

Self-guided Archaeology Walk near Abbotsbury, South Dorset.

A detailed guided walk to help you understand the archaeology of Tenants Hill, Wears Hill and the connecting landscape.



MAP It is highly recommended that you use this guide in conjunction with the OS Explorer OL 15 map.

TRANSPORT – Small amount of parking available near the entrance to Gorwell Farm and on Bishop’s Road (1) (SY 58878672). Alternatively there is limited parking at Abbotsbury Castle hillfort (22).

ACCESS Unsuitable for wheelchairs

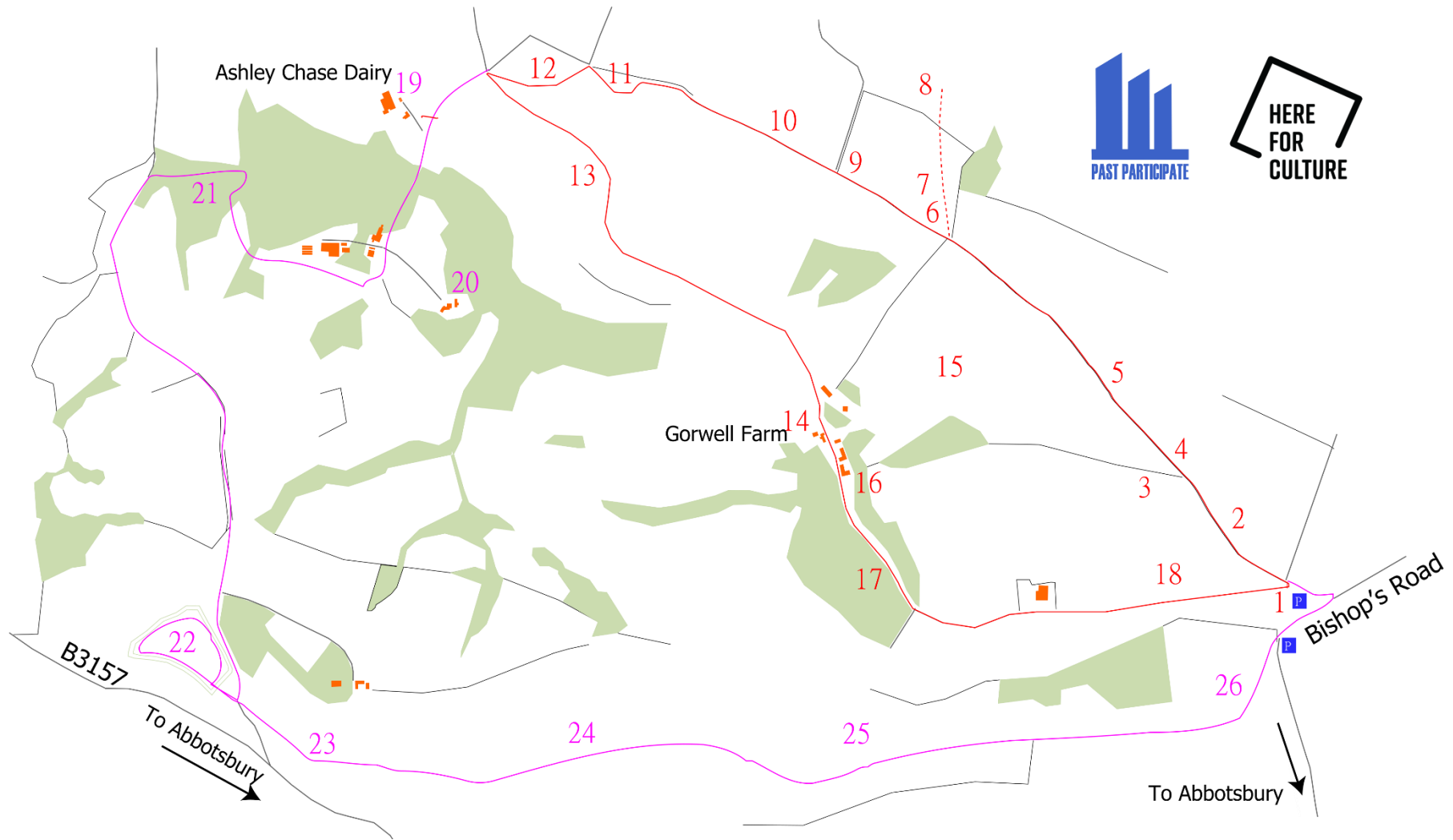
DOGS Great for dogs but keep them under control and in sight and make sure they stay away from wildlife, livestock, horses, and other people unless invited.

