

# WELCOME TO DORSET



*Durdle Door on the Purbeck coast is an iconic symbol of Dorset*

**DORSET** is situated in south-west England on the the English Channel coast. It covers an area of 1,024mi<sup>2</sup> (2,653km<sup>2</sup>) and stretches about 60mi (96km) from west to east and 45mi (72km) from north to south. With no motorways and few dual carriageways the roads tend to be slow if busy.

The total population of the county including the Unitary Authorities was 763,700 in the 2011 census. Bournemouth and Poole together had 331,600 people, while the Dorset County Council non-metropolitan county had 432,100.

*Dorset Heath*



The combination of a benign climate, wonderful coastal scenery, unspoilt countryside and nearby urban areas has made tourism the main industry in Dorset. Its popularity first developed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when the fashion for bathing in the sea and taking seaside holidays started.

Today nearly 4 million people visit the county for a week or more and a further 21 million take day trips. Of these c.58% go to the towns, c.26% to the coast and only c.16% to the rural interior. Given that the coastline exceeds 150mi (240mi), including Poole Har-

*Dartford Warbler*



bour and the vast area of countryside to explore, Dorset rarely feels busy, especially away from the main attractions.

The oldest evidence for the presence of people is Palaeolithic handaxes from 400,000 years ago. The county has been continuously inhabited since c.11,000BC when the first Mesolithic hunter-gatherers arrived after the last glaciation.

Since then Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Age cultures flourished. Romans, Saxons, Vikings, Normans and others came and went. Great monasteries were built and dissolved, *Lulworth Skipper*

*Wikipedia*



## A DIVERSE SMALL COUNTY WITH LOTS TO SEE & DO



Wikipedia

### THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME "DORSET"

Although Dorset is mentioned in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in AD891, the root name is very much older. Many variations occur, but all include the prefix *dorn*, (B *durno*, large round pebble or fist). The Romans called Dorchester *Durnovaria*, most likely from the original local name. Maiden Castle, the large Iron Age fort 1.6mi (2.5km) southwest of Dorchester may be the *Dunium* (B *dun*, fort) referred to by Ptolemy c.AD150 as the main stronghold of the *Durotriges*.

Interestingly, over 40,000 sling shot pebbles were found at Maiden Castle when excavated. Whether this has anything to do with the name is unknown, but it adds to the mystery.

The Roman name was probably pronounced as *Dornawara* by the locals. Later, the Saxons added a suffix (OE *ceaster*, town) to give *Dornwaraceaster*, soon shortened to Dorchester. This led to the local people being referred to as the *Dornsæte* (OE *sæte*, people), and hence to the modern Dorset.

Dorset map showing administrative divisions many fine small towns were built and agriculture thrived. Later, the British military arrived in force in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for around 150 years. Dorset has withstood and absorbed them all.

The result is a small county, filled with charming rural villages, fine old buildings, a mix of traditional and modern agricultural practices. Dorset has some of the best places in the UK for those interested in wildlife. It also has a huge network of paths on the coast and inland, long and challenging, easy and short.

The coast has nearly 90mi (140km) of beaches; sandy, shingly or rocky. Cliffs display several hundred million years of geology and range from sandstone in the west to chalk and limestone in the east. In places they are amongst the most spectacular in the UK.

Those who prefer culture, night life and an urban environment will not be disappointed either. Bournemouth and Poole have all of the facilities expected of major cities, except in compact packages. Throughout the year festivals and events are led all over Dorset to suit everyone.

Marshwood Vale from Pilsdon Pen - typical Dorset patchwork of fields, hedges, valleys and low rolling hills



# WELCOME TO DORSET - A DRAMATIC COASTLINE



*Lyme Regis*



*Charmouth Beach and Golden Cap at low tide*



*West Bay has a shingle beach and spectacular cliffs*

*Weymouth Beach*



**THE DORSET COASTLINE** offers spectacular options for visitors. The dramatic Jurassic Coast stretches for 95mi (155km) from Exmouth in Devon to Old Harry Rocks at the east end of Purbeck. Further east an uninterrupted stretch of beautiful sand stretches for over 12mi (19km) from Sandbanks to Highcliffe.

**Sea Temperatures** at Weymouth peak around 18.5°C in early September, which is very pleasant for swimming. For most of July, August and September they exceed 16°C. In January and February the average sea temperature is 4°C.

