

## **Dorset Boxing Day Walk - Ringstead Bay (4.5 miles)**

From the car park you follow a ridge of high downland with dramatic seaward views. The path then runs downhill past a tiny chapel, St. Catherine-by-the-Sea, perched on a grassy hillside, to meet the Coast Path and head west along the crest of Burning Cliff. The cliff marks the western end of a huge landslip of vertical boulders and crumbling vegetation covering 115 acres. It derives its name from the years between 1826 and 1830 when it burned almost continuously owing to the oxidation of oil-bearing shale in its surface. You follow the path to Ringstead village and beach and see the mounds and embankments of a deserted medieval village before returning to the car park. This is a walk for any time of year but at quiet times in winter it is particularly special.



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### **FAST FACTS**

**Terrain:** Good undulating paths and tracks, with one short, steep climb.

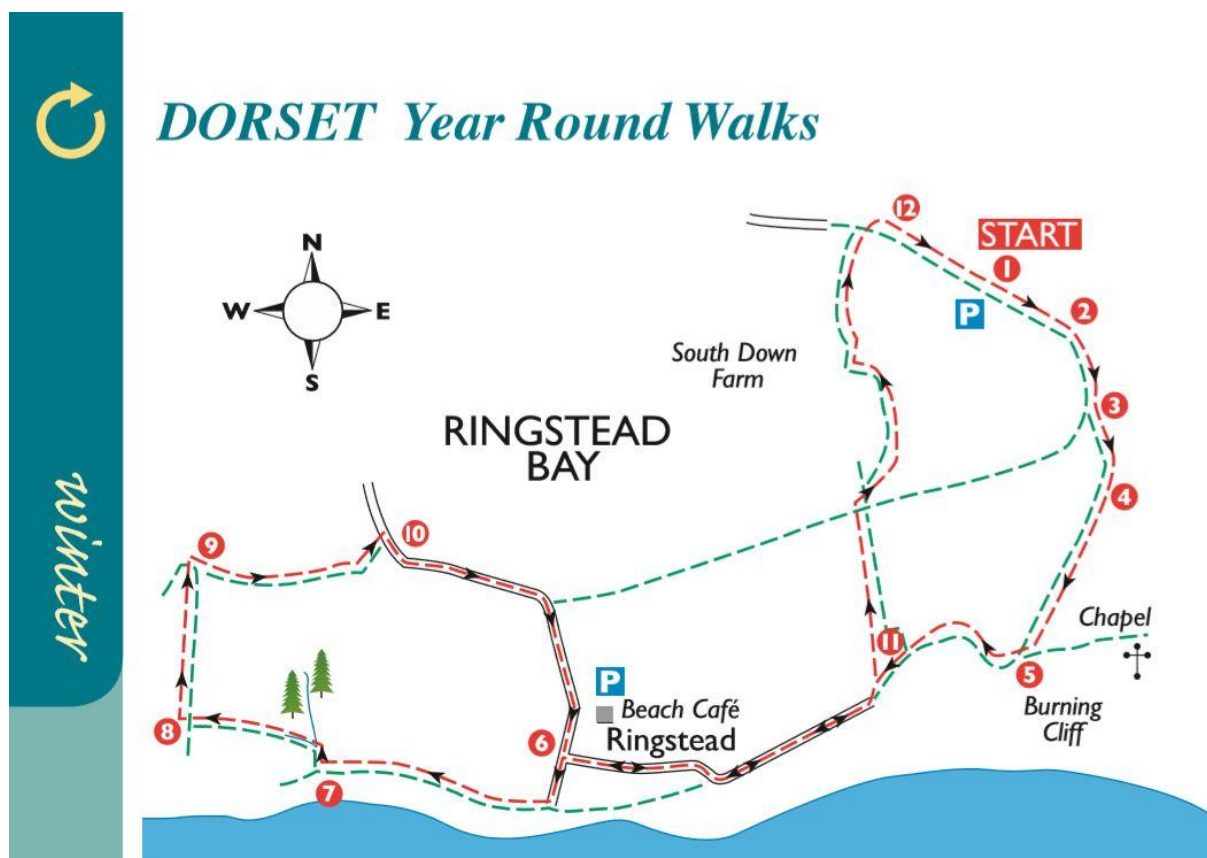
**Starting point:** National Trust car park at South Down (GR SY 757825).