Please follow the Countryside Code. Not all the monuments listed here are directly on footpaths, although they are all visible from the route described, so please respect crops and livestock.

Route	Distance	Height Gain	Time
Red	6.5km	110m	
Red + Purple	10km	188m	4 hours

This walk has been put together by Past Participate and funded by the Cultural Recovery Fund. For queries or to get involved in more of our activities please email info@pastparticipate.co.uk





Red Route

1 'The Moot Stone'

'The Moot Stone' is a large slab of sarsen stone, which was probably erected as a standing stone in the Neolithic or Early Bronze Age. It now stands at the end of a hedgebank, at one side of the entrance to Gorwell Farm, but may originally have stood a metre or two to the south, where the cattle grid is now located. This location is now the boundary between 4 modern parishes.

Sarsen stones are made of flint and chert pebbles in a silica matrix, they can be found in the valleys nearby (particularly the Valley of Stones) where they were deposited during the Ice Age.

Moot is derived from an Old English verb meaning 'to meet'. Legends or traditions associated with some ancient burial mounds and standing stones resulted in them being selected as meeting places during the Anglo-Saxon period. These meetings were held to resolve local affairs, including legal matters, administrative decisions, and making proclamations.

If you turn around and face south-east, on a fine day you will get a panoramic view of the Isle of Portland. Portland was an important location during the Mesolithic, Neolithic, and Early Bronze Age, as it was the principal source of Portland Chert. This material was used to make prehistoric tools, including carefully worked arrowheads that were traded across southern England.



The Moot Stone
Photo by Hayley Roberts

Walk to the Northwest along the track to the right of the Moot Stone.

2 'Weymouth Road'

The footpath you are walking along used to be a more significant routeway. It was called 'Weymouth Road' on a map produced in 1750, suggesting that it originally linked Litton Cheney with Portesham, and ultimately led to Weymouth, around 10km to the south-east.

Immediately after passing into the next field, cross over a stile in the hedge to the left and then follow the boundary on your left-hand side until you reach a gate. Go through the gate and turn left.

3 'The Grey Mare and her Colts'



The Grey Mare and Her Colts

Photo by Jim Rylatt

'The Grey Mare and her Colts' is a Neolithic chambered long barrow; a type of burial monument. Five large sarsen stones – three are still upright – formed a façade at the south-eastern end of the monument, behind which lies the capstone of the burial chamber. The capstone has been dislodged from its original location and now slopes down toward the north-east. This probably occurred when someone investigated the chamber in the past; one tenant farmer in the 19th century reported that he had found 'many human bones, and a quantity of ancient British pottery'. The burial chamber is contained by a mound that is about 24m long, 13m wide and 1m high. The surface of the mound is uneven and irregular. It is possible that this reflects the location of antiquarian trenches. However, numerous small sarsen stones are exposed around the façade and the burial chamber, which suggests that this is a stone cairn, rather than an earthen barrow, and could account for the absence of clearly defined quarry ditches flanking the sides of the mound. The larger sarsen boulders exposed around the edge of the mound could represent the remains of a kerb that retained the cairn.

The chambered tomb was constructed with views of the sea to the east and so that people facing the façade overlooked a dry valley leading to Gorwell. This location was carefully chosen – if the tomb had been located 200m to the south it would also have had views toward the Isle of Portland, but this was evidently not wanted. This monument has not been excavated by archaeologists, so it is not precisely dated, but similar monuments were constructed and used in the period between c. 3700 and 2900 BC.

Retrace your steps to the stile, cross and pause by the opening through the hedge.

4 Field boundaries



Stile crossing gap in hedgebank
Photo by Hayley Roberts

The hedgebank you have just crossed was probably constructed in the later Bronze Age or Iron Age and extends 2.3km from the Moot Stone to the north-western end of Tenants Hill. This boundary formed part of an extensive late prehistoric co-axial field system extending across Tenants Hill, White Hill, and beyond; other hedgebanks forming the perimeters of modern fields also fossilise elements of this prehistoric field system.

