



Mid & South East Cornwall

Port Isaac to Port Quin



A massive 1.8 million people trudge at least some part of the South West Coast Path each year, which isn't exactly surprising given that it is the UK's longest continuous public right of way and probably the longest coast walk in the world.

There is something wonderfully invigorating and yet blessedly tranquil about walking near the shore. Here's a case in point - a clamber that takes you from Port Isaac to Port Quin on the North Cornish coast. It looks no more than a couple of miles on the map, but by the time you've meandered up every hillside, rounded each headland and negotiated half-dozen steep coombes, you'll have walked the best part of four. And then there's the little matter of a return trip - you can either walk inland or go back the way you came.

First word of warning: do not be tempted by the harbour car park. It IS the harbour and, if the tide is out when you leave, it will surely be in when you get back. You will not be the only visiting motorist who has watched the roof of his or her car being lapped by waves.

The alternative is to stop at the town car park on the hill between Port Isaac and Port Gaverne - and although this adds a little to the walk you will be treated to fine views of the place they used to call 'Portizack' - which was old Cornish for a harbour that dealt in corn.

Looking down at the scene you might think little has changed since the old corn days, but really it's impossible to imagine just how busy the harbour once was. I have seen old sepia photographs of the way things used to be - with gigs, brigs and schooners dried out in what was then just a bay.

Basic Hike: from Port Isaac west along coast to Port Quin - and either back again or returning along footpath inland.

Recommended Map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 106. Distance and going: seven miles. Food and drink: plenty to choose from in Port Isaac.

One picture showed village women hard at work loading Delabole slate onto one of the schooners, and another of the 1920's construction of the twin moles that now create shelter for the harbour. There was some sort of structure there dating back to Tudor times, but The Haven, as it's officially known, was never really going to live up its name. North-westerlies can be disastrous.

The hard-working female slate-loaders have long gone and now people like hard-working TV make-over experts have taken their place. Port Isaac is a Mecca for wealthy holiday-cottage owners.

We descend to the harbourside making our way past the lifeboat station, the fish shop and fishermen's sheds- and, shortly afterwards, begin our first climb. The first of many. But don't be put off - each of these ascents will reward you with a stunning view. This first clamber is no exception. Once you've got to the top of the Lobber Point you will be rewarded by an excellent view of the port

Now we plummet down into Pine Haven (anyone seriously calling this narrow rock-lined gut a haven must have been mad) - and then climb a thousand steps to the next elevation. The cliff doesn't seem to have a name, but we stay at altitude as we make our way above Varley Sand to reach Varley Head. Here the walker can follow the path left across the field, or wander down and around the brink of the headland - depending on how fit he or she feels. The latter route is a permissive right-of-way allowed by the landowner.

Next comes Greengarden Cove - and this too, must have been some old Cornishman's idea of a joke. Gardens definitely do not come to mind as you peer over the precipice.

Now we turn Scarnor Point where we are treated to some zigging-and-zagging as the coast path avoids the many indentations cleaved by the sea. Steps descend to take you to a lower level at Downgate Cove where the coast path weaves like a tailor's stitch across ancient landslides as it proceeds to Kellan Head.

J.R.A. Hockin, who wrote many fine words on the subject of Cornish walking, described Kellan Head as «superb» - and it's easy to see why. You are treated to a panorama of the immense curve of Port Quin Bay, which stretches west to a rocky stack called The Moulds, near Pentire Point.

The path rounds Kellan Head to sweep south towards Port Quin, and for a while it seems impossible that there can be an old fishing village lurking anywhere hereabouts. The coast seems to continue unpunctuated past dramatic Dryden Point, crowned by its castle-shaped folly. But soon we are introduced to a Cornish fjord that cuts into the cliffs and winds inland to the little fishing harbour.

There's not much there today, save for a few National Trust owned holiday cottages - but the harbour is as picturesque as any you'll find on the north coast. And I agree with old Hockin in that I fail to find Port Quin in the least bit eerie. Some people do though - mainly because there is a legend that

claims the entire male population of this tiny place was once wiped out in a terrible storm.

Indeed, a maelstrom in the winter of 1697 did completely destroy the village's herring fleet, though it's not clear how many lives were lost.

Anyway, this is where you have the choice of either turning on your heel and walking back along the coast path - or proceeding east on the footpath that leads up the valley, passing the old farm of Roscarrock before plummeting into the deep coombe just west of Port Isaac. From there, it's simply a matter of crossing the hill back to town.