

Classic Crossings

Lyme Bay

and the

Portland Race



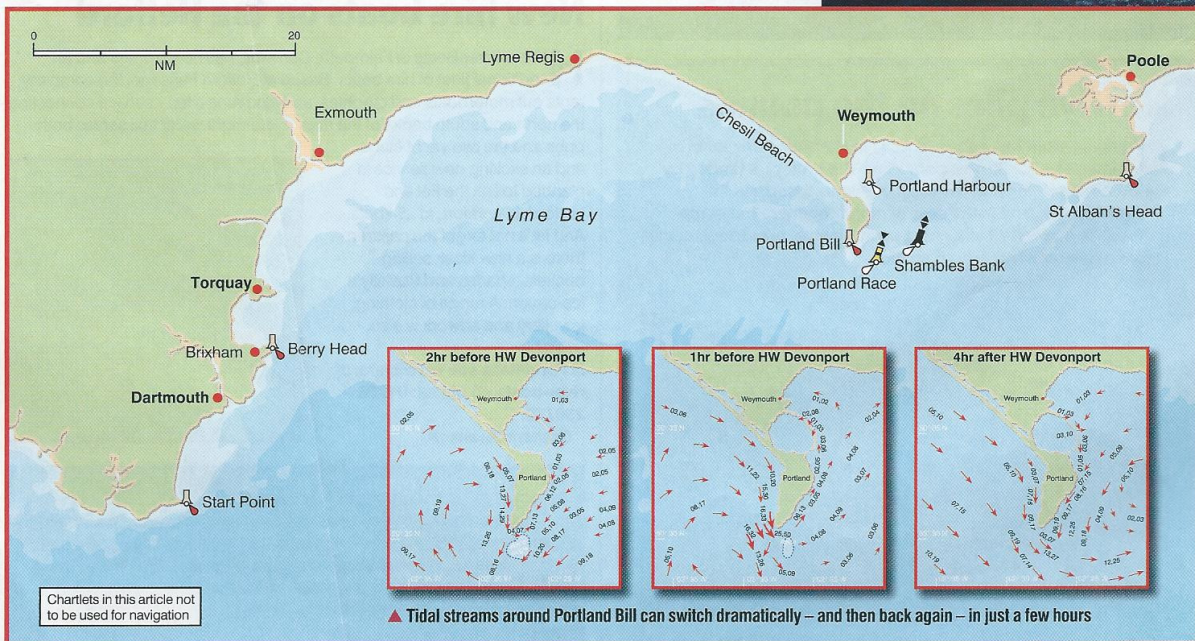
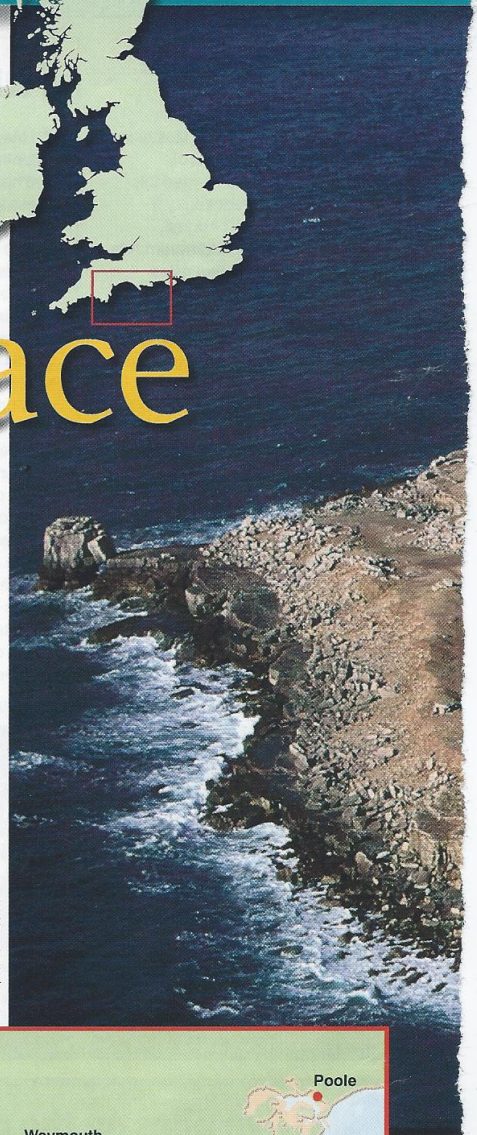
The Portland Race in Lyme Bay has a fearsome reputation among seafarers, but given due respect and proper planning it can make for a rewarding voyage, says David Rainsbury

Approaching from the south-east Lyme Bay is the gateway to the delightful cruising grounds of the West Country. Sailing along the south coast of England, the bay is half way between Land's End and North Foreland. To the west of the bay is Start Point, with several excellent harbours close to hand. To the east, Portland Bill stands five miles out into the English Channel and its tides create one of the most notorious stretches of water in