Received wisdom suggests that the stones used to construct 'The Grey Mare and her Colts', and many other prehistoric monuments in the area, were transported from the Valley of Stones, 1km to the east of your current location. Ongoing research suggests that this was not the case and that sarsens were originally scattered across White Hill and the eastern half of Tenants Hill. It is likely that later prehistoric farmers cleared these stones and used them to form the foundations of the hedgebanks –

look closely at the gap through the bank leading to the stile and you can observe several small sarsen boulders.

5

Follow the track north-westward to the corner of the field.

Another standing stone?

A large slab of sarsen lies 1m to the left of the track, near the north-west corner of the field; it may be obscured by vegetation. It is similar in size to the Moot Stone, raising the possibility that it was also used as a prehistoric standing stone.

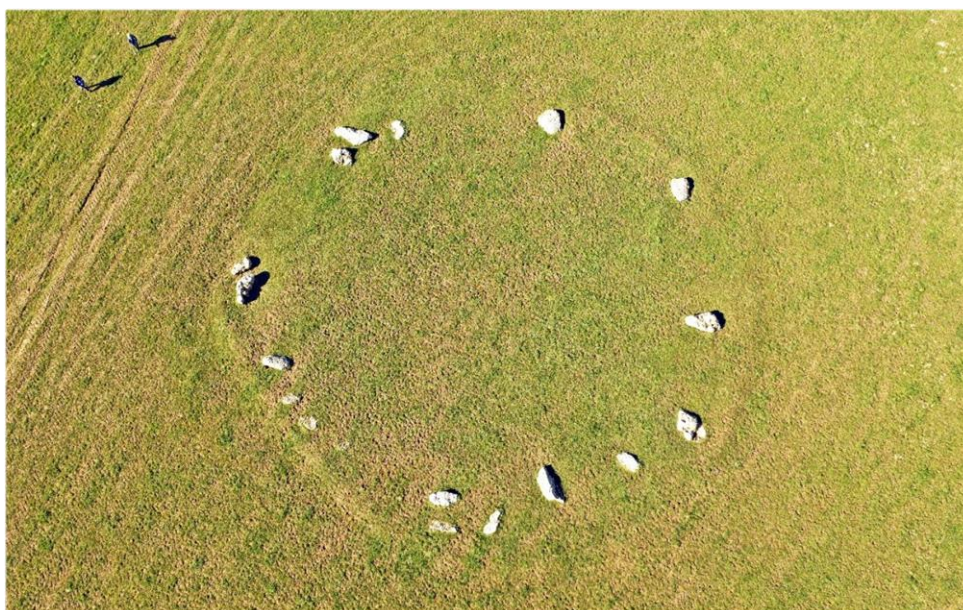
If so, could it have been a marker along an ancient prehistoric trackway that ran along the axis of the Tenants Hill from north-west to south-east that linked the funerary monuments constructed along the ridge? This is the same route of the footpath you are currently following.

Continue to follow the track through the next field and pass into the field beyond. You can leave the track, following the footpath sign, to visit the stone circle.

6 Kingston Russell stone circle

The Kingston Russell stone circle is the largest surviving stone circle in Dorset. It is composed of eighteen visible sarsen stones in an irregular ring up to 25m across. All the stones are now recumbent, but one stone was still standing in 1805, suggesting that all the stones were originally upright. The stone circle has not been excavated, so there is no precise date for its construction and use, but its size and form, including the absence of an encircling ditch, suggest it was created in the Early Bronze Age.

The stone circle was constructed at the narrowest part of the ridge, where coombes descending south-westward toward Gorwell Farm and north-eastward to Foxholes Farm were the easiest place to cross the hill. This suggests that the circle was deliberately sited at the junction between the cross-ridge route and the path running along the ridge.



Aerial view of Kingston Russell Stone Circle

Photo by Jim Rylatt

7 Round barrow

This round barrow, known as Kingston Russell 15 (KR15), is located 60m to the north-west of the stone circle; look very carefully and you should be able to discern a low circular mound around 24m in diameter and up to 0.4m high. These are often labelled as 'Tumulus' on OS maps and is type of round barrow called a bowl barrow, so named because originally it resembled an upturned bowl. Bowl barrows were funerary monuments, which covered single or multiple inhumation or cremation burials. Most examples were constructed during the Early Bronze Age.

