



Prawle Point



14

Prawle Point

No. 14 | Grade B | 28km | OS Sheet 202

Tidal Ports Plymouth and Dover

Start  Torcross (824 423)

Finish  Hope Cove (674 398)

HW/LW HW Salcombe is around 5 hours and 35 minutes before HW Dover.

Tidal times Inshore at Start Point, the WSW going (ebb) stream begins around 2 hours and 20 minutes before HW Dover. The ENE going (flood) stream begins around 3 hours and 55 minutes after HW Dover.

At the mouth of the Kingsbridge Estuary, the ingoing stream begins 5 hours and 45 minutes before HW Plymouth and the outgoing stream begins 15 minutes after HW Plymouth.

Max Rate Sp Inshore at Start Point, streams reach 4 knots, at Prawle Point, 3 knots, at Bolt Head, 2 knots. The out-going flow at the mouth of the Kingsbridge Estuary reaches 3 knots.

Coastguard Brixham, tel. 01803 882704, VHF weather 0110 UT

Introduction

Although South Hams derives its name from Hamme (Old English: *Sheltered Place*), its south coast is anything but! These unforgiving cliffs and reefs have seen hundreds of shipwrecks. With



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its famous lighthouse, wave-cut reefs and high cliffs, this excellent trip showcases the very best of South Devon's coastal scenery.

Description

Torcross with its Sherman Tank memorial is a more convenient spot to shuttle from, but launching at Hallsands (818 388) avoids 3km of pebble beach. The steep shingles of Start Bay recede after Hallsands. If you were wondering where Hallsands actually is, note the shattered ruins on the rocks; a calamitous storm destroyed the village in 1917.

The ebb tide propels you along the curving coast to the jutting mica schist headland of Start Point. Start Point's tide race flows offshore to the south-east, so unless you require a head start to Brittany, some form of break-out is necessary (ask a white-water paddler). Reaching 62m above the water, 28m Start Point lighthouse is unusual, James Walker's 1836 design incorporating gothic battlements. The fog signal house collapsed into the sea in December 1989, necessitating substantial rebuilding. Directly below, the rocks of Black Stone harbour a seal colony.

The 11km of coast stretching to the Kingsbridge Estuary are extremely interesting to kayakers, not to mention extremely beautiful. The cliffs are generally low, with farmland stretching downhill behind. The unique aspects are the raised former beaches visible above the high water mark, and the wave-cut ledges extending out into the waves. These wave-battered platforms were formed when the sea was higher in an inter-glacial period, approximately 120,000 years ago. The bedrock is riven with criss-crossing faults and prolonged wind and wave erosion has widened these. The result is a natural rock-hopping playground, with innumerable channels to probe.

The reef is broken up revealing occasional small sandy beaches. The first is Mattiscombe Beach (817 369) where two peculiar earth pillars on the reef have resisted erosion, due to being capped by harder rocks. Lannacombe Beach (802 372) has road access, although there is only parking for one or two cars. The house here is a former corn mill, and the grinding stones can be found lying nearby.

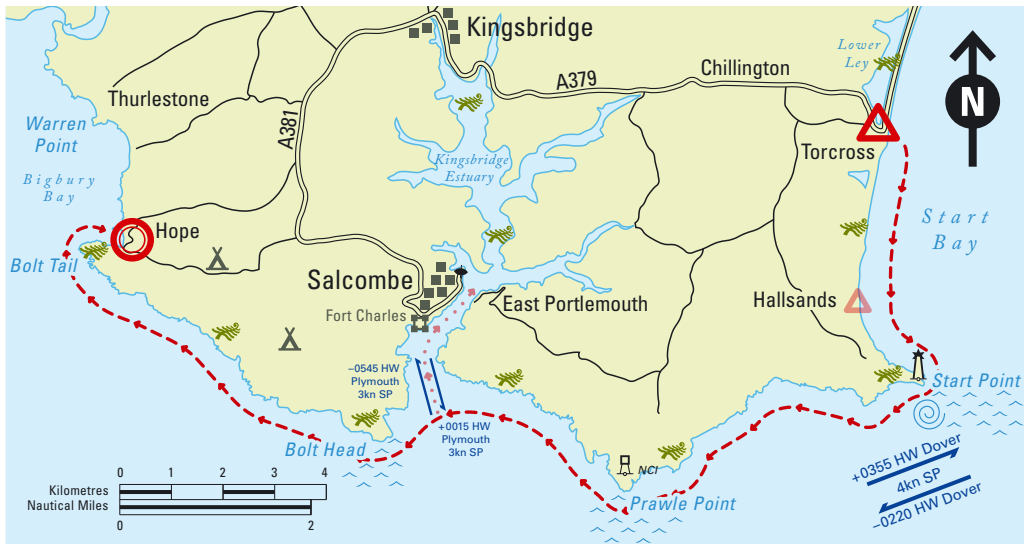
About 2km after Prawle Point, the keen-eyed will spot a series of WWII fortifications hidden along the shore. These were to protect a radar station near the village of East Prawle.

