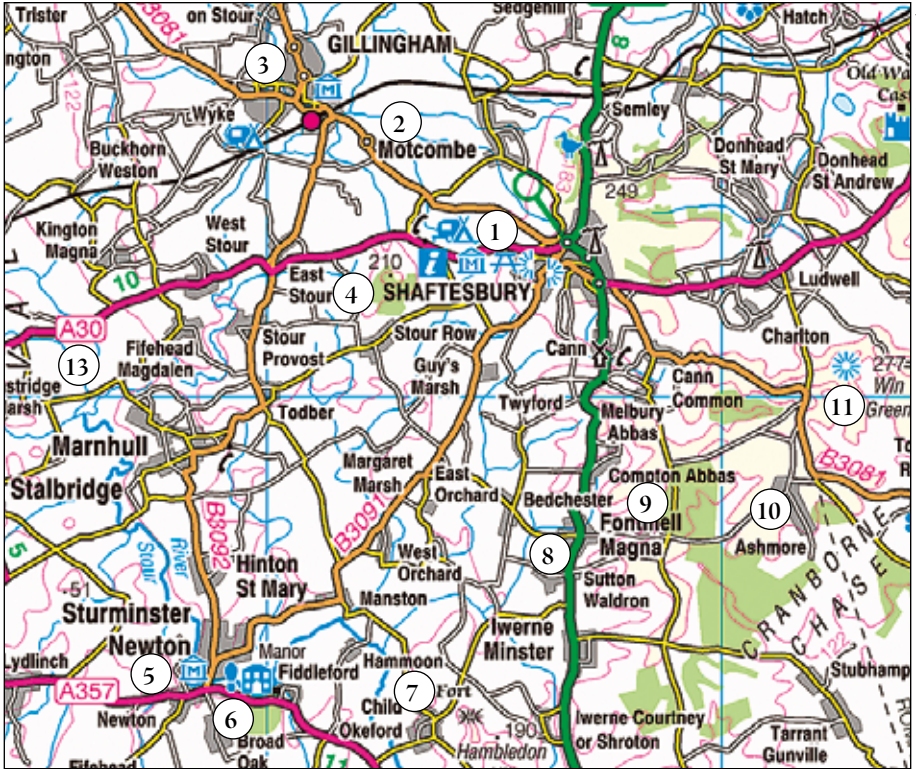


# ITINERARY #12 - SHAFTESBURY & THE NORTH



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## SHAFTESBURY & THE NORTH

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SHAFTESBURY stands on a small plateau on the western scarp slope of Cranborne Chase facing Blackmoor Vale to the west. This excellent defensive position may well have been in use since the Neolithic Age, with legend suggesting a Celtic and Roman past. In fact the first evidence of settlement is by the Saxons in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

According to Sir Frederick Treves in his 1905 book, *Highways & Byways in Dorset*, "The city has had many names. It was, in the beginning, *Caer Palladour*. By the time of the *Domesday Book* it was *Sceptesberie*. It then, with all the affectation of a lady in an eighteenth-century lyric, called itself *Sophonia*. Lastly it became *Shaston*, and so the people call it to this day, while all the milestones around concern themselves only with recording the distances to "Shaston".

The River Stour enters Dorset north of Gillingham and meanders across Blackmoor Vale via Sturminster Newton (*Stur* to locals). At Blandford it crosses a large gap in the Dorset Downs, and exits North Dorset near Spetsisbury. The fertile Stour Valley has been for long an important dairy farming area.

Cranborne Chase is an eastward extension of the Dorset Downs and forms the eastern boundary of this area. The steep-sided valleys and rounded plateaux to the east of the A350, from Blandford to Shaftesbury, include the renowned chalk downland nature reserve of Fontmell Down. Large hillforts occupy Hambledon and Hod Hills, while the prominent Duncliffe Hill is topped by an eponymous ancient woodland.