This example has been flattened and spread, probably as part of post WW2 farming improvements. KR15 does not have an encircling quarry ditch, which suggests that the mound material consisted of turf or soil collected from somewhere else.

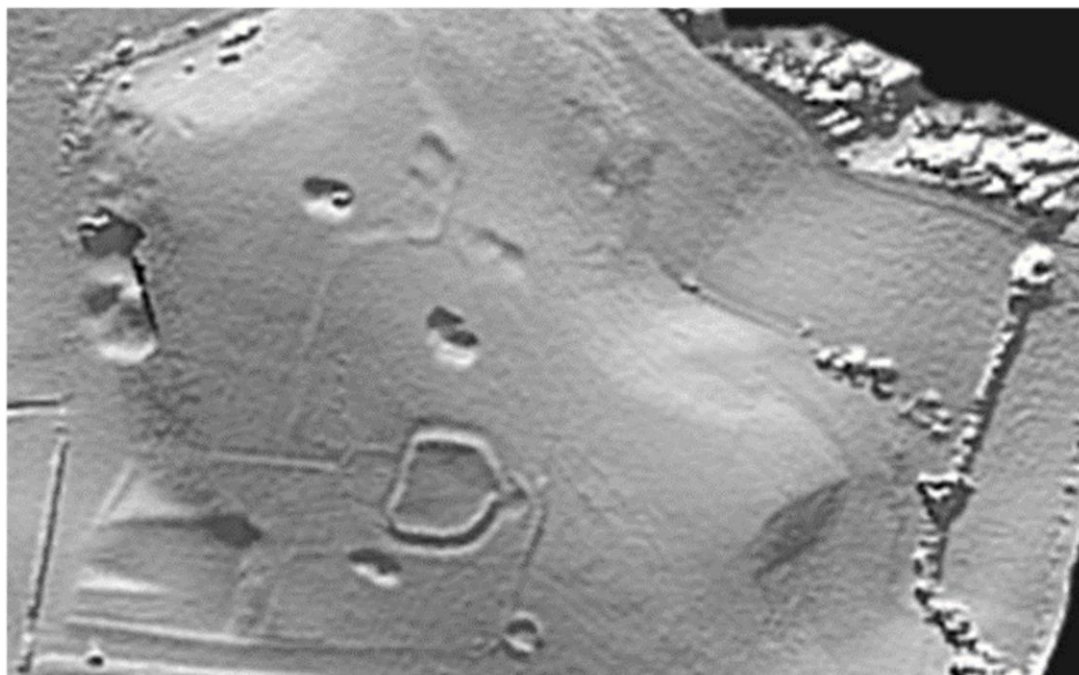
*For optional detour head north and through the gate to the next field (8)
Otherwise return to footpath at edge of field and follow to (9).*

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8 Tenants Hill enclosure and dewpond

The enclosure is located on a small promontory at the northern edge of Tenants Hill. It is formed of an earth bank with a surrounding quarry ditch which encloses a D-shaped area that extends 38m north-south and 37m east-west. The entrance is located on the eastern side of the enclosure and is associated with outlying banks that may have been used to direct livestock into the compound. Several small fields – possibly garden plots or paddocks – are located immediately to the south-west of the enclosure. The form and size of the enclosure indicates it was probably constructed during the Late Bronze Age or Iron Age, and it is one of only three such sites that still survive in Dorset.

The embanked circular feature located to the south of the enclosure is a dewpond. Dewponds are shallow, saucer-shaped pools, which were constructed on hilltops to provide water for livestock when other sources of surface water were not available. It is possible that some dewponds may have prehistoric or early medieval origins, but the majority were constructed during the 18th and 19th centuries.



This is a 3d aerial image of the Tenants Hill enclosure

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www.aerial-cam.co.uk

Return to the track south of the stone circle and follow to the south-west corner of the field.

9 Archaeological excavations

Recent excavations close to the south-west corner of the stone circle field have provided evidence for tens of thousands of years of human activity. The oldest find was handaxe made and used by a late Neanderthal person somewhere between 60000 and 40000 years ago. The excavation also recovered worked flint dating to the Upper Palaeolithic, Late Mesolithic, Early and Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Ages, as well as an Early Neolithic leaf-shaped arrowhead made from Portland Chert.

