

Avon Estuary



Downstream from Aveton Gifford, the river Avon winds through its beautiful and secluded valley to the sea. This fine walk traces its course. This circular route uses the seasonal ferry from Bantham to Cockleridge. See www.southdevonaonb.org.uk for details.

Start: | Bantham Sands car park, TQ7 3AN or Timber car park, Aveton Gifford, TQ7 4LT (start at point 9)

Distance: | 7.5 miles (8.5 miles at high tide)

Difficulty: | Moderate walk. Stiles, 3 flights of steps, steep ascent and descent. More on high tide route.

Terrain: | Some unsurfaced paths which can be muddy in wet weather.

Parking: | Bantham Sands and Timbers car park, Aveton Gifford

OS map: | Explorer OL20

Grid Ref: | SX 665 437

Public transport: | Buses to Aveton Gifford - see www.travelinesw.com. For ferry times see www.southdevonaonb.org.uk/walks

Refreshments: | In Bantham and Aveton Gifford

Toilets: | Public toilets at Bantham Sands car park and Aveton Gifford near the village hall

This walk is available in the following formats from www.southdevonaonb.org.uk/walks



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Southwest coast path walking app – enhanced content with photos, audio and film.

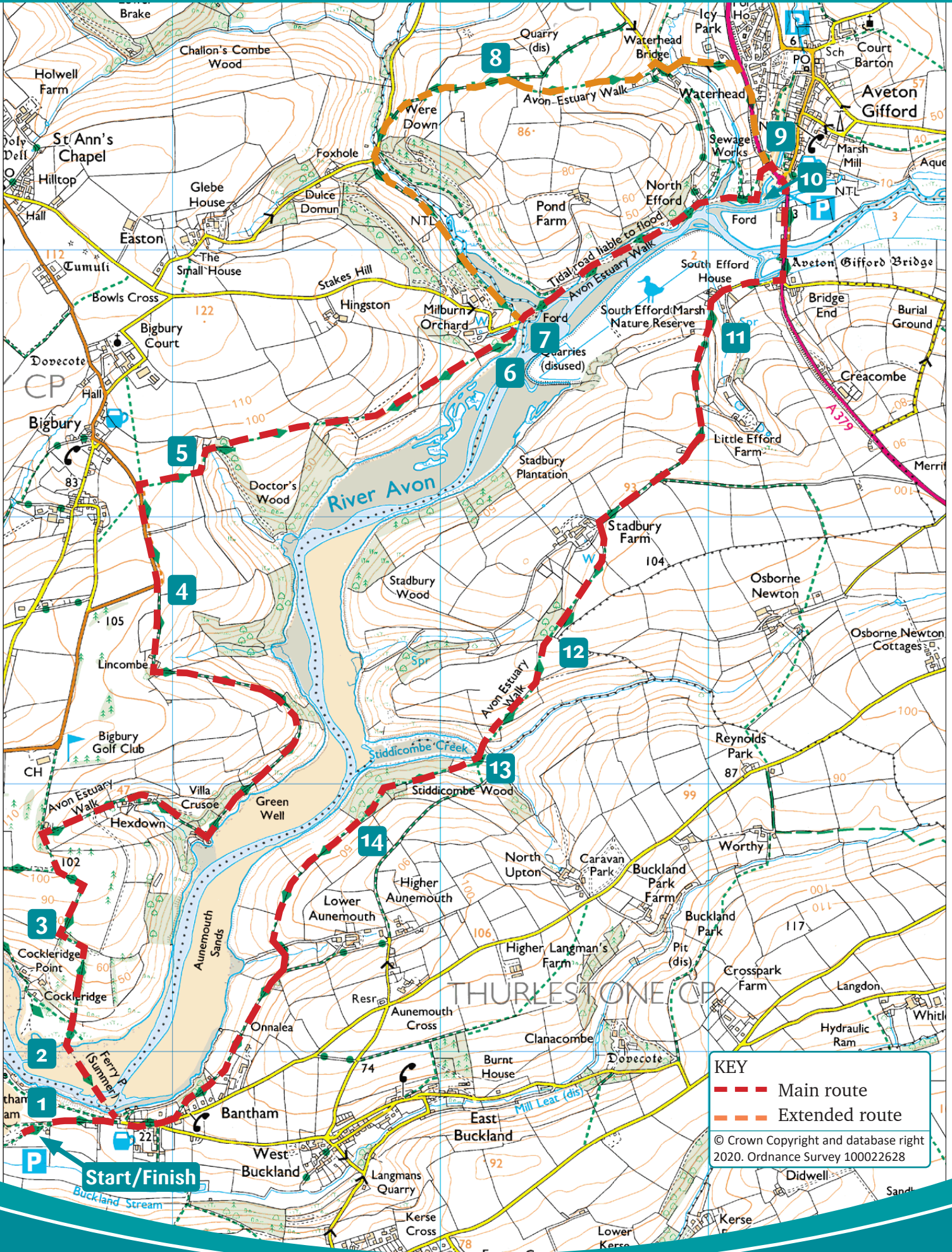
Directions

This route follows the blue 'Avon Estuary Walk' waymarkers.

- 1 Walk back to the turning circle by the car park entrance and turn left down to the quay. Take the ferry from here across river (the ferry operates a seasonal service, see the ferry information panel at Bantham or the AONB website for further details).
- 2 From ferry information panel at Cockleridge head inland and up steps. Follow field edge up, and then to left, then bear right up road alongside and across golf course.
- 3 By a turning bay and waymarker on left, turn right over cattle grid and down drive. Walk through houses at Hexdown, then bear right down footpath. Turn left at the bottom to follow private drive.

- 4 Just before you meet road, turn right into field and follow 'Permissive Footpath' fingerpost along field edge. Half way across second field, turn right across field signed 'Milburn Orchard 1 ½m'.
- 5 Bear left over the stile, and left again at a fork in the woods. Follow waymarked path along field and terrace, dropping gradually downhill.
- 6 Turn left along the foreshore, and then right along tidal road to Aveton Gifford. At low tide jump to point 10
