

Follow the coast path east. A memorial sculpture to the Telecommunications Research Establishment (TRE), unveiled in 2001 by Sir Bernard Lovell, stands above the floor of an old quarry.



TRE was established in May 1940 when scientists, including Lovell, moved here to research radar. The first target

building imaged on a screen was St Aldhelm's Chapel. Reg Batt pedalled around with sheet aluminium wired to his bicycle frame to test radar's sensitivity to slow-moving objects. TRE operated here for just twenty-two months but was, as the memorial plaque states, 'crucial to the winning of the war and the birth of modern telecommunications.'

As the coast path heads towards the sea a path doubles back to the right taking you down into the quarry. Steps, remains of buildings and the footings of masts are almost all that is left of the huge wartime operation which occupied the headland.

Walk on through the quarry and consider two options: first, hefting hewn stone up to the brow of the headland and carting it away; second, tipping it over the edge so that blocks can be worked down below and manhandled onto boats.



Yes, you've guessed it, the masons' accomplices were gravity and water. Resisting both, there's a found sculpture, a body of Pond Freestone with a head and beak of Spangle. It was not built; someone chose to leave it in place, while the quarried stone was dismantled around it.

Return to the Coastwatch station and follow the coast path to the west, passing close to the flag pole. There's a quote from Dylan Thomas on the last stone seat before the steps: 'Time Passes. Listen. Time Passes.'

The return walk to Renscombe is pure delight, but it must be earned, with a steep climb down steps to Pier Bottom and a corresponding ascent to Emmetts Hill. Pier Bottom is a truncated dry valley. In evening light you can pick out Celtic Fields. A track, running along a terrace above the valley bottom, was metallated to take stone carts from the quarries to a pier built before 1750, but not shown on any map, to handle 100,000 tons of stone for the construction of Ramsgate harbour.

Emmetts Hill is crowned by Portland Stone and undermined by the weathering of soft shale. Views of Chapman's Pool, its arc of Kimmeridge Shale, grow better and bleaker. Profiles of Hounstout and Swyre Head, Povington and Whiteway Hills, Gad Cliff and Worbarrow Tout crowd up and recede at once.



Keep the drystone wall on your right. After the Royal Marines memorial garden, six inscribed stones set into the wall celebrate the wall itself and the forces which sustain and erode it.

Soon you come to the field path, way-marked 'Renscombe', that leads to the car park.

The whole headland of St Aldhelm – its fabric of freestone and shale, its mantle of turf and barley with a few relics to jog our memory – tells us how, if we stand on the edge of things and listen, history, war, work, weather, tides and, yes, time itself will simply pass.

Walk guide written by Paul Hyland

Photography by Paul Hyland, Angie Green and Delphine Jones. Design by Artcore Studio Ltd. © Artsreach 2009

Further information:
Marjorie Wallace, Robert Watton, Judith Malins *St. Aldhelms Chapel at St. Aldhelms Head*
The Parishes of the Purbeck Hills 1985-2005 (church guide)

Ilay Cooper *Purbeck Revealed*
James Pembroke Publishing 2004

Paul Hyland *Purbeck: The Ingrained Island*
Gollancz 1978, Dovecote Press 1989

Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site:
www.jurassiccoast.com

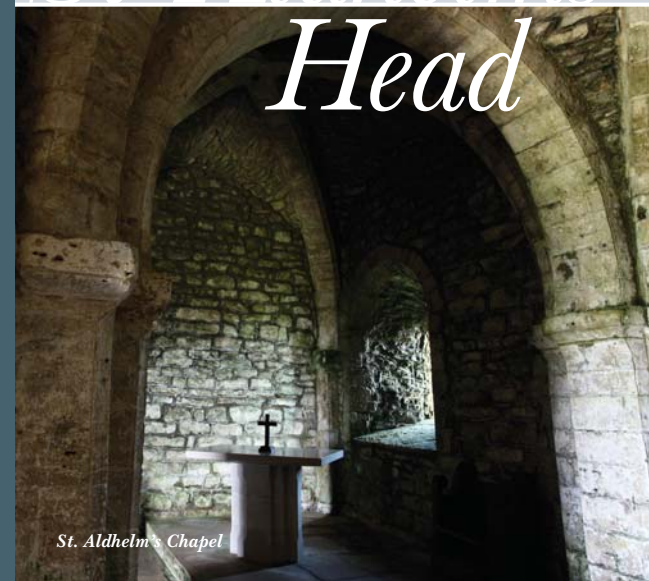
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A short walk to St. Aldhelms Head