The main discovery within the trench was an Early Bronze Age roundhouse, the interior of which was 10.2m in diameter. The doorway of the building was aligned upon the stone circle, raising the possibility that this unusually large building had some form of ceremonial or ritual purpose. Plain Collared Urn pottery recovered from several of the postholes indicates the building was constructed between 1800 and 1500 BC.



Excavating a posthole with pottery in the bottom

Photo by Anne Teather

Continue along the track to the next field.

10 Round barrow

The well-preserved bowl barrow, visible in the field to your right, is known as Kingston Russell 14. It is 20m in diameter and 2m high, and was not enclosed by a quarry ditch. It provides an indication of how KR15 would have looked before it was damaged. An irregular hollow in the top of the mound indicates the barrow was investigated by antiquarians.

Continue along the track.

11 Chalk pits

These chalk pits are two of the many that were excavated around the upper slopes of Tenants Hill during the post medieval period. The majority have now been backfilled, but their locations are marked on Ordnance Survey maps at 'Pit (dis.)'.

The top of Tenants Hill is covered by a layer of Clay-with-Flints, which makes the soil acidic and promotes the development of heathland vegetation – parts of Tenants Hill were still covered by heath until the 20th century and would have looked like the high ground overlooking the Valley of Stones. This heathland was improved by spreading crushed chalk, which reduced the soil acidity, enhanced the soil structure, and increased the availability of nutrients.



*A Chalk Pit, still used by the farmer today.
Photo by Hayley Roberts*

Continue along the track a short distance until you reach a gate with a stile next to it on your left-hand side. The footpath curves across the field, follow footpath for 50m.

12 Long barrow

The low oval mound to your right (possibly invisible if under crop) is thought to be the remains of an earthen long barrow, known as Long Bredy III. It would originally have been higher, but it has been spread by agricultural activity and is now about 30.0m long, 15.0m wide and 0.6m high. This funerary monument would have been constructed during the same period as the Grey Mare and her Colts – other long barrows having been dated to between c. 3800 and 3300 BC.

Follow the footpath, down the slope to a stile in the SW corner of field.

13 Round barrows on Wears Hill

As you start to descend Tenants Hill notice how the round barrows along the South Dorset Ridgeway to the south (on top of Wears Hill), disappear. Many of the round barrow cemeteries in Dorset, such as the Winterbourne Poor Lot Barrows, were located on false crests so that they were silhouetted on the skyline when viewed from lower lying ground. In contrast, the barrows on Tenants Hill and Wears Hill were constructed on the top of these ridges and would only have been visible as you walked past them or from adjacent uplands. Also see [23](#) & [24](#).

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For the **Red** route cross one stile, then immediately turn around and cross the adjacent one and *follow the path to the valley bottom*. Alternatively *Turn left and follow Ashley Chase Lane downhill, following the purple route, starting at number 19*.

14 Gorwell Farmhouse

Gorwell Farm is a two-storey stone-built house. The projecting north wing incorporates four stone mullioned windows and is 17th century in date, as are elements of the entrance porch on the eastern frontage. The rest of the building appears to have been constructed in the mid-19th century.

15 Medieval deer park

A document of 1285 provides the earliest mention of 'Gorewull' and records that the manor was held by Ralph Wake. The Wake family still held the land in 1349 when a medieval deer park at 'Gorewelle' was first recorded. The exact proportions of this park are unclear, but it appears to have extended north-eastward and eastward from the modern farmyard to the axial boundary running along the ridge of Tenants Hill (see 4), suggesting that it covered around 34ha. This area incorporates Park Coppice – a reference to the deer park – which probably incorporates the 'four acres of underwood and herbage' located in the park in 1361. Roe deer can still be seen in the fields and woodland around Gorwell, and you may be lucky enough to see one during your walk.

Continue along the main drive through the farmyard

16 Barn

The last building at the south-eastern edge of the farmyard is a barn of six bays, which was probably built in the 17th or early 18th centuries. Several of the stones inside the barn are marked with 'witch marks', which are thought to have been carved to protect the building and the people who worked within it by warding off evil. The most prominent 'witch mark' is a daisy wheel, or hexafoil, which takes the form of a six petalled flower drawn with a compass. There are also at least two stones with Marian marks, overlapping V's that are thought to represent the initials of the Virgin Mary.

17 Gorwell stream

As you leave the farm a stream runs along the western side of the valley bottom. This small tributary of the River Bride gives the valley its name – Gorwell is derived from Old English place-name elements meaning 'dirty spring or stream'.