## ORDNANCE SURVEY 1:50,000 &amp; 1:25,000 MAPS

OS Landranger Map 183 Yeovil & Frome; Map194 Dorchester & Weymouth  
 OS Explorer Map 118 Shaftesbury & Cranborne Chase; Map 129 Yeovil & Sherborne

## SHAFTESBURY &amp; THE NORTH

**1. Shaftesbury** (page 256, popn 2011, 7,314) is sited on a 218m escarpment with steep slopes on all but the eastern approach. The Saxons fortified the town here in c.800. The earthworks on Castle Hill may well be the remains of this Saxon fort.

**Shaftesbury Abbey** was founded in c.888. This Benedictine nunnery became exceedingly wealthy over the centuries. Sadly it was razed to the ground after 1539, so that only foundations remain today. The Abbey Museum and Gardens are very much worth a visit.

**Gold Hill** (page 256) descends steeply from behind the Town Hall on the south side of the town. The row of pretty thatched cottages facing a steep, cobbled street is an iconic Dorset scene.

**Gold Hill Museum** (page 256) is at the top of the hill below the 13<sup>th</sup> century St Peter's Church and includes the Priest's House.

**Walks and Viewpoints** There are panoramic views to the north, west and south over Blackmoor Vale from the streets and paths which circumnavigate the hill. Those from Castlehill and outside the entrance to the Abbey Museum are especially good. An exploration of the old part of town makes an interesting, but strenuous, stroll.

**2. Motcombe** (page 257) is the site of the annual Gillingham & Shaftesbury Agricultural Show which has been held in late August since c.1860.

**3. Gillingham** (page 257, opn. 2011, 11,756) is in the centre of a small bowl-shaped valley, a salient into Somerset. The arrival of the railway in 1859 turned a sleepy rural town into an industrial centre. **Gillingham Museum** is in the local library. It explains local geology and has displays of Roman, Norman and local industrial artefacts.

**4. Duncliffe Wood** (92ha, page 257) is a large, ancient wood on Duncliffe Hill, 2.5mi (4km) west of Shaftesbury. Although largely felled and replanted in the 1960s, it retains ancient Lime Trees. The wood is famous for its spring time Bluebells and other woodland wild flowers. Rare butterflies may be sought in the summer.

**5. Sturminster Newton** (page 252, popn.2011, 4292) is situated in a small promontory surrounded

by a large loop of the River Stour, near a fording point. The fine bridge dates from the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

**The River Stour** (page 240) arises in chalk and is normally low in summer. In winter it frequently extends over a large flood plain. It has been used since ancient times to drive water mills to grind corn or saw timber.

**Sturminster Newton Mill** is powered by a water turbine that generates 18kW to drive the machinery, which is all in working order. A visit is strongly recommended to see this fine old mill in action.

**6. Fiddleford Manor** (page 252), about 1mi (1.5km) downstream, dates from the 1370s and retains much of its original appearance. The open timber roofs are particularly impressive.

**7. Child Okeford** (page 249) is one of several highly attractive small villages around Hambleton Hill (see p351). All are a pleasure to explore on foot, with thatched cottages, narrow lanes, ancient churches and quaintly-named pubs.

**8. Fontmell Magna and Compton Abbas** (page 255) are two pretty little villages below the downs. There are many side roads and footpaths to explore but the busy A350 is not recommended for walkers.

**9. Fontmell Down** (page 254) is a chalk downland nature reserve on the western escarpment of Cranborne Chase. Here a series of downs are separated by steep combes or bottoms. Along with Melbury Down, this area is famous for its chalk-loving wild flowers and butterflies. Nine species of orchids grow here, along with Spring and Autumn Gentian and Chalk Milkwort. The 30 species of butterflies include Chalkhill and Adonis Blues, Grayling, Silver-spotted and Grizzled Skippers.

**Compton Abbas Airfield** (page 255), on the top of Melbury Down, has a restaurant from which flying activities may be observed.

**10. Ashmore** (page 255), at 277m, is the highest village in Dorset. The village pond was its source of fresh water for centuries.

**11. Win Green** (277m, page 255) is the highest point on the northwest corner of Cranborne Chase. This viewpoint takes in much of Dorset to the south and Wiltshire to the north on a clear day.