**How to get there/parking:** Turn south off the A352 Wool–Dorchester road at the Warmwell roundabout, and take the A353 to Weymouth. Soon after Poxwell, there is a sharp right-hand bend, followed by a tight left-hand turn onto a lane for Upton. Follow the lane through Upton; follow the sign for the National Trust car park, passing a turning for Ringstead and the beach café on the right (this is a toll road). Go straight on through a gateway, and park on the left of the track.

**Sat Nav:** DT2 8NQ.

**Refreshments:** The Smugglers Inn is a short drive away in the coastal hamlet of Osmington Mills.

## THE WALK



1 The route of the first part of the walk from the National Trust car park is marked by orange arrows.

Leaving a noticeboard on your right, follow the ridge heading south-east to a gate signed with an orange arrow and marked 'No Cars'. Go through the gate and continue downhill enjoying wonderful views over Weymouth Bay.

2 When you see a gate ahead bear right following the orange arrow sign down a track with a fence on your left to a wooden signpost.

3 Keep ahead downhill following the sign 'Coast Path and Ringstead' also marked with an orange arrow to another signpost. Follow the sign for Ringstead to meet the Coast Path. (Our route is now indicated with the familiar acorn symbol.)

4 On the corner you bear right to follow the Coast Path, but before you do so you must see one of the highlights of this walk, the little chapel of St. Catherine-by-the-Sea. Turn left just past the corner to walk through part of the graveyard to see the chapel. Return to the Coast Path and continue downhill.

5 When the path divides keep ahead, following the Coast Path sign to follow the crest of Burning Cliff. In his short story *The Distracted Preacher* about local smugglers during the Napoleonic War, Thomas Hardy suggests a different reason for the cliff's name. The heroine, knowing Customs officers are on watch, sets a gorse bush alight to 'warn off' an approaching ship full of contraband. Descend steps to cross two small footbridges following the sign for Ringstead. (Shortly after you pass a footpath on the right marked for South Down which is part of our return route.) Keep ahead to go through a small gate to a track which levels to pass a house on the left and approach Ringstead village. Keep ahead past a caravan site and houses on your left to a road.

6 The Beach Café is on the corner on your right. Turn left along the Coast Path through a gateway and bear right to follow the path running west above the beach past houses on the right. During the 18th century you might have spotted smugglers at work as the beach was a favoured landing place for contraband goods. They used a thatched cottage on the shore as their headquarters. The path bears a little left through a narrow wooded area then continues beside an open field with a fence on the right. If you look over the field you will be able to make out the low mounds of the site of Ringstead's medieval village. It is believed to have been destroyed by pirates.

7 Leave the Coast Path at this point and follow the footpath through woodland. Descend some steps and cross a stream. Climb the steps on the other side and follow the path through the woods to meet a track.

8 Turn right following the sign for Upton and keep ahead with the woods on your right to join a crosstrack.

9 Bear right for Ringstead through the woods. Go through a gate, bear left at the junction opposite Glebe Cottage and continue to a road.

10 Turn right and follow the road as it curves right and runs downhill to meet our outbound route at Point 6 opposite the Beach Café. Turn left to retrace your steps along the Coast Path.

11 After about a quarter of a mile, turn left to cross a stile signed 'N.T. South Down' and marked with an orange arrow. Walk up the field ahead and go through a gateway. Continue along the track ahead beside fields with a hedge on your left. The track curves a little left then keeps on uphill before dipping down towards South Down Farm. Go through a gateway and pass the farm on your left. Follow the lane from the farm as it winds steeply uphill to the ridge path we followed at the start of the walk.

12 Turn right along the ridge to return to the National Trust car park and your car.

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## WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

**St. Catherine-by-the-Sea.** This tiny wooden church has stood in a spectacular setting on the slopes of White Nothe cliff since 1926.



It has been recently restored and is beautifully maintained. Although the church can only be reached by footpath it holds regular weekly services. Above the altar are three small engraved glass windows. If you have visited the

church at Moreton and seen the windows engraved by Laurence Whistler you may recognise a family likeness as they are the work of his son, Simon. The hillside churchyard slopes down towards the sea. At the foot of the cliffs waves cream along the edges of inaccessible beaches and there are magnificent views over White Nothe and Weymouth Bay. Every year an outdoor service is held here in this lovely setting.

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