**Lyme Regis** has a fine sandy beach, sheltered by the Cobb breakwater. It is a small version of the traditional seaside resort ideal for families. To the west of the harbour Monmouth Beach is mostly shingle, but is excellent for fossils.

**Charmouth** also has an excellent fine sandy beach, which stretches for over 2.5mi (4km) all the way to Golden Cap. It is highly variable, sometimes being more shingle than sand. At low tide extensive ledges are revealed. The Charmouth Heritage Coast Centre has fossil displays and runs fossil hunting walks.

**Chesil Beach** is a massive shingle barrier beach stretching for 18mi (29km) from West Bay to Portland. The size of the pebbles gradually increases from west to east. The shingle

makes for hard walking, but the beach can be accessed at many points including West Bay, West Bexington, Abbotsbury and Ferrybridge.

**Weymouth** became a fashionable seaside resort for rich Georgians in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Today it is an attractive holiday resort town with a beautiful sandy beach that extends around Weymouth Bay for 2.2mi (3.5km). All of the traditional things are on offer including donkey rides, seaside attractions and fish and chips.

**The Isle of Portland** is joined to Weymouth by Chesil Beach. This resistant limestone outcrop has high cliffs. There are many old quarries; several are nature reserves famous for rare butterflies and wild flowers. Portland Bill is the most southerly point of Dorset.

**The White Nothe** overlooks Weymouth Bay from the east and marks the start of the Isle of Purbeck. From here to the Old Harry Rocks along the South West Coast Path is 30mi (48km). This part of the Jurassic Coast consists of dramatic chalk and limestone cliffs with lovely bays, sea stacks, natural arches and other features.

**Durdle Door** is perhaps the most iconic symbol of this coast, along with its neighbour, Lulworth Cove. Both exceed expectations despite their popularity. The coast paths and shingle beaches here should not be missed.



*Chesil Beach from Portland*



*Ringstead Bay and the White Nothe*



*Lulworth Cove*

*Durdle Door*



## WELCOME TO DORSET - A DRAMATIC COASTLINE



*Worbarrow Bay from the east*



*Swanage Beach*



*Old Harry Rocks*

*Studland and Poole from Ballard Down*



**Worbarrow Bay** can only be accessed when the Lulworth Ranges are open to the public. Apart from the ruined village of Tyneham, there are wonderful walks along the cliffs west to Lulworth Cove and east to Kimmeridge Bay with its famous rock strata and ledges.

**Durlston Head** is the south-east extremity of Purbeck. The nature reserve here is one of the best in the whole country for rare butterflies and plants. It is also a hotspot for migrating birds. The highlights include Lulworth Skippers and Chalk-hill Blue butterflies as well as Early-spider Orchids.

**Swanage** has a fine sandy beach, sheltered by the Purbeck Hills to the north and the coastal ridge to the south. It is the least commercial of all Dorset's larger resorts, but has a charm all of its own. With its steam railway, Pleasure Pier and surrounding countryside it has much to offer the visitor.

**Old Harry Rocks** are a series of chalk sea stacks at the east end of Ballard Down. They mark the eastern end of the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site.

**Studland Bay**, one of the finest beaches in Dorset, extends over 4mi (6km) to South Haven Point. This beautiful arc of sand, backed by dunes, trees and a large heathland nature reserve, is uncommercialised, but very popular due to its proximity to Poole.

## SAND, SHINGLE, CLIFFS, FOSSILS & SEASIDE FUN

**Poole, Bournemouth and Christchurch** boast some of the best seaside resorts in the country. A fine, safe, sandy beach stretches over 12mi (19km) from Sandbanks in the west to Highcliffe in the east. Promenades, beach huts, amusements and every sort of seaside entertainment are available.

**Poole** The main beach faces southeast and runs for 3mi (5km) from Sandbanks to Branksome Chine. It is less commercial than central Bournemouth, but has full facilities, including lifeguards in summer. The east shore of Poole Harbour is muddy, but very popular for water sports and bait diggers. Hamworthy Park Beach is a much more traditional seaside area. It has a long row of beach huts and safe, sheltered bathing.

**Bournemouth** is the epitome of a British seaside resort. Very popular since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it has kept up with current trends and offers everything from traditional beach entertainment to classical culture and high class shopping. Further east, Southbourne and Hengistbury Head offer just as good beaches, but are much more tranquil.

**Christchurch Beach** stretches for 2.5mi (4km) from Mudeford at the entrance to Christchurch Harbour to the Hampshire border. There are ferries to Mudeford Spit and Christchurch from here.



