

4. GREAT NATURE'S OPEN BOOK – DURLSTON

Swanage – Durlston – Anvil Point – Quarries – Swanage

This is a gentle 4 mile (6.5 km) circular walk of 1½-3 hours, from the centre of Swanage to the Durlston Country Park (for the Globe), and back again through old stone quarrying areas.

STARTING POINT

Swanage, by the pier.

FACILITIES

Refreshments at Durlston Country Park.

ANY PROBLEMS?

Very few. This route is popular and easy to follow.

ABOUT THIS WALK

It was in the last decades of the nineteenth century that Swanage underwent a quite profound transformation. What had previously been a working sea-port where the stone trade dominated the local economy found itself changing out of all recognition. ‘Trippers’ began arriving, both on the trains (the branch line opened in 1885) and by paddle-steamers from newly-developed Bournemouth. The sandy beach became the centre of life and tourism muscled out the stone merchants. Swanage’s two piers tell the story: the old pier (now just a set of wooden stumps set in the sea) had been built in 1859 for trade; the new pier, erected in 1896, was for leisure.

One man conveniently links together both sides of this story. George Burt (1816-1894) was a Swanage man who made his fortune in London as a partner in his uncle’s stone and building business (his uncle was John Mowlem, the son of a Swanage quarryman and the founder of the famous construction company). Burt was familiar with the old Swanage, the one where stone was brought down to the town from

the quarries of Herston and Langton, stored beside the water in stone stacks or ‘bankers’, and then carried in carts by horses into the shallow waters of the bay, ready to be transferred into small boats. These boats in turn conveyed the stone further out to sea, where sailing ships would be riding at anchor waiting to receive their cargo. Later, of course, the construction of the pier meant that ships could tie up there, with the stone taken to them along the tramway from the bankers.

But if Burt knew Swanage as it had been, he also had a major part in the making of the new, visitor-orientated, town. Having built his business and made his money by paving London’s streets with Purbeck stone, he then set about doing his best to improve his home town in best Victorian style. He laid out his Durlston estate with wide avenues and promenades, with seats suitably positioned for admiring the vistas and with stone signs, appropriately inscribed with exhortations (‘Look round, and read Great Nature’s open Book’).

Burt had a strong educational streak: stone plaques were put up on the side of Durlston Castle to inform visitors, among other things, of the duration of the longest day at Spitsbergen, the convexity of the oceans, and the height of spring tides at Swanage.

Durlston went through a torrid time in the second half of the twentieth century: Burt’s great globe, for example, was fenced off behind turnstiles and became a rather tacky tourist attraction. The terraced walkways became overgrown. Burt’s ‘Castle’ was a lost building in search of a new role, at various times a tired cafe or unprepossessing bar.

It has been the designation in 2001 of the Dorset and East Devon coastline, the Jurassic Coast, as a UNESCO world heritage site which has helped save Durlston and led to its transformation. Lottery and other grant funding is ensuring that Burt’s Durlston Castle can have a second lease of life as one of the main visitor centres for the heritage coast. New interpretation boards are going up, to complement Burt’s old plaques. The old man, now resting in the cemetery in Kensal Green in London, would, you feel, have been delighted.

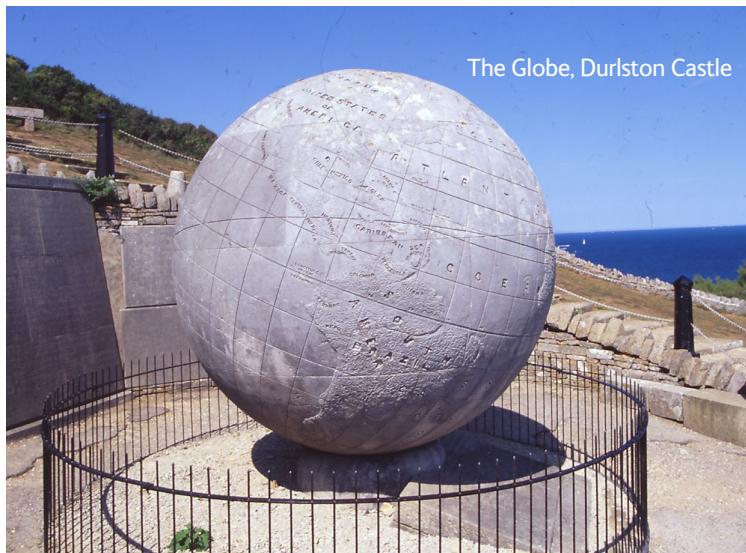
THE WALK

From the pier, follow the ‘coast path’ sign to the right of the Swanage Sailing Club and make your way towards Peveril Point, either along the shoreline (which can be slippery) or along Peveril Road, just above.



