

# Birds, Pexies and Mills

## The Medieval Windmills Walk



**Start:** Portland Museum, 217 Wakeham, Easton, Portland DT5 1HS.

**End:** Church Ope, Portland DT5 1JA.

Paths are on uneven terrain and include walking up and down hills.

**This walk lasts approx 60 mins.**



This short guide is a self-guided version of a performative walk created and led by Ania Bas for the b-side festival 2018. The walk is based on research conducted by local residents led by Bea Moyes. It forms part of The Portland Pathways Project run by b-side and supported by The Heritage Lottery Fund. Design by Spike Golding.

- 1 Start your walk at St George's Church, a large church built from Portland stone designed by a quarry merchant Thomas Gilbert.
- 2 As you walk down the streets of Easton consider the tradition of 'club walking', an ancient Dorset wide ceremony connected to nature and female fertility. A ritual of women walking down the street dressed in white and carrying flowers while men were watching them from the sides. A fictionalised version of the ceremony can be found in Thomas Hardy's book 'Tess of the d'Urbervilles'.
- 3 At this point you can see in the landscape the remains of the ancient agricultural system of strip field farming. Strips of lands were called 'lawns' and separating them bulks of earth 'linchets'. The large number of these strips is a result of the system of inheritance which stipulated that the property of the deceased was divided equally between their children (women and men).
- 4 The common land on Portland was managed by the Court Leet, a Saxon authority that still exists today and stewards the land on behalf of the Crown. The highest position in the Court Leet belongs to The Reeve and Portland women often held that role.
- 5 The lawns were used to grow carefully controlled crops including wheat, potatoes, barley, oat and peas. This is reflected in the names of many pathways including Sweet Hill, Reap Lane, Barleycrates, Barley Croft Lane or Green Way.
- 6 The ruins of two medieval Windmills still stand on the outskirts of Easton on fields originally known as Haylands. In 16th century the mills would have been the tallest structures on the island, their moving sails visible from the sea, and would have served as a landmark for Portlanders and as well as sailors
- 7 Much of agricultural labour was historically done by women who were not able to find more lucrative work in the quarries. They would farm the land but also forage for blackberries, apples, sloes, valerian, arum and other flowers and herbs.
- 8 Portland is full of legends and myths connected to the land. One of them tells of fairies called pexies, who as Jeremy Harte reports, "*slipped out at night to dance among the fields in the barren landscape [...] on moonlight nights the pixels could be seen as they raced along these, looking for places where they might hold their revels.*"
- 9 Pennsylvania Wood offers a haven and welcome change in an otherwise heavily quarried landscape. It's also a site of one of many on-going battles to protect and maintain free access to pathways on the island for the benefit of all.
- 10 At Church Ope you are welcomed by the calm sea and a stoney beach, favoured by locals. Read an excerpt from: 'A field guide to getting lost', Rebecca Solnit: "*The places in which any significant event occurred become embedded with some of that emotion, and so to recover the memory of the place is to recover the emotion, and sometimes to revisit the place uncovers the emotion. Every love has its landscape. Thus place, which is always spoken of as though it only counts when you're present, possesses you in its absence, takes on another life as a sense of place, a summoning in the imagination with all the atmospheric effect and association of a powerful emotion. The places inside matter as much as the ones outside. It is as though in the way places stay with you and that you long for them they become deities—a lot of religions have local deities, presiding spirits, geniuses of the place.*"