huge range of wildlife that they support, from large creatures such as owls, woodpeckers and bats to hundreds of insects and communities of extremely specialised lichens, mosses and fungi which play a vital role in the decomposition of dead wood. Many of these insects and plants can only survive in the specialised conditions afforded by ancient trees, which often contain large amounts of dead or rotting wood.

Britain (in particular England and Wales) has the largest number of ancient trees in north-west Europe. It is thought that this is because of our peculiar history of land use, in particular our ancient forest systems, deer parks, field and parish boundaries, landscaped parks and wooded commons. It is difficult to produce a clear and satisfactory definition of an ancient tree. They do however share a number of common features and can broadly be defined as 'trees that are of interest biologically, aesthetically or culturally because of their age'. The actual age and size at which a tree can be considered ancient varies enormously depending on species. For example, a birch tree will probably not reach 200 years, a willow will be ancient at this age but an oak will just be maturing.

5 M5 Motorway & View of the Blackdown Hills

From the bridge over the M5 there is a good panoramic view that includes the Blackdown Hills to the south. These hills, now designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, rise to 315 metres at Staple Hill. Formed from an extensive outcrop of Upper Greensand from the Cretaceous period, they are characterised by a dramatic, steep, wooded scarp slope facing north and a gently sloping plateau to the south which is deeply dissected by the valleys of the rivers Yarty, Otter and Culm. The 122-mile route of the M5 from Worcestershire to Pearce's Hill just south-west of Exeter was first surveyed in the mid 1960s. The final stretch from Somerset across to Devon was let to contract in 1968 and officially opened by the Prime Minister, James Callaghan, in 1977.

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6 Poundisford Lodge (private house)

This can be glimpsed through the trees to your left. In 1534 Bishop Gardiner decided that the deer park was no longer required, and leased it as two separate agricultural holdings to two Taunton merchants, Roger Hill and his son William. The lodge was built for Roger Hill.

7 Poundisford Park (private house)

This grand manor house was built for William Hill circa 1550, with later additions and alterations, and is architecturally interesting in that it represents the years just before the creation of the Elizabethan style. The brick-built summer house is of the late 17th century.

8 Lime Avenue

To your left is an avenue of limes running north-south. Long avenues of trees were a fashionable feature of the landscaped parks and gardens of many large country houses, often used to link the formal garden to the parkland and countryside beyond.

9 Church of St. Mary and St. Andrew

The oldest parts of this church date from the early 14th century. In a county famous for its beautiful church towers, this church is unusual in having a lead covered spire with an octagonal bell chamber based on a square tower. There are a few early 16th century bench ends and a very handsome early 17th century pulpit with sounding board.

There are still the remains of medieval stained glass in the upper lights of the lady chapel north window. Thomas Gainsborough was a frequent visitor to the parish - one of his portraits has always been known as the 'Pitminster Boy'. Humphrey Coles or 'Black Humphrey' as he was better known, a wealthy landowner and High Sheriff of Somerset, lies alone in the north-west corner.

10 View to Adcombe Wood

Ahead, on steep west-facing slopes, are Woodram Copse and Adcombe Wood. These woods are owned by the Woodland Trust. They are classified as Semi-Natural Ancient Woodland, ie. woodland that has existed since medieval times (before 1600) to the present day without ever having been cleared for uses other than wood or timber production. Ancient woods are important as many contain fragments of primaevael forests, the climax vegetation for this country. Also, ancient woods have had a long time to acquire species

and to form stable floral and faunal communities. Large amounts of ancient woodland have been lost to agriculture, urban development, road building, quarrying and other extractive industries.



11 Corfe and Church of St. Nicholas

This village is of Saxon origin. The name means 'cutting through the hills'. Corfe was part of the 55 hides of Taunton, a hide being a measure of land which can vary according to locality but is generally between 60 and 120 acres. Early reference to the village is recorded in 1158 when Henry of Blois, Bishop of Winchester, gave the church at Pitminster with its chapels at Corfe and Poundisford, to Taunton Priory. It was a place of worship in Norman times, cared for by the Augustinian canons of Taunton Priory until the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539. At a later date it became a chapel of ease to St. Mary's in Taunton.



The first mention of St. Nicholas was in 1557 when a parishioner of Orchard was buried in the churchyard of 'Sainte Nicholaus in Corfe'. Unlike many churches in Somerset it was not rebuilt during the prosperous years of the 15th century and, as far as is known, remained as it was constructed until 1842 when it was largely rebuilt by the official architect of the Diocese, Benjamin Ferry. The present tower was added 16 years later. The church is constructed of Blue Lias with Hamstone dressings. It contains a very early Norman font which incorporates some even earlier Saxon features. In 1898 the church was one of the first buildings in the west to be lit by electric lighting, powered by the Newton Dynamo that was invented in the coach house at nearby Barton Grange.

12 Barton Grange (private dwellings)

This was the site of the summer residence of the Prior of Taunton, and at the Dissolution was purchased by Humphrey Coles who is said to have had a very grand mansion here. What remains is just the kitchen and office wing of the house.

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Sources of information and further reading

The Deane Tree Plan
Taunton Deane Borough Council

Somerset Parks and Gardens
James Bond - Somerset Books

Landscape Encyclopaedia
Richard Muir - Windgather Press

Black Poplar Tree, leaflet
Taunton Deane Borough Council

Website of the Countryside Agency
www.countryside.gov.uk

Guide to the Care of Ancient Trees
English Nature - Veteran Trees Initiative

British Roads Past and Present - Devon
Valerie Belsey - Past and Present Publishing

Listed Building Database
Taunton Deane Borough Council

The Buildings of England - South and West Somerset
Nikolaus Pevsner - Penguin

Taunton Deane Church Trail
Taunton Deane Borough Council Leaflet

The Hidden Landscape
Richard Fortey - Pimlico

Geology and Landscape of Taunton Deane
Hugh Prudden - Taunton Deane Borough Council

Inventory of Ancient Woodland In Somerset
former Nature Conservancy Council - J A Lister and A L Pinches

Information about Corfe and its church was sourced from the written guide in the church

If You Require Further Information Please Contact:

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Bengali

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Hindi

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