geography southwest

Place To Walk

A Circular Walk at Kilve, Somerset

Location & Access:

The Somerset village of Kilve is located on the A39 road mid-way between the towns of Minehead (12 miles to the west) and Bridgwater (10 miles to the east).

The walk is best accessed from the pay and display car park at Kilve (ST 145 443).

A limited bus service is operated by First Bus (service 15 / 14) between Minehead and Bridgwater, stopping at the Hood Arms in the village centre.

Hatch Green Coaches operate service 23B to Taunton.



Jurassic cliffs at East Quantockshead. Photo: Paul Berry

Key Geography: Industrial archaeology, Jurassic geology, coastal landscapes, fossils.

Introduction

Somersets Jurassic coast may not be as well-known as its equivalent on the south coast of Devon and Dorset, but it still of great interest. Jurassic rocks are exposed on this coastline in a designated SSSI that stretches from Lilstock to Blue Anchor, interrupted briefly by a band of Triassic mudstones and sandstones around St Audries Bay. Triassic rocks appear again from Blue Anchor to Minehead. This coastal exposure of Jurassic rocks is known as the Blue Lias (or Lower Lias), the word 'Lias' being a term originally used by quarrymen to refer to layers of rock. Yellow and grey limestones and dark shales are exposed on the cliffs and foreshore as alternating bands, often producing a unique 'washboard' wave cut platform cut by a series of complex fault lines. They were formed in warm shallow seas around 180 to 200 million years ago. The area is internationally significant in terms of the fossils that can be found here, including ammonites and remains of large marine reptiles like ichthyosaurs. Visitors need to exercise care on the foreshore due to the high tidal range on this stretch of coast, and be mindful of the rules of fossil hunting within an SSSI.



Jurassic foreshore at Kilve. Photo: Paul Berry

(continued overleaf)

Curiosity Questions:

Hinckley Point 'C' nuclear power station is visible from the path on this walk. When will it be operational?

What percentage of Britain's electricity demand will be generated at Hinckley Point 'C'?

The nearby Quantock Hills were named as England's first AONB. In what year?

Further information:

https://devongeography.wordpress.com/2026/05/19/exploring-the-beach-that-burns-a-circular-walk-at-kilve-somerset/

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geography southwest

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This is a short walk of 5.5 km (3.5 miles), and ample time should be allowed to explore the beaches at Kilve and East Quantockshead. An extension can be added to visit Lilstock, increasing the walking distance to 13 km (8 miles) in total.

Exploring 'The Beach That Burns' - A Circular Walk at Kilve, Somerset



Oil retort at Kilve. Photo: Paul Berry

1) The walk starts at the pay and display car park at Kilve (ST 145 443), where there are toilets and picnic benches available. The route begins at the far end of the car park next to the cricket pitch, where there is a tall brick building with a chimney. This is a redundant oil retort, built in 1923 to extract oil from the local shale rock. In 1916, the dark bands of shales in this area were found to be bituminous (containing high quantity of organic matter) and oil rich. This led Doctor Forbes Leslie to establish his Shaline Company, and a Somerset oil rush began. The idea was to manufacture petrol, fuel oil, paraffin and lubricating oil, and mix the shale residue with clay to make cement, tiles and bricks. A rail link connecting Kilve to Bridgwater was even suggested. At the time, it was estimated that 40 gallons of oil could be extracted from just 1 ton of shale, but in reality the scene was a scam, and only 5.2 gallons were ever extracted. Somerset's oil boom ended quickly, and in 1935, the 70-year-old Doctor Leslie was given a two-year prison sentence for his fraudulent business venture.

2) Follow the path to the left of the oil retort which leads through a gate and over a bridge towards Kilve beach.