- 7 **Alternative route at high tide:** Turn left along foreshore as above, but go straight across at road onto public footpath over stepping stones and through grounds of Milburn Orchard above creek. Turn right along a track, bear right where you meet a fork, and turn right along the road. After 200m bear right up green lane signed 'Drunkard's Hill'.

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- 8** At top of rise, bear right onto footpath across fields and down through the dip. Turn left along the lane, then sharp right by Skipper's Hill Cottage. Cross at the main road and take the path opposite, bearing right onto path above road.
- 9** At the bottom turn right through the underpass into the car park. Turn left out of car park onto road.
- 10** At mini- roundabout turn right along main road over river. Cross by Bridge House onto permissive path alongside road. Rejoin road again over bridge, then path once more, to finally cross road and follow lane opposite at Bridge End.
- 11** At the top turn right along lane. At Higher Stadbury bear left onto footpath, and bear left again where you join a further footpath.
- 12** Follow path along right hand field edges and then down between fences. Turn right through the gate and follow right hand field edge. Just before the next field gateway, leave the well - walked path and drop down the field to the left. Bear right at the bottom.
- 13** Through two gates, cross Stiddicombe Creek via footbridge to left. Turn right through gate then bear up through field past waymarker post. Cross stile into wood and follow waymarkers.
- 14** Follow path along field edges above river, through gate on to track. By fingerpost signed 'Bantham 1/2 mile' fork right onto the footpath down between stone walls. Go through gate and turn right at gate on to next track. At road turn right down through Bantham and back to the car park.

Further Interest

Heritage

Bantham was home to one of the most infamous smugglers in South Devon, named Nat Cleverly. The contraband booze ferried aboard his fishing boat was bought in the free port of Roscoff across the Channel. Cleverly was eventually brought before the courts, but found not guilty and released - by one of his best customers, the local magistrate.



This walk along with many more can be downloaded from www.southdevonaonb.org.uk

Lime kilns, like little grottos, can be seen close to the water's edge at Stiddicombe, and below Milburn Orchard. Limestone brought upriver on barges was burnt in these kilns to produce lime. It was spread on the fields and also used to produce lime mortar, and limewash for cottage walls.