Follow the road around the corner and pass the farm buildings on your left-hand side.

18 More round barrows!

The last two fields on the left-hand side each contain a bowl barrow, which should be visible as a low mound on the skyline. Both barrows are ditchless, and each has been truncated and spread by agricultural activity. The first barrow you pass is Long Bredy 16, which is around 29m in diameter and up to 1.3m high, and the second is the slightly smaller Long Bredy 17 (24m in diameter and 1m high).

Follow the drive until you return to the start or for the purple extension follow the lane downhill

Purple extension

19 Ashley Chase Dairy

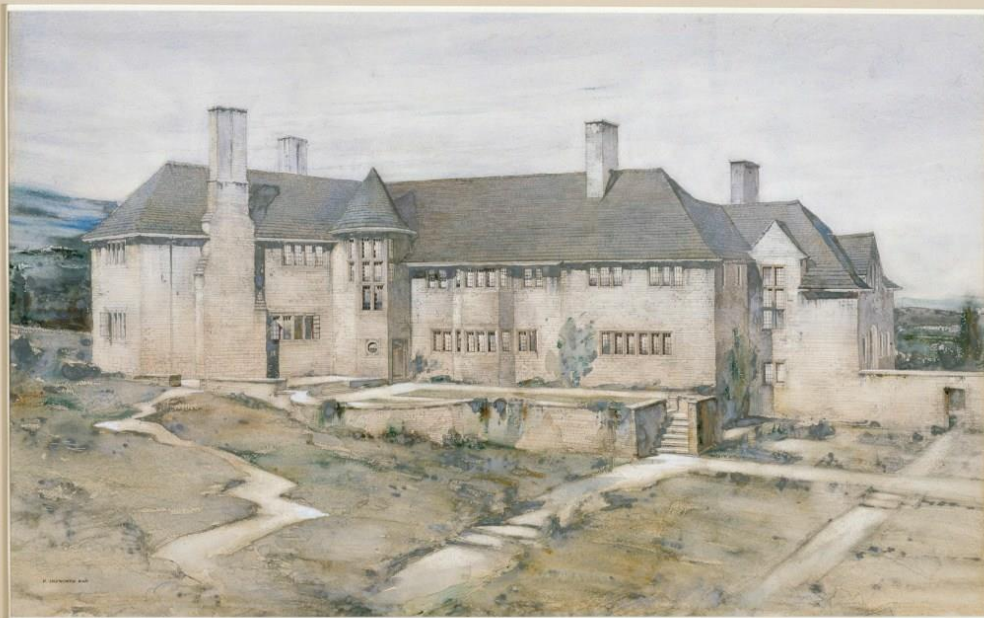
The first group of buildings that you pass on the right-hand side is Ashley Chase Dairy. The thatched building is Ashley Chase Dairy Cottage, which was built in the early 19th century.

Continue to follow the road through the woods and up the hill. As you reach the cross roads continue straight over.

20 Ashley Chase House

The track to the left goes to Ashley Chase House (private), which was built in 1925 as a shooting lodge for Sir David and Lady Olga Milne-Watson; Sir David was the managing director of the Gas Light and Coke Company, a forerunner of British Gas. The house was designed by the distinguished architect and watercolourist Sir Edward Guy Dawber, who was renowned for his Arts and Crafts style buildings.

The earliest reference to 'Asseleghē' was in a deed dating to 1246 – the name combines Old English place-name elements that mean 'Ash-tree wood or woodland clearing'. The 'Chase' element is not medieval and was introduced by the Milne-Watsons when they named their house. It has now become associated with other elements of the surrounding landscape.



ASHLEY CHASE, DORSET.

Guy Dawber. Design for Ashley Chase, Dorset: perspective of south garden front, c.1925