*Bournemouth Beach stretches for miles*



*Bournemouth Beach from the pier*



*Southbourne Beach and Hengistbury Head*

*Mudeford from Hengistbury Head*



## WELCOME TO DORSET - VISITOR ATTRACTIONS



*Ammonite Fossil on Charmouth Beach*



*Abbotsbury Swannery*



*The Cerne Giant may represent Hercules, or perhaps not*

*The Nothe Fort, Weymouth*



**VISITOR ATTRACTIONS** Dorset has a huge number of visitor attractions, from internationally important museums to tiny village heritage centres. A small selection of the “must visit” places are described here. Many more are included in the Gazetteer and the Information Pages at the back of the book.

**Dorchester**, the county town of Dorset, makes a good starting point, especially the County Museum with its displays covering fossils, archaeology and history. Along with Maiden Castle, the mighty Iron Age hillforts and Roman remains, there is much to see here.

**Abbotsbury** is situated at the north end of The Fleet, facing Chesil Beach. Its Swannery, Tropical Gardens, attractive old thatched stone cottages and situation make it a very attractive village. St Catherine’s Chapel offers fine views over Chesil Beach to Portland.

**The Cerne Giant** is on the A352 between Dorchester and Sherborne. This enigmatic tumescent man, with a large club, is cut out of the chalk on a hillside above Cerne Abbas. He may well date from Roman times.

**The Nothe Fort** at Weymouth is the most impressive military structure in Dorset. A coast defence fort was established here in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and hugely enlarged in the 1860s. It only went out of use during the Cold War.

## FOSSILS, GIANTS, WAR, STEAM TRAINS & MANSIONS

**The Tank Museum** is, without a doubt, one of the best museums in the UK. With over 300 tanks and other military vehicles it will please any enthusiast, but the sheer quality of the displays will also impress the most unmilitary of folk. Not to be missed. Military vehicles from 1914 to the 21<sup>st</sup> century are on display, with live events during the year.



*The Tank Museum has machines dating from WWI onwards*

**Corfe Castle** in east Purbeck is probably the most romantic, spectacular and most visitable castle in the UK. It was established by the Normans, expanded over centuries and slighted by Oliver Cromwell. He only managed to create an even more special place to visit, despite his destruction.



*Corfe Castle is one of the most romantic and spectacular in England*

**Swanage Steam Railway** was set up after the British Rail branch line was closed in 1972. It operates a regular steam timetable from Corfe Castle to Swanage and hopes to have regular services to Wareham by 2015. Any steam enthusiast will be delighted by the old stations, locomotives and services, as are most children.



*Swanage Steam Railway*

**Kingston Lacy** is a legacy of the prominent Bankes family. This huge 8,500ha estate was bequeathed to the National Trust in 1981, its biggest ever bequest. Apart from the ornate house, it includes nearby Badbury Rings, lovely gardens and the impressive Beech avenue on the B3082, planted in 1835, as well as Ballard Down and Studland.



*Kingston Lacy, north of Wimborne Minster*

# WELCOME TO DORSET - ARCHAEOLOGY & HISTORY



*Palaeolithic handaxes*

**ANCIENT DORSET** There are a vast number of archaeological and prehistorical sites in Dorset. Many were dug into in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by gentlemen antiquarians and some have been more scientifically excavated in modern times.

Very few such places are sign-posted or presented to the public to visit. To many this simply increases the challenge and satisfaction of finding and experiencing ancient sites.



*Mesolithic microliths*

Throughout the book Ordnance Survey coordinates are quoted to aid visitors.

**Palaeolithic Age** The first evidence of people in Dorset is handaxes dating from at least 400,000 years ago found in gravel deposits beside rivers. There are no sites to visit, but several museums have displays including those in Dorchester, Poole and Christchurch.

**Mesolithic Age** At the

start of the last inter-glacial period around 11,000BC people started to arrive over the land bridge from Europe as the climate warmed up. They left many traces of shelters, hearths and piles of shells.

**Neolithic Age** Dorset has many remains from the time of the first farmers from c.4000BC onwards. These include causewayed camps, burial mounds, enclosures, ditches and banks. They also built henges, some of which were huge. Sadly only vestiges of these remain. Pottery as well as stone and bone tools can be seen in the museums.