Kilve Beach. Photo: Paul Berry

3) Allow plenty of time to explore the foreshore at Kilve. The beach here is part of the Blue Anchor to Lilstock SSSI, and an important pilgrimage site for geologists from all over the world. The rocks here are early Jurassic in age, formed from sediments deposited on an ancient sea floor around 195-200 million years ago, and are known as the Blue Lias (or Lower Lias) formation. The geology at Kilve consists of yellow, brown, and grey limestones alternating with layers of softer darker mudstones and shales. While strolling along the beach, it is possible to identify numerous faults in the cliffs. Flat expanses of limestone pavement, split by a complex series of fault lines, produce unique areas of 'washboard' wave cut platform, created by differential erosion of the main rock types. We have already discovered that the local shale rock contains oil, and this beach has been described as 'the beach that burns'. It is said that a bonfire of driftwood lit on the beach will cause the underlying rocks to spit as the oil within heats up. The rocks found at Kilve are the same Blue Lias rocks that run under west Dorset and create the well-known landscape of the Jurassic Coast, one of England's UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The shoreline around Kilve is also internationally significant in terms of the fossils found here, including ammonites, gryphea, and marine reptiles. The most common find is the smooth-shelled ammonite Psiloceras planorbis, but bones of ichthyosaurs and plesiosaurs are also abundant.



Washboard foreshore at Kilve. Photo: Paul Berry

(continued overleaf)

4) If you walk a few metres to the east (to the right if facing the sea), you will come to the Kilve Pill, where the River Holford (which you passed by the car park) runs across the pebble beach into the Bristol Channel. A tiny port once existed here, to import culm (an inferior type of coal) to burn as fuel in local lime kilns. The old stone jetty no longer exists, and the location was eventually judged to be too dangerous to use due to the strong local tides. The river level can be high in winter months, and prevent further exploration along the beach. However, if it is possible to navigate past the beach river, a walk of around 500 metres at low tide will take you just to the east of a cliff promontory with a ruined look-out building, where you will find four ancient mud volcanoes on the exposed foreshore. These appear as small grey mounds, about a metre tall and four metres in diameter. They were formed around 250 million years ago by sediment laden water that forced its way to the surface driven by pressure and methane gas. Each has a cap of tufa (precipitated limestone), and shale mud inside. The beach at Kilve was popular in days gone by for the sport of 'glatting', where conger eels were hunted at low tides. Groups of men would use dogs (often spaniels) to locate the congers (or 'glats') under stones on the beach, and then lift the stones with tall wooden staffs before bagging the eels in hessian sacks. The practice flourished between the wars but had died out by the 1950s.



Fossils are abundant on Kilve beach. Photo: Paul Berry

5) To continue the walk, pick up the King Charles III Coast Path at the head of the beach, and head west (to the right while facing inland). The route passes through an open grassed area, and then through a kissing gate. There are good views now inland to the Quantock Hills and the Exmoor National Park, and across the waters of the Bristol Channel to Wales. At the time of the last UK glacial maximum, sea level was several hundred feet lower than today, and the Bristol Channel did not exist. Now, it has one of the largest tidal ranges in world - up to 12 metres in places - behind only the Bay of Fundy and Ungava Bay in Canada. The sea here is always brownish in colour, due to sediments brought down by the River Severn and other local drainage channels.

6) After the coast path bends inland to the left, you will soon reach an old lime kiln hidden amongst the brambles. Working lime kilns were once common in this area, burning limestone to make fertiliser to sweeten soils. There used to be a small harbour at East Quantockshead to import limestone and export alabaster.

7) Descend the set of steps next to the lime kiln to explore East Quantockshead beach. There are some excellent exposures of the layers of limestone and shale in the cliffs next to the steps. Faults in the cliff are easy to spot with the offset limestone beds. On the beach itself are some fine examples of flat, scoured limestone pavements and ribbed 'washboard' foreshore. Fossils are also abundant here. This section of cliffs is important to geologists as it has been adopted as a GSSP (Global Boundary Stratotype Section and Point) marker, an internationally agreed division between two parts of the Lower Lias succession, meaning that all sedimentary rocks of this age (196.5 million years) in the world are related back to this cliff exposure. It is known as the 'Golden Spike' and is found just to the east (on the right as you descend) of Limekiln



Steps at East Quantockshead beach. Photo: Paul Berry

(continued overleaf)