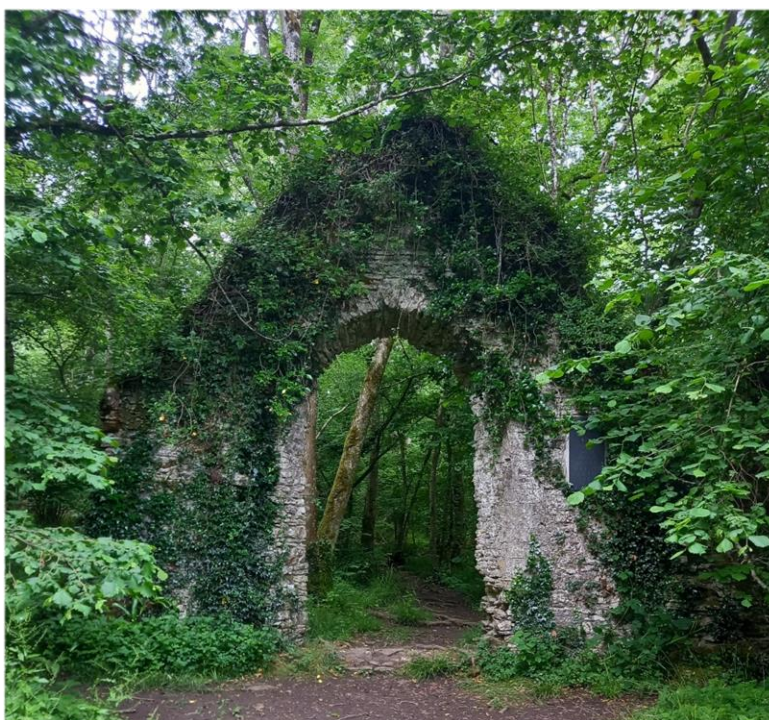
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As you head up the hill cross the stile on the right hand side of the road. Follow the path, across the fields, across a (very) muddy patch to the woods. Cross the next stile and continue until the small path reaches a T-junction, turn right.



21 The Chapel of St Luke



Chapel of St Luke
Photo by Hayley Roberts

The ruins of a small chapel that was 11m long and 6m wide, are preserved in Chapel Coppice. Only the western wall, which incorporates an arched window, and a fragment of the north-east corner of the chapel survive. This surviving masonry probably dates to the 15th century and includes two stone heads that have been reset in the gable wall. The latter is supported by a crude buttress that was erected in the late 1920s on the instructions of the Milne-Watsons, who also commissioned an altar table and cross. They are both buried in the ruins of the chapel.

In 1246, Ashley was given to Netley Abbey, Southampton, by William of Litton. This was a Cistercian community that would have observed a life of austerity and isolation that emphasised the benefits of agricultural labour and self-sufficiency. It is likely that the Ashley estate was run as a grange – a monastic farm – by monks and lay-brothers, and that the chapel was built close to the principal farm buildings to serve this small religious community.

Follow the footpath back to the T-junction and then crossing the little bridges continue to Park's Lane. Head south along the road for just over 1km.

22 Abbotsbury Castle hillfort

Abbotsbury Castle is a small Iron Age hillfort located at the western end of Wears Hill. It probably originated as a univallate hillfort – a single bank and ditch running around the top of the ridge – that enclosed a 1.8ha triangular area, but further embankments were subsequently added.

The north-eastern, north-western, and southern sides of the hillfort are surrounded by two ramparts and a ditch that enhance the natural escarpment. On the south-eastern side, four ramparts and two ditches block the approach along the ridge; the innermost of these was part of the original univallate hillfort. The opening immediately to the north of this early rampart was the main entrance to the enclosure.

Despite the evocative name this was not necessarily built as a monument for defensive warfare, although it is and would have certainly been an impressive display of labour! Hillforts may have been meeting or settlement places.

The eastern half of the hillfort contains the remains of several roundhouses, some of which are visible as low circular banks around 6m in diameter. To the south-west of these houses, near the southern rampart, lies a Bronze Age bowl barrow with the vestiges of an encircling ditch. The top of the barrow has been disturbed, possibly by antiquarians, but it has also been suggested that the mound could have functioned as a signal beacon during the medieval period.

The south-western corner of the enclosure has been modified by the creation of a small square enclosure, the ditch of which cuts through the Iron Age ramparts. It has been suggested that this was the site of a Roman signal station, but excavations in the 1970s did not find any evidence for this. It has since suggested it might have been a wartime addition.

Once you have looked around the hillfort, cross the road and follow the South West Coast Path eastward along the top of Wears Hill.