Peveril is still one of the most pleasant parts of Swanage, and the centre of the small lobster fishing industry. As you walk to the point, there's a chance to admire the clock tower, a typical piece of Victorian gothic architecture which was originally erected near London Bridge to commemorate the Duke of Wellington. Unfortunately his tower was soon found to hold back the London traffic - whereupon John Mowlem's firm dismantled it and shipped it to Swanage. The clock tower (the clock itself never arrived at Swanage) is one of a number of relics from London which Mowlem and Burt were responsible for bringing here. Their motives must have been partly pragmatic, since the masonry helped provide ballast for the otherwise empty stone boats on the return journeys.

The lifeboat station has been a landmark in this part of Swanage since 1875, when a south-east gale and a dark night conspired to drive an Exeter ship, the *Wild Wave*, on to the rocks at Peveril. Fortunately, the crew of five were saved by coastguards, but it was clear that



The Globe, Durlston Castle

they were lucky. The town needed a lifeboat, and got one almost immediately: the story of the rescue appeared in *The Times*, and the next day one of the readers came forward with the money for the boat.

The Swanage lifeboat house is frequently open to visitors, and the main boat itself is a fine sight particularly when being launched down the slipway into the bay. The Purbeck coastline remains treacherous to commercial shipping and the Peveril Ledges which stretch out seawards from Peveril Point need to be given a wide berth.

From the coastwatch lookout at Peveril Point, follow the path uphill along the edge of the cliff. Swanage's second bay, Durlston Bay, is below you; Durlston Castle can be seen ahead at the end of the bay.



The path continues along the cliff-side before leaving the grassy hillside by two stone seats. When you reach a tarmac road, turn left (an old stone sign confirms the way). Continue to the end of the road, turning left when you emerge at the more major Durlston Road. Walk along the road for a short way, and then turn left on to a footpath into woodlands. (This route for the coast path is relatively new, the more direct route having been closed because of cliff erosion problems.) Another left turn will bring you to the edge of the bay, where you pick up the old route of the coast path. The path now wanders through some overgrown woodlands. The woods have been cut back a little recently and a number of viewpoints give glimpses out towards the Isle of Wight.

As the path arrives at Durlston, turn and walk down the right-hand side of the Castle until you reach the stone Globe.

The Globe is, along with Corfe Castle and Old Harry Rocks, a familiar picture on postcards. It was constructed in 1887 in Mowlem's yard at Greenwich from 15 pieces of Portland stone held together by granite dowels, and is estimated to weigh about 40 tons.

The Globe has recently been restored, so that the place names and details can once again be made out. Around it Burt put up a series of tablets quoting the poets, as well as blank stones inscribed 'Persons anxious to write their names will please do so on this stone only'. Also nearby are old London metal bollards: Swanage has over 100 of them in total, rescued by Burt when they were no longer required in the capital.

Take the steps down from the Globe and turn right on to the coast

The Lighthouse, Anvil Point



path, enjoying the fine view straight out to sea. A bracing sea wind often accompanies it, making a pleasant change after the sheltered woodlands of Durlston Bay. Follow this path as it winds along the cliff edge, past the old entrance to the Tilly Whim Caves. The Caves (old stone quarries) are closed to the public due to the danger of rock falls, but can be seen behind you as you leave the Durlston estate path to scramble down, and then back up, a little valley towards the lighthouse.

Beyond the lighthouse on Anvil Point, which was erected in the early 1880s, the coast path continues enticingly. If you have the time and energy, carry on a little further. Thrift, sea plantain and samphire are among the plants and flowers growing here, and the cliffs are home for many types of sea-birds. Enjoy the sea views along the Purbeck coast, before retracing your steps.

Leave the lighthouse and take the tarmac access road for a short distance inland. Immediately after crossing the small whitewashed bridge turn sharp left, to follow a path up the hillside. Bear left at the top, to find a gate.

Pass through the gate, and immediately to your right you'll see another gate, leading into a meadow. This is the start of the path back to Swanage. Enter the meadow (stones set in the wall provide an alternative to the gate), and continue down the right-hand side of the field.

From now on, it is easy walking back to the centre of Swanage. The town itself comes into view shortly on your right, while over to the left is the pocked ground which denotes former quarrying activity. Keep to the path, which runs almost straight ahead.

The track skirts some new houses and becomes tarmac. Carry straight on, and in due course Swanage church tower appears, directly ahead.

You emerge into Townsend Road. Drop down to the High Street, and turn right to retrace your steps to the pier. (Before you do, you may want to take the opportunity of exploring the old Mill Pond area just next to the church).

As you walk back down High Street, notice the frontage of Swanage's Town Hall, another London souvenir saved by George Burt. This was originally the entrance to the Mercers' Hall in Cheapside, London, and dates back to 1670. Across the road from the Town Hall is George Burt's former residence Purbeck House, now a hotel, which not surprisingly has its own curiosities, including statues from London's Royal Exchange and stone balustrades from the old Billingsgate Market.