

Stokenham and Torcross



Coast and countryside

Follow how man has shaped the landscape on the coast and in the countryside of this pretty parish.

Start: | Torcross car park, TQ7 2TQ

Distance: | 6 miles

Difficulty: | Moderate. 4 flights of steps, 2 stiles

Terrain: | Coast path, green lane, surfaced road. Mostly fairly even underfoot, with some slippery and muddy patches in wet weather.

Parking: | Torcross car park, TQ7 2TQ

OS map: | Explorer OL20

Grid Ref: | SX 824 423

Public transport: | Buses to Torcross – www.travelinesw.com

Refreshments: | In Torcross, Stokenham and Stokeley Farm shop

Toilets: | In Torcross car park

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KEY

--- Main route

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Directions

Numbers in brackets refer to Points of Interest.

- 1** From car park, cross the road to seafront and turn right along the sea wall. At the end turn right in front of the building called 'At the beach' and turn left up the road signed 'Unsuitable for heavy goods vehicles'.
- 2** Take the steps up on your left, turn right at the top and follow the coast path yellow waymarkers up the hill and onto footpath. Path climbs inland around the back of old quarry and drops down to Beesands Cellars.
- 3** Shortly before the path reaches the beach, turn right at fingerpost onto public footpath. Alternatively, to visit beach, go straight on, then retrace your steps and turn left here.
- 4** Follow path up field edge, cross track and continue, following yellow waymarkers.
- 5** Route emerges past cottages at Widdicombe then bears right up drive. After 200m turn right at fingerpost along public footpath and drop down through field. At road turn left.
- 6** At the junction go straight on. Proceed with care down right side of this sometimes busy road, staying on raised verge where possible. As you approach right hand bend, cross road to follow left hand verge, then turn very sharply left down narrow lane.
- 7** Past caravan site at Island Farm, turn right down green lane signed 'Public Byway'.
- 8** At road, cross, turn left and walk with care down main road through Chillington. After 100m turn sharp right up narrow lane signed 'Public Byway' leading up green lane signed 'Frittiscombe Lane'.
- 9** Cross road at top and follow public footpath diagonally down across field opposite signed 'Stokenham ½m'. Cross second field to the road. Turn right down hill.
- 10** At the junction, turn right and immediately left to continue down narrow lane into Stokenham village.



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- 11** At junction at the bottom turn left (or right for village pubs) Continue past 'T' no-through-road sign, and turn right through lychgate. into churchyard. At left of church turn left. Leave churchyard through iron gate, following public footpath fingerpost ahead and to left across field.
- 12** Turn right at road. Just before main road turn left signed 'Permissive Path Torcross ¾m'.
- 13** Follow path to left through caravan park. Leave site via gate in far top corner past play area.
- 14** At road, continue along roadside footpath back to Torcross and car park on left.

Further interest

Man and the Landscape

The Devon countryside has been shaped and affected by man for thousands of years, and the land has a fascinating tale to tell.

From scratching at the earth with sticks and bones, to flicking switches in today's sophisticated farm machinery, we have left our mark as we have sought to meet our needs from the land. The result is an epic story of quiet heroism and struggle, ambition and desperation, and triumph and defeat, etched indelibly into the Devon landscape.

Thousands of years ago ancient Celtic tribespeople were creating enclosures and huge earthworks. Saxon settlers imported their unique systems of agriculture, and medieval farmers set out to claw the land back from nature. Clearing heaths and woods acre by hard-won acre for cultivation, they made strides which have been built upon by generations of farmers and workers right up to the present day.

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The characteristic hedgebanks which enclose Devon's fields are jewels in the county's crown. Many of them date back over 800 years and some, incredibly, are up to 4000 years old. These sturdy and beautiful boundaries, spangled with wildflowers in spring and summer, are a haven for wildlife of all kinds.