23a Western round barrow cemetery, Wears Hill



Abbotsbury 7 Round Barrow

Photo by Hayley Roberts

A group of seven bowl barrows were constructed along a 200m long section of the ridge top. The most westerly of these, Abbotsbury 6, was destroyed by quarrying before 1939. The first barrow you encounter today is Abbotsbury 7, which is 15m in diameter and 1m high. An antiquarian trench has been dug into the mound from the north-western side and the depression of a slight ditch is visible on the south-eastern side. The other 5 barrows are of varying size but are all visible nearby and also show signs of antiquarian investigation. The clustering of these funerary monuments suggests that there was a close relationship between the people who were buried within them and potentially indicates that they were part of the same extended family.

Wears Hill is named in reference to Wears Farm, located at the foot of the hill to the north. This property was held by Gilbert le Ware in 1327 and William le Ware in 1332.

23b Royal Observer Corps post

The round barrows of the western barrow cemetery surround a Royal Observer Corps monitoring post that was opened in March 1959 and decommissioned in October 1968. It was established to identify and report hostile aircraft and nuclear attacks on the United Kingdom. The visible remains comprise a small concrete and stone observation position and the concrete access hatch and ventilation shaft of an underground bunker.

Walk along the ridgetop, following the path whilst admiring the stunning view of the South Dorset Ridgeway, Abbotsbury, Chesil beach, the Fleet and Portland.

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24 Eastern round barrow cemetery, Wears Hill

The eastern barrow cemetery comprises four bowl barrows. The most westerly of these is Abbotsbury 9, which is 12m across and 1.5m high. The other three barrows are located 300m further east. Abbotsbury 10 has a 15m diameter and 1.2m high mound; Abbotsbury 11 is 12m across and 1m high and has the depression of an antiquarian trench in the top; and Abbotsbury 12 has a diameter of 14m and is 1.5m high.

24a Abbotsbury Tithe Barn

There is much to see from the view here but one interesting building that stands out is Abbotsbury Tithe Barn. This was built around 1400 and is now the largest remaining tithe barn in England. The Abbey of St Peter was founded by the Benedictines in 1044 and dissolved in 1539 when the buildings were leased to Sir Giles Strangeways, who may have turned them into a residence. St Catherine Chapel which you may have spotted on the ridge closest to the sea was built by the monks as a pilgrimage chapel.



The Tithe Barn stands out amongst the buildings in Abbotsbury

Photo by Hayley Roberts

Continue to follow the footpath along the top of the ridge, signposted to Hardy Monument. It is possible to take the path north, following the signpost to Long Bredy. This will take you close to Gorwell Farm, via evidence of stone quarrying.

25 White Hill barrow cemetery

White Hill barrow cemetery is the third that you encounter along this ridge. It consists of five Bronze Age bowl barrows grouped together at the western end of White Hill. On the southern side of the path lies Abbotsbury 2, a grass covered barrow 14.0m in diameter and 1.6m high, which has an antiquarian trench dug into the eastern side of the mound.

The truncated and spread remains of Abbotsbury 1 are located 180m to the north in an arable field; it is a low circular mound around 14m across and up to 0.5m high. Further east lie Abbotsbury 3, 4, and 5, which have diameters between 12.0m and 19.0m and heights from 0.7m to 1.2m.

Continue to follow the South West Coast Path eastward until it reaches Bishop's Road. Follow the road up the hill to return to the start.

26 Round barrow

As you approach the end of the walk you pass one more round barrow on your left-hand side. Abbotsbury 20, located 210m east of White Hill Plantation, is a bowl barrow with a diameter of 13.0m and a height of 0.3m. Ploughing has revealed lots of large flints, suggesting that the mound is a cairn.

Time Line

Period	Approximate Date Range
Middle Palaeolithic	150000 – 40000 BCE
Upper Palaeolithic	40000 – 10000 BCE
Early Mesolithic	10000 – 7000 BCE
Late Mesolithic	7000 – 4000 BCE
Early Neolithic	4000 – 3300 BCE
Middle Neolithic	3300 – 2900 BCE
Late Neolithic	2900 – 2400 BCE
Early Bronze Age	2400 – 1600 BCE
Middle Bronze Age	1600 – 1200 BCE
Late Bronze Age	1200 – 750 BCE
Iron Age	750 BCE – 43 AD
Romano-British	43 – 410 AD
Early Anglo-Saxon	410 – 650 AD
Middle Anglo-Saxon	650 – 900 AD
Late Anglo-Saxon	900 – 1066 AD
High Medieval	1066 – 1250 AD
Late Medieval	1250 – 1485 AD
Post Medieval	1485 – 1900 AD