Before the tidal road was constructed to Aveton Gifford, a line of irregular stepping stones known as the 'dog biscuits' followed the stakes across the marsh.

Timbers car park by the bridge at Aveton Gifford was at one time the site of a saw mill. In those days the cutting was done with long double handled saws, worked by two men. One stood above, while the poor soul who drew the short straw worked from a pit beneath, getting showered with sawdust.

According to locals, the name 'Drunkard's Hill' refers to those natives of Aveton Gifford who had gone drinking in Bigbury and stayed too late. Finding the tidal road covered on their return were thus obliged to climb the 300ft Drunkard's Hill to get home, an appropriate penalty for overindulgence!

Landscape

'Avon' means 'river' in the Celtic tongue. The Avon makes a 22- mile journey from its origins high on Dartmoor down through the wooded valley it has carved, to where it meets the sea by Bantham and Bigbury on Sea.

The estuary is tidal below a weir 4 miles upstream from Aveton Gifford. The 'ria' type estuary was formed when rising sea levels flooded the river valley after the last ice age.

The creek at Milburn Orchard and at North Efford marsh are wonderful examples of salt marsh. This important habitat is formed on low coasts where the ground gets flooded by sea water. Cord Grass traps silt from the tide, which eventually raises the level of the marsh. Salt marsh is becoming increasingly rare as low-lying coastal land has been reclaimed for agriculture.

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Wildlife

The estuary is fabulously rich in birdlife, attracting all sorts of waders, gulls and wildfowl.

The waders are to be found probing along the shore and water's edge. There are too many to mention all of them here. However, upstream towards Aveton Gifford, where the mud is muddier, they include Curlew, Lapwing, Redshank and Greenshank – named after the colour of their legs – and Common Sandpiper, with its white underparts and mottled brown back, straight bill and large dark eyes.

Dunlins are smallish birds, and like many waders have different plumage according to the season. One of their folk names is 'sea- mouse' as they are said to resemble a mouse with long legs, scurrying about on the shore. Their dull grey winter plumage gives way to rich chestnut, black and white streaking during the summer.

Similarly coloured, but smaller and with a shorter bill, the Little Stint is a rare winter visitor.

The Dabchick – or Little Grebe – is a small diving bird found on the estuary. A little round ball of a bird, without a tail, it dives for fish, insects and snails.

Further downstream, the sandier it gets, the more gulls and oystercatchers are to be found. Up to 500 Black Headed Gulls are found on the estuary's mudflats, along with the large, mean- looking Herring Gull, with its yellow beak and eyes. You may also see the (not so very common) Common Gull - smaller and slimmer than the herring gull and with a dark eye.

The Avon estuary is South Devon's best for swans. In the winter Mute Swans gather here from as far away as Abbotsbury in Dorset. There are often 50 or more, and the stretch of river around the boathouse at Bantham is a good place for a sighting.

It is a complex job to try and describe the ducks of the estuary, as the colouring of a single species usually differs between male and female, and summer and winter plumage. The best bet is to get hold of a pocket guide before setting out. On the river you may see Mallard, Wigeon, Teal, Shoveler and Pintail.

Hérons, and brilliant white Little Egrets are common sights, and the sharp-eyed may spot a Kingfisher. Ravens nest in the pines at Milburn Orchard. The Raven is the world's largest crow, with a distinctive dry, rattling 'crronk' call.

Stiddicombe Wood contains some Beech and Sycamore, but it is unusual in that the majority of the trees are Sweet Chestnut. This species of tree was introduced to Britain by the Romans, who harvested the nuts not only to roast and eat as they are, but to make chestnut flour.

The lower reaches of the Avon are a nursery site for Sea Bass, a silvery sea fish of shallow waters that grows up to a metre long.

The sands at Cockleridge support the increasingly rare Sea Holly. A short but spectacular plant, it has pale blue, holly- like leaves and bright powder blue flowers. Also found here is Sea Spurge. Familiar to gardeners, this is one of the wild ancestors of the larger garden Euphorbia. Its small, fleshy oval leaves are clustered thickly up the reddish stems, some of which are topped with pale green flowers in summer.

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The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development Europe investing in rural areas has supported Explore South Devon to promote circular walks within the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.