St. Aldhelm's Chapel

Purbeck Footprints

A walk of about 3 miles with one steep section, down and up steps on the coast path.

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A short walk to St. Aldhelm's Head

There is a car park with toilets in Worth Matravers and a wonderful pub, *The Square and Compass*. But to begin this short walk you should drive past the pond and the church. Follow the road, left and then right, to Weston Farm. Bear right and left for Renscombe, then left again for the car park on the right-hand side of the rough road to St Aldhelm's Head (OS map reference: SY964775).

'St Aldhelm's Head,' writes venerable Hutchins, 'now vulgarly called St Alban's Head,' is still so called by those who should know better. Even Ordnance Survey gives the option, 'St Aldhelm's or St Alban's Head.' Alban had no links with Dorset. Aldhelm, scholar, poet, abbot of Malmesbury and later bishop of Sherborne, was the human face of advancing Saxon culture as Celtic Dorset was annexed.

Continue up the road on foot, keeping to the high track. You are making for Purbeck's prow across a fertile plain, or plateau above the sea, on which Bronze Age and medieval people left their

marks. Celtic fields occupy over sixty acres. Tatters of strip fields are superimposed on them. Barrows yielded finds and burials. To the right, a dry valley, Pier Bottom, runs down into the Portland Sands. Pottery, shale lathe-cores and Roman coins were dug up east of St Aldhelm's Quarry. In 1982 ploughing unearthed a cylindrical grain store twelve feet deep and archaeologists excavated a settlement site.



St Aldhelm's Quarry is marked as a 'Stone Pitt' on an early eighteenth-century map. It has been worked by W.J. Haysom & Son since 1934. It's still in business, unbuilding shelves of Shrimp, Spangle and Pond Freestone for prestigious new buildings and restoration jobs in churches and cathedrals. The whine of machinery is punctuated by the chime of mallet on chisel. A long-limbed derrick, or jib-crane, stands among stacks of stone, last survivor of a type introduced to Purbeck from Portland after the First World War.



To the south the Coastguard Cottages and St Aldhelm's Chapel stand on the skyline. As you approach, see where the chapel is situated: on a two-foot high platform in a circular earthwork described as 'an early Christian enclosure.'

St Aldhelm's Chapel was built in the late twelfth century, dedicated to Dorset's first Saxon bishop. A hermit may have prayed here; footings of a possible cell and a young woman's remains were discovered close by.

Like St Mary's in Corfe Castle, the chapel was served by a royal chaplain in Henry III's time. Was it an outpost of the castle? It was a seamark; evidence from recent repairs makes the tradition that a beacon burned at the point of the roof more plausible.

This dank place may have been a chantry chapel in which to sing masses for souls lost at sea. Like Corfe Castle, it is built mainly of Burr, quarried three miles away, though there are chunks of Ham stone too, from Ilminster. Unlike a church, its corners, not its walls, are roughly aligned to the points of the compass.



It is a wishing place. Seventeenth-century names, from the period when it grew ruinous, cover the central pillar. Girls dropped pins into a cavity there, good luck charms in hope of a man. How many of them knew that St Aldhelm's principal treatise was *De laude virginitatis*, 'In Praise of Virginity'?

Beyond the chapel the old Coastguard Station, now manned by National Coastwatch volunteers, might be the bridge of a ship.

Underground
quarry entrance

MAP