A Circular Walk at Kilve, Somerset



East Quantockshead Cliffs. Photo: Paul Berry

steps (ST 137 443). The boundary itself lies almost at the top of a thick layer of dark shale which dips to beach level at the first point east of the steps. Immediately above it is a thin yellow limestone followed by a thin grey shale and then a distinctive metre thick yellow limestone. It is in simple terms, Greenwich Mean Time for geologists. At low tide, you may want to continue further along the beach to explore a number of recent cliff landslips, a tumbling waterfall, and the small promontory named 'Blue Ben'. A local legend suggests a dragon once lived in the shale caves at Kilve, and was known as the steed of the devil. It is said he fell from one of the many limestone causeways along this coast and drowned in the sticky channel mud. The entrance lobby to the Wells and Mendip Museum is dominated by a two-metre-long skeleton of a 'Jurassic Sea Dragon' (a fossilised ichthyosaur) found in this area - perhaps the body of Blue Ben himself?



Shale beds, East Quantockshead. Photo: Paul Berry

8) Return to the top of the steps to the wooden signpost, and follow the path in the direction of East Quantockshead. The path runs between farm fields, and you will get a good view on the hill to the right of Court House, which has been the home to the Luttrell family for more than 900 years. The path eventually reaches East Wood, and where it comes to an end, turn right towards the village of East Quantockshead.



East Quantocksheaad. Photo: Paul Berry

9) Walk along the road past the village duck pond, and turn right to explore some of the buildings of this quintessentially English village. There are thatched cottages, a mill house dating from 1725, a medieval tithe barn, a church, and the grade I listed manor house (Court House). St Mary's church is grade II listed, with parts dating back to the fourteenth century. There is an interesting ceremonial sun dial on the south wall, which also holds numerous fossils. Court House has a medieval tower and other parts dating from the seventeenth century. The manor here was granted to Ralph Pagnell after the Norman conquest, and has passed through different generations before falling into the hands of its current owners, the Luttrell family. East Quantockshead was the birthplace of Victorian painter Sarah Biffen (1784-1850), who was only 37" tall, and born with no arms and only vestigial legs. She used her mouth to paint and write, and had some of her art accepted by the Royal Academy.

10) Retrace your steps to the duck pond and continue along the road (known locally as Frog Street) away from village, ignoring turns to the right and left.

11) After passing the village hall on the right, take the footpath that leads away from the road to the left past some cottages. The footpath runs across open farmland, and forks at the end of the first field.

12) You now have a choice of two routes - for a more direct route back to the car park, take the left fork, which skirts the edge of East Wood before joining a track which leading to a road (Sea Lane). Turn left here to pass Old Rectory House and then St Mary's church and the Chantry on the left, before continuing to the car park.

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13) Alternatively, to visit the village of Kilve and its excellent pub (The Hood Arms), branch off to the right, which leads to the main road (A39). Turn left here, and follow it for 500 metres or so to the village. This is a busy road, so exercise caution. Kilve (population c 350) is equidistant between Minehead (to the west) and Bridgwater (to the east), and was listed in the Domesday Book as 'Clive', probably meaning 'cliff'. It boasts an excellent seventeenth century coaching inn (The Hood Arms), and Kilve Court, a grade II Georgian mansion now reborn as an outdoor centre running Duke of Edinburgh course for Somerset County Council.



The Chantry, Kilve. Photo: Paul Berry

14) Turn left at the junction just beyond the pub, and continue along Sea Lane. You will pass a number of houses and on the left, and then St Mary's church, with parts of the building dating back to 1265. You will then reach building ruins known as the Chantry. This is a remnant of a substantial manor house built by Simon de Furneaux in 1329. The original chantry chapel was located inside St Mary's church, and de Furneaux installed five monks here, whose sole purpose was to say daily prayers to save his soul and those of his family. It was not uncommon in those days for rich landowners to set up chapels such as this to buy their way out of purgatory. The chantry fell into disuse in 1411, long before the dissolution of the monasteries that was to follow. The ruined building we see today is said to have been used in the past as a store for smuggled brandy, and was gutted by a catastrophic fire around 1850, destroying the medieval roof and floors. Next to the ruins can be found the Chantry Tea Rooms, well worth a visit.

15) You can now continue along the road to the car park to complete your walk.

