



Circular walking guide from Cowes

Some of the most beautiful walks in the country can be found within easy reach of the South West Trains network. Follow a heritage trail on the Isle of Wight

Getting to Cowes couldn't be simpler. Take the train to Southampton Central Station, hop on a free bus for the short ride to the ferry terminal and then it's just 22 minutes by high-speed jetfoil to the natural wonders of the Isle of Wight. The island is home to the UK's largest walking festival, and, with over 500 miles of award-winning footpaths and bridleways and 30 miles of heritage coastline, it's not hard to see why. Over half of the island has been designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the stunning surroundings are complemented by a history rich in everything from smugglers and dinosaurs to royals and sailing. Indeed, it is the island's nautical history that forms the basis for one of its newest walks, the Boat Trail, which connects the sailing towns of Cowes and East Cowes. Here are some of the highlights along the way.

Foot passengers arrive at the Red Funnel terminal in Cowes, where you can pick up the circular trail outside. Turn right and head up the High Street for the Sir Max Aitken Museum, which takes its name from the former chairman of Express Newspapers and legendary Cowes yachtsman. From May to September you can take a guided tour of the museum's collection of yachting memorabilia. A little further up on the waterfront is Customs House, which is still in use today, and past that, at the end of The Parade, is the Royal Yacht Squadron, one of the most exclusive clubs in the world, dating back to 1815. The loop back takes you down Castle Road to Pascall Atkey on Sun Hill, which is thought to be the oldest yacht chandlery in the world, and into the Yacht Haven at the top of Shooters Hill. The Yacht Haven is the centre of action during Cowes Week, when luxury yachts and celebrities vie for attention and you can order a drink at the longest bar in the world. During the winter months, it's a fascinating place to watch repairs being carried out.

Head down Shooters Hill and into Birmingham Road, which eventually becomes Medina Road. Follow the road down to the riverside where the floating bridge connects the two towns. The bridge is actually a chain ferry, which has been carrying passengers over the river since 1859. Its interior was specially refurbished for the opening of the Boat Trail and features nautical scenes by local artists and schoolchildren. Turn left off the bridge and immediately on your left is the Gridiron Shed, from where the first ever seaplane was launched in 1913. Carry on up Trinity Road to Trinity House, which operates and services all the lighthouses of England and Wales. Columbine Yard on Castle Street was built in 1935 and was where Sir Christopher Cockerell designed the world's first hovercraft. On the Old Road you can see the last remnants of the Henry VIII fortifications, which were built to defend the Solent.

Return back down Castle Street, turn left into Church Path before the roundabout and follow the path past sights such as the Old Cinema and Falcon Yard until you reach the Heritage Centre. The Centre is run by local historians (Mon-Sat 1000-1300) and is the perfect place to find out more about the town's past. The trail is circular, so continue to follow it and it will lead you back over the floating bridge to the Red Funnel terminal in Cowes.