The southernmost point of Devon and the most distinctive coastal feature is Prawle Point, an angular arch of green-tinted hornblende schist. It can be 'threaded' at high water but don't mess up as the Coastwatch station above will be watching! The rusting scrap metal nearby was formerly MV *Demetrios*. She was blown here by Force 10 winds on 18 December 1992 after a tow cable snapped. She broke her back within an hour of running aground. The subsequent salvage operation bankrupted the salvage company, perhaps explaining the amount of debris remaining. Incidentally, birders will want to know that this is one of the few places where the extremely rare cirl bunting has been spotted in recent times.

Maceley Cove is sheltered by Gammon Head, said to resemble Queen Victoria! Further sandy coves lead to Gara Rock (750 369), where few traces remain of the tramway and pier used in the nineteenth century to ship out iron ore.

Approaching the Kingsbridge Estuary, the coast often receives shelter from Bolt Head against wind and swell. Paddling up the estuary to visit Salcombe (route 15) is a possibility.

The second half of this trip could be described purely by shipwrecks, just a handful of which are mentioned here. The Bar guarding the Kingsbridge Estuary from swell was responsible for the loss of the Salcombe lifeboat *William and Emma* in 1916. The crew had rowed to the aid of the schooner *Western Lass*, grounded near Start Point. They arrived to find the crew already rescued, and returned towards home. The lifeboat capsized in steep breakers whilst crossing The Bar, drowning 13 of the 15 lifeboatmen.





Rockhopping near Langerstone Point

The approach to Bolt Head is beneath 130m cliffs, Starehouse Bay being surrounded by the spiky slopes of Sharp Tor. The rocks in Starehouse Bay are the Rags and the series of rocks extending out from Bolt Head are the Mew Stones, where a tide race might be encountered. The coast's character has transformed completely and 7km of cliffscape stretches away to the west, coloured by patches of thrift and thyme.

Two kilometres from Bolt Head, Steeple Cove is a sheer-sided inlet dominated by a tall stack which presumably supplied the name. In December 1932, the Spanish freighter *Cantabria* ran aground here in fog and all 24 crew made a misguided attempt to scale the cliffs. They were luckily discovered and rescued off the rocks by the lifeboat, narrowly averting a disaster. At LW, remnants of the *Cantabria* can be seen through the clear water.

Soar Mill Cove is the only good spot to land and stretch, before returning to face the cliffs. West Cliff (689 382) also claimed a fog victim. In 1925, the 10 crew of the tug *Joffie* were saved after the Mate swam ashore with rope, allowing a rescue team to rig a 'breeches buoy'. Sadly, the Captain died of exhaustion after rescue. Just to the west, look for 'Ralph's Hole', named after a smuggler who used a pitchfork to prevent Customs officials from investigating what he had stored inside!

Redrot Cove is the location of a monumental cave, and then Bolt Tail is reached. In 1907 this headland witnessed yet another of South Hams' shipwrecks, again in fog. The 76 crew and 79 passengers of the stranded SS *Jebba* were all rescued to the cliffs above. The Hope Cove lifeboat *Alexandra* failed to reach the stricken vessel, but two local fishermen scrambled 60m down the cliffs and managed to rig up two bosun's chairs. Edward VII awarded the Albert Medal to both men.

Tucked behind Bolt Tail is sheltered Hope Cove, journey's end.



VARIATIONS

Salcombe is perfectly placed to divide up this trip; land at North Beach car park (732 381). Mill Bay (740 382) on the east side of the Kingsbridge estuary is a convenient landing to shuttle the first half. Looping into the Kingsbridge Estuary (route 15) to land at Frogmore reduces the shuttle to around 5km.

Tide and weather

A launch around HW will give tidal assistance for much of this trip, although it is concentrated around the headlands and can be weak in-between. Start Point tide race extends 1.5km SE, and forms large eddy currents. Smaller races occur at Prawle Point and Bolt Head. This coast picks up Atlantic groundswell more than other parts of South Devon.

Additional information

Higher Rew campsite (714 382) is 2km from Salcombe, tel. 01548 842681, www.higherrew.co.uk. Bolberry House Farm campsite (695 392) is 2km from Hope Cove, tel. 01548 561251, www.bolberryparks.co.uk.

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The death of Hallsands

Paddling past the shattered ruins clinging to rocks at Hallsands (818 384), it's hard to believe that this was once a large village.

In 1897, work began in Start Bay dredging sand and gravel for the construction of Plymouth docks. Within a few years, locals living and fishing along the beach complained that the beach was receding and that the fishing industry was suffering. Eventually, the authorities took heed and the dredging ended.

On 26th January 1917, an Easterly gale blew along the Channel, combining with spring tides to create a storm surge. The beach was overtopped and water flooded into houses in Hallsands. The village's 128 residents were evacuated. By dawn, four of Hallsands' 30 houses had been destroyed. Locals returned the next day at LW, to retrieve what they could of their belongings.

The following night saw a second storm surge. The village was completely demolished, with only one house left standing.