16) *It is possible to extend your walk along the coast path to the old port of Lilstock, the start point of the SSSI that stretches along this coast for 12 miles to Blue Anchor. To do so, take the path to the right of the oil retort by cricket ground. This passes a lime kiln hidden in the woods that was built between 1840 and 1871, replacing earlier kilns sited at the head of the creek. You will soon pick up the King Charles III Coast Path heading east. You will soon pass an old ruined look-out shelter, and with the Bristol Channel island of Steepholm and Hinckley Point power station visible in the far distance, the low clifftop path offers tremendous views over the foreshore below with its fascinating faulted Blue Lias limestone pavements. This stretch of Somerset coast was used in the days of WW2 as a military training area, preparing troops for the D Day landings. A 20-foot concrete arrow on the ground once assisted low-flying aircraft with their bombing practice over the Bristol Channel, but has long since been removed. Tank training also took place in this area, firing at targets mounted on rails in front of an earth embankment which has since been bulldozed flat. Soldier barracks were sited at nearby Kilton. After 2 km, the path passes an old military quadrant observation building, used to coordinate bombing training runs of F111 aircraft up until 1995. Yellow and black floating targets can still be seen in the waters of the channel, but today they are used to train C17 helicopter gunners from nearby RNAS Yeovilton. After passing an old wartime pill box, the path reaches a junction which leads inland to Lilstock Farm. Continue a little further to arrive at the site of what was once Lilstock harbour, and the start (or end) of the SSSI. A small port was built here in the 1830s by Sir John Alford to import*



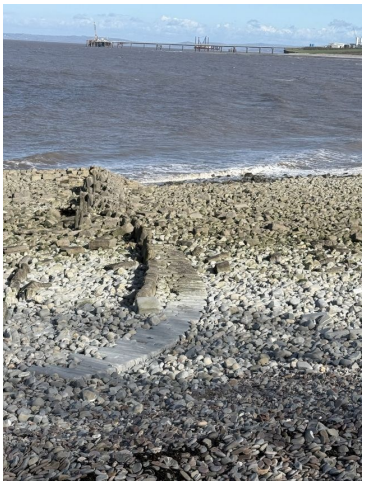
Lilstock Beach. Photo: Paul Berry

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geography southwest

Place To Walk

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Remains of the old port at Lilstock. Photo: Paul Berry

coal from Wales for domestic use and to fuel local lime kilns. Timber pit props were exported on the return ship journeys. There is not much left to see today unless you hunt around, and it is difficult to imagine that this was a bustling port in the 1800s. However, there are remnants of an old slipway and dry dock running through the pebble beach, and old houses and lime kilns are hidden in the undergrowth at the foot of the cliffs. Towards end of the harbour are the remains of a lifting crane with a metal framework still visible. Back in the day, a dock and breakwater were constructed here, and by 1848, a coastguard station had been added. A customs office was *soon established, and by 1886, warehouses had been built. There was even a pub called the Limpet Shell, and pleasure steamers visited here, linking Lilstock to Ilfracombe and Cardiff. A canal link to Seaton in east Devon was even talked about at one time, but was never commissioned. In the boom days of the 1860s, Lord of the Manor Peregrine Acland built a promenade along the clifftop to allow his sickly daughter (a TB sufferer) to be driven up and down in a pony trap to enjoy the clean sea air. It must have done her some good, as she went on to bear nine children and lived to the age of seventy-one. A severe storm on 28th-29th December, 1900, destroyed much of Lilstock's harbour (along with others along this coast). After the slipway and pier were damaged, the port buildings slowly deteriorated and the entrance to the docks became blocked by shingle. The harbour was soon abandoned. It is worth spending some time studying the crazy patterns nature has created on the limestone foreshore at Lilstock, and perhaps search for abundant ammonite and gryphea fossils on the pebble beach. Then you can return to Kilve along the same route.*



Jurassic foreshore at Lilstock. Photo: Paul Berry

Answers to Curiosity Questions:

Hinckley Point 'C' nuclear power station is visible from the path on this walk. When will it be operational? *(2027 - 2030)*

What percentage of Britain's electricity demand will be generated at Hinckley Point 'C'? *(10%)*

The nearby Quantock Hills were named as England's first AONB. In what year? *(1956 - AONBs are now known as a 'National Landscapes')*

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geography southwest

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