

Travel

The Dorset Royal Chase itinerary takes in Cranborne and Sixpenny Handley



= UK =

A walk through history

Richard Blackmore discovers ancient burial mounds, royal hunting grounds and an astrological ditch in Dorset



FOOTTRAILS.CO.UK

We are five minutes into our walk when we encounter our first Dorset wildlife. On a narrow, hedge-lined bridleway skirting the Eastbury House estate at Tarrant Gunville, a grouse flaps out of the bushes and scuttles off along the path ahead of us. Within seconds, the nervous bird is joined by a second, then a third. We follow our feathered guides for five minutes, until the enclosed track widens and the birds scatter into the fields around the Chettle Long Barrow, leaving us alone to take in our first views across the ancient landscape of Cranborne Chase.

My partner and I have come to this sleepy corner of East Dorset for

a tailor-made rambling weekend organised by Alison Howell's Foot Trails. The Bath-based company specialises in sustainable rural walking holidays across south-west England, and Howell's local knowledge allows her to create packages that take the hassle out of choosing routes and accommodation.

We are following half of the company's "Dorset Royal Chase" itinerary – a one-way, four-night trail that leads from one country inn to another, normally with two nights at each location, and walks varying in lengths from seven to 12 miles.

A couple of weeks before we set off, we received a recyclable Foot Trails

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"Walk and Explore" box, containing the essentials for our self-guided adventure: waterproof A4 Ordnance Survey maps and ring-bound trail cards with numbered routes to follow, highlighting points of interest and historic sites; nature cards for identifying wild flowers, trees and animals; plus a fortifying bag of sweets and a voucher for a bottle of wine at our first inn.

Our treks are designed to provide a snapshot of Cranborne Chase, the UK's sixth-largest Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Covering 380 square miles and overlapping the boundaries of Dorset, Wiltshire, Hampshire and Somerset, the Chase has evidence of human habitation dating back millennia. Its rolling chalk grasslands, woodlands, chalk escarpments, hillsides and river valleys are home to vast numbers of archaeological remains, including one of the largest concentrations of burial monuments in England.

The once-heavily wooded plateau of the Chase became a royal hunting ground after the Norman conquest. One of the fathers of modern archaeology, General Augustus Henry Lane-Fox Pitt Rivers, carried out much of his pioneering work in the Chase, having inherited the Rushmore Estate at Tollard Royal in 1880. During his lifetime he amassed more than 50,000 artefacts.

As squire of the old Saxon village of Farnham, he set up a private museum for his collection and updated its 17th-century inn to cater for Victorian visitors. His museum closed in the 1960s, its collection carted off to Salisbury,



The 16th-century Inn At Cranborne was last year voted the UK's most dog-friendly inn

We picnic near a clump of beeches and pines that conceals an Iron Age hill fort; there is no sound but birdsong and the breeze whistling through the trees

but the Museum Inn survives – and is the jump-off point for our stroll.

Our first afternoon takes in a gentle four-mile section of the Foot Trails "Dorset Cottages" route. A taxi drops us off at Tarrant Gunville to make our own way back to Farnham. The footpaths and hedges along the trail are dotted with wild flowers, butterflies and big-sky views stretching for miles.

That evening, we enjoy hearty gastropub fare in the Museum Inn and while away an hour or two in the cosy, low-beamed bar before retiring to our room in the converted stables.

Our Sunday walk follows a nine-mile stretch of Howell's "Beyond the Chase" route, and our taxi ferries us to nearby Sixpenny Handley to stock up on lunch supplies. The trail from "6D" takes us on to Handley Down, along the edges of enormous fields and past more burial mounds. Across the A354 we spot the remains of a Roman road, the Ackling Dyke, before descending into the wide, green valley of the River Crane.

GETTING THERE
The Dorset trail usually begins near Shaftesbury. The nearest train station is Tisbury, Wiltshire; transfer from station to inn is about 25 minutes.

STAYING THERE
The full Dorset Royal Chase itinerary costs from £495 per person, based on two sharing, including four nights' B&B. (foottrails.co.uk)

Near the valley floor a fence tracks the route of the mysterious Dorset Cursus – a six-mile ditch and bank which may have had astrological significance for the ancient Britons. A path along the Crane leads us into the cul-de-sac village of Pentridge, which features in Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as Trantridge, where Tess keeps poultry for Alec and his mother.