**Bronze Age** There are funerary barrows, dating from c.2000BC and later, all over the county. Some yielded exceptionally rich grave goods when dug into in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

*Bronze Age Barrows*



*The Nine Stones Neolithic stone circle*

*Neolithic chambered cairn*





*Eggardon Iron Age hillfort*

century. There are remains of farms, field systems and settlements in many areas, especially Cranborne Chase.

**Iron Age** Starting c.6000BC hillforts were constructed in large numbers all over Dorset, some on the site of previous Neolithic enclosures such as at Maiden Castle. They vary in size and complexity but all are hilltops defended by massive ramparts and ditches and enclose roundhouse settlements.

**The Romans** rapidly took over the whole of southern England after their invasion of AD43, including Dorset. Their roads are still very prominent in the landscape, especially Ackling Dyke. Villas, mosaics, temples, forts, harbours, weapons, tools, pottery and household artefacts have all been found.

**The Saxons** took control of Dorset by the late 7<sup>th</sup> century. By the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century Wessex was fully established under Alfred the Great. Abbeys such as Shaftesbury were founded and many churches were built. The ancient churches at Wareham and Studland have many Saxon features. The impressive wall built by Alfred to defend the town from the Danes still surrounds Wareham and makes a fine circular walk.

**The Normans**, who were really Vikings masquerading as Frenchmen took over a highly organised country in 1066. Dorset has many churches and abbeys built by them, usually on the site of earlier Saxon chapels. There are only a very few ruined castles from this time, most having long since fallen out of use and been demolished. Corfe Castle is Dorset's best example. Founded by William I, it met its nemesis in Oliver Cromwell.



*Ackling Dyke Roman road, northeast Dorset*

*Saxon Town Walls, Wareham*



*St Nicholas Norman church, Studland*



# NATURE AND ENVIRONMENT



Wootton Fitzpaine meadow



Bluebell woodland



Cogden Beach

Radipole Lake RSPB Reserve



**DORSET** has many superb places to find wildlife. Apart from the famous and varied coastline, there are a host of nature reserves and other wild places, some remote, others right in the middle of towns.

**West Dorset's** unspoilt wild flower-filled meadows are a delight. At Wootton Fitzpaine, Powerstock and Kingcombe, among other places, these present a continuously changing kaleidoscope of colour from early spring through summer.

First Snowdrops, then Wood Anemones followed by Bluebells, carpet woodland areas while the roadside verges and hedges present an ever changing spectacle. Ancient hillforts, such as Coney's or Lambert's Castles are spring delights and good for birds too.

**Cogden Beach**, near Burton Bradstock, is of shingle, backed by sand, dune slacks and old meadows at the western extremity of Chesil Beach. Burton Mere, a small fresh water pond, is surrounded by marsh and reeds. The whole area is a magnet for migrant birds.

**Radipole Lake & Lodmoor** in central Weymouth are wetland RSPB reserves. Bearded Tits, Cetti's Warblers, Marsh Harriers, Bitterns and Kingfishers may be seen here along with many wildfowl and common species of birds. Otters and Water Vole are present along with Eels and many other fish as well as Frogs and Toads.

## THE BEST PLACES TO VISIT FOR WILDLIFE

**Portland Bill** is internationally known as a migrant bird recording site due to its position on the English Channel. Portland itself is a wonderful place to look for limestone-loving plants as well as butterflies.

**Purbeck**, with its chalk and limestone rocks, has a huge range of places for naturalists to visit. Durlston Country Park, near Swanage, with its wild flower meadows, orchids and butterflies is one of the best wildlife sites in Dorset. Arne RSPB reserve, near Wareham, is prime Dorset heathland and vies strongly with Durlston as an essential visit.

**Brownsea Island** is the largest of 8 islands in Poole Harbour. Belonging to the National Trust, it covers 500 acres (202ha) and can be reached by ferry from Poole. The varied habitats include woodland, marshy areas, saltmarsh and a large lagoon. Red Squirrels survive here and many Avocets overwinter. Grey Herons, Little Egrets, Common and Sandwich Terns all nest here.

**Cranborne Chase**, in north-east Dorset, is part of a large chalk plateau. With ancient woodland, downland, deep combs and dry valleys, much of it is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The woodlands are of particular interest for their wide range of flora and butterflies. Ackling Dyke, Badbury Rings, Bokerley Dyke and Martin Down are some of the essential visits.



*Portland Bill*



*Arne RSPB Reserve*



*Brownsea Island*

*Bokerley Dyke*