Thousands of years of toil and muscle have produced the patchwork landscape of field and farm you see today. The earth has been cut, dug, ploughed and moved for as long as man has been here, and it is no exaggeration to say that, as you look out over the countryside, Devon's history really is laid out before you.

Heritage

The village of Stokenham was known in Saxon times as Stoc or Stoc Hamme "meaning Stoc meadows". By the 13th century the town was called Stoke in Hamme, leading to its current name.

Stokenham became a manor around 1185. The lord of the manor to whom the grant was made was Matthew Fitz Herbert, a favoured courtier whose family had been close to the Norman kings through generations. He built the manor house next to the church, but it was abandoned in the 1580s. Archaeologists have found evidence for the building in Manor Fields, immediately to the east of the church.

Henry VIII gave Stokenham Manor to Katherine Parr his sixth and final bride, as part of her marriage dowry. When Henry died in 1547 Katherine ordered her officials to make an exact assessment of the rental income she would get from Stokenham. These documents provide a good insight to the parish during Tudor times.

During medieval centuries, robbing and plundering pirates roamed constantly up and down the Devon coast, and elsewhere, dashing ashore for plunder and pillage wherever they saw the opportunity. These included the infamous Barbary pirates, also known as Corsairs, from the coast of North Africa, who captured slaves for the Arab slave markets. As well as attacking ships, the corsairs raided on land taking men, woman and children from villages on the Devon and Cornish coasts. In the late 1620s it was feared there were around 60 Barbary men-of-war prowling the southwest coasts and attacks were occurring almost daily.

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For that reason, in Stokenham parish there were no coastal settlements during many hundreds of years: it simply was not safe to live there. So the fishermen had their workshops and their nets and boats right on the coast, in 'cellars', but they kept their homes and their families a little inland, at places like Bickerton, Beeson and Widewell. These attacks were so frequent by the 1650s that they threatened England's fishing industry, with fisherman being reluctant to put to sea, leaving their families unprotected ashore.

It was only after the rise of British naval sea power during the reigns of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I that communities felt safe enough to live by the sea. Soon the fishing cellars began to become more populated as families settled on the coast. Torcross, Hallsands and Beesands were amongst the last Stokenham villages to come into existence.

The parish church of St Michael dates from 1431 and stands near the site of an ancient holy well. It was built on the site of an earlier medieval church originally dedicated to St Humbert the Confessor who died in 1188. It is built on the side of a hill so that its whole length can be seen from below and is dedicated to St Michael and All Angels, which was common practice for churches standing on elevated sites.

The parish was one of the six which were given notice to evacuate the area as part of the D Day preparations, when Slapton Sands was used for landing practise using live ammunitions. The evacuation zone covered 30,000 acres from six parishes, including the villages of Torcross, Slapton, Strete, Blackawton, East Allington, Sherford, Stokenham and Chillington. Over 3000 people comprising 750 families and 180 farms were given just 6 weeks to clear their land and homes and find somewhere else to live. (You can find out more about this story Explore Start Bay pages of the website or on the panel near the tank in the car park at Torcross),

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On 12th November, Stokenham Church was packed to capacity by those under notice to quit, to hear addresses of explanation and encouragement from the Lord Lieutenant of Devon and an American General. In the main, American troops were to engage in this immense military exercise.

This involved landing from the rough waters of Start Bay on to the steep slopes of Slapton Sands already prepared with mines, defensive obstacles and defending troops. Two bridges were established across the Ley. One, a pontoon type for vehicles, spanned the Ley at its narrowest part, the other constructed of iron scaffolding and boarding went across a wider part.

Covering shell-fire from ships' guns and 'planted' explosive devices brought as much realism as possible. Torcross suffered some damage, but the major incident occurred near the Parish Church. A shell blasted a hole in the nearby Church House Inn. The explosion lifted out a section of roof on the south side of the Church, and all the stained glass in the windows on that front was blown out and later replaced by plain glass.

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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.