An etched window in the tiny church of St Rumbold commemorates Pentridge's most famous resident, the

Battle of Britain ace Roland "Bee" Beaumont, who later became the UK's leading post-war test pilot.

From the church, our steepest climb takes us to the top of the 185m-high Pentridge Hill. At the summit, we admire the panoramic views and picnic near a clump of beeches and pines that conceals a small Iron Age hill fort; there is no sound but birdsong and the warm breeze whistling through the trees.

In late afternoon, we trek the final few miles towards Cranborne, a former Saxon settlement and monastic centre that gave the region its name. When a brief, heavy shower forces us to shelter in a copse, we realise we are sharing our refuge with deer, perhaps descendants of those medieval herds chased by the kings of England. Cranborne became a hunting destination in the 13th century, when King John visited the downs. Later, Henry VIII founded a hunting lodge, modified by the 1st Earl of Salisbury to create Cranborne Manor House for the visits of James I.

We pass the imposing, walled manor as we enter the village and find our home for the night, The Inn At Cranborne. The 16th-century pub has nine rooms and was voted the UK's most dog-friendly inn last year, with pet pals allowed in two bedrooms, dog treats on the bar and canine breakfasts available.

Humans are well catered for, too, with an award-winning "30-Mile Menu" that includes game, meat, fish, seafood, vegetables and herbs from within a 30-mile radius. Before our dinner, however, a roll-top bath offers a soothing soak for aching limbs, after our short walk through Dorset's long history.



Doyden Castle Port Quin, Cornwall

Nineteenth-century party animal Samuel Symons built Doyden in 1830 as a "pleasure house", where he would drink and gamble with friends. The truncated Gothic tower, which featured in *Poldark*, has dramatic coastal views. It's now run as a one-bedroom let for two, with Rock, Polzeath and Port Isaac all within four miles. From £233 per night, minimum stay two nights, nationaltrustrolidays.org.uk



Peckforton Castle Cheshire

In 1844, Lord Tolemache, a "man of considerable eccentricity", decided to build a castle in the style of a medieval fortress. The Grade I listed property has 48 individually designed rooms, uses local produce in its restaurants, and has recently been working with Natural England to rehouse some surprise guests – a colony of rare bats. Doubles from £100, B&B, peckfortoncastle.co.uk



Ballygally Castle Co Antrim

This 17th-century castle is said to be one of the most haunted places in Ulster. The most frequently sighted spirit is the "friendly" Lady Isobel Shaw, who is said to walk the corridors and knock on doors. Guests can also book a three-day tour to see the landscapes used for *Game of Thrones* locations such as Winterfell and the Iron Islands and Stormlands. Doubles from £100, B&B, irelandluxurytravel.com



Roch Castle Pembrokeshire

This is one for romantics. Situated on a rocky hill, with views of St Brides Bay, Roch Castle is a six-bedroom, five-star hotel which has won a slew of awards. Built in 1280, the castle's claim to fame is that it was the birthplace and home of Lucy Walter, mistress to Charles II and mother of his son, the Duke of Monmouth. Doubles from £210, B&B, rochcastle.com



Lochinch Castle Cottages Stranraer

Roam in 75 acres of grounds at self-catering Lochinch. The cottages are situated on an isthmus surrounded by freshwater lochs, with the ruins of Castle Kennedy at one end and Lochinch Castle at the other. The grounds include 18th-century sculptures, an avenue of monkey puzzle trees, and the chance to spot osprey and red squirrels. Cottages from £360 per week, sawdays.co.uk



Thornbury Castle South Gloucestershire

Guests at this 16th-century castle can sleep in the very room in which King Henry VIII spent his honeymoon with Anne Boleyn. The Duke's Bedchamber, which overlooks the oldest Tudor garden in the country. The castle was originally owned by Edward Stafford, third Duke of Buckingham, but his tenure as landlord was cut short when the king,

a distant cousin, ordered his beheading for alleged treason, and conveniently got the castle too. Guests can also stay in the Tower Suite, at the top of a 77-step spiral staircase. The décor includes 24-carat gilding, silk wall hangings and the largest four-poster bed in any UK hotel at a whopping 10ft wide. Doubles from £195, B&B, luxuryfamilyhotels.co.uk THE INDEPENDENT



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