

ITINERARY #5 - DORCHESTER & AROUND



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DORCHESTER & AROUND

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DORCHESTER (popn. 2011, 19,060) is the county town of Dorset. Though far from being its largest settlement, it makes up for this with a long history and a wide range of places to visit and things to do. From Jurassic fossils to the famous author, Thomas Hardy, Dorchester will repay a visit.

Around 4,000BC, Neolithic people built huge circular henges at the Maumbury Rings and Mount Pleasant. They also built the first enclosure at Maiden Castle. During the Iron Age this was developed into a massive hillfort.

The Romans called the town *Durnovaria*, probably an adaptation of its local name. The High Street follows the original Roman road from Old Sarum to Exeter. Much remains to be seen from these times, including a town house, an impressive aqueduct and parts of the town walls. The museum houses large mosaics as well as many artefacts; artistic, domestic and military.

Development of Dorchester to the north has always been constrained by the River Frome and its flood

plain. Like many other towns, it suffered several devastating fires. Those of 1613 and 1725 destroyed most of the town. It was only in the 19th century that Dorchester expanded outside the ancient town walls to the south and east. Today a ring road keeps through traffic out of the town. To the west the "urban village" of Poundbury is continuously expanding.

Dorchester offers shopping, eating out, accommodation and other services greater than might be expected for a small town. There are the usual chain stores, but also many independent specialist shops. With eight museums in the town and numerous attractions roundabout there is plenty to see and do regardless of the season.

Thomas Hardy spent most of his life in or near "Casterbridge" as he called the town in his novels. His birthplace at Higher Bockhampton and his residence from 1885, Max Gate, are both National Trust properties. A star attraction in the Dorset County Museum is Hardy's study, complete with his desk, books and pens.

ORDNANCE SURVEY 1:50,000 & 1:25,000 MAPS

OS Landranger Map 194 - Dorchester & Weymouth

OS Explorer Map OL15 - Purbeck & South Dorset

DORCHESTER & AROUND

1. Dorchester (page 162) is a compact town, best explored on foot. There are plenty of convenient car parks as well as two train stations.

The Town Walks (page 164) follow the line of the Roman walls. They enclose many of the sites of interest mentioned here.

Dorset County Museum (page 164) is perhaps the best place to start a visit to the town. It has major displays on Jurassic Coast fossils, archaeology, Dorchester, rural life and, of course, Thomas Hardy.

The Old Crown Court and Cells (page 164) are preserved in Stratton House, High West Street. It was here that the Tolpuddle Martyrs were tried and sentenced in 1834 (page 176).

The Bloody Assizes (page 165) were held in the Antelope Hotel in 1685 after the failed Monmouth Rebellion. The building is now a restaurant.

St Peter's Church (page 164), down the street from the Museum, is one of very few medieval buildings in the town; it dates from the 15th century.

The Keep Military Museum (page 165) is housed in a prominent Victorian mock keep near the Top of the Town roundabout. It covers the history of the Devon and Dorset Regiment from 1685.

The Roman Townhouse (page 163) is behind County Hall, near the Top of the Town roundabout. It is the only such house in the UK.

Hangman's Cottage (page 166) is below Colliton Park beside the Millstream. In former times its tenant was kept busy by the nearby courts.

Small Museums (page 167) There are four small museums to the south of the High Street.

The Dinosaur Museum is a superb hands-on experience which is great for children.

The Tutankhamen Exhibition has a replica of the pharaoh's tomb as found in 1922 as well as authentic reconstructions of many artefacts found there.

The Terracotta Warriors Museum has replicas of the famous Chinese clay army.

The Teddy Bear Museum is upstairs and features bears of all types including famous ones such as Paddington Bear and Rupert Bear.

Napper's Mite Almshouse (page 168) in South Street was built in 1616 and is now a restaurant.

2. Maumbury Rings (page 162), near Dorchester South Train Station was originally a Neolithic

henge monument. Later, the Romans used it as an amphitheatre, while it was turned into a gun battery during the Civil War. Finally it became the site of public executions, either by hanging or burning.

3. Max Gate (page 170) is just off the junction of the A35 with the A352, east of the town. Hardy lived here from 1885 until his death in 1928.

4. Hardy's Cottage, Higher Bockhampton (page 171), is the birthplace of Hardy. The cottage and its lovely garden are owned by the National Trust.

Stinsford Churchyard (page 170) is off the A35, east of the town. Hardy's heart and both of his wives are buried here.

5. Kingston Maurward House (page 174) near Stinsford, has fine formal gardens and an animal park.

6. Thorncombe Wood (page 174) has a well-preserved section of Roman road. This starts near the carpark, which also give access to Hardy's Cottage **Puddletown Forest** (page 174), further east, has a further long section which can be explored.

7. Poundbury (page 169) is on the west side of Dorchester. This new urban village is very much the creation of HRH Charles, Prince of Wales.

8. A Roman Aqueduct (page 162) once ran from near the Top of the Town roundabout for 12mi (19km) above the River Frome. Its course can be followed from Poundbury hillfort along the side road that follows the Roman road to the northwest.

9. Maiden Castle (page 172), about 2mi (3km) from the town centre, is the largest and most spectacular of Dorset's Iron Age hillforts. Not to be missed, it is accessed by a side road off the Weymouth Road.

10. Whitcombe Church (page 175) on the A352 to Wareham, was for many years the charge of William Barnes, the great poet, philologist and minister.

11. The Mill House Cider Museum (page 175), between Moreton and Owermoigne, has displays of old cider-making equipment and a plant nursery.

12. Tolpuddle Martyrs Museum (page 176), off the A35, tells the story of the farmworkers sentenced to transportation to Australia, but ultimately pardoned in an early success for workers' rights.

13. Athelhampton House & Gardens (page 174) is considered to be one of the best manor houses in the country. It is off the A35 east of Puddletown. It is open all year, but only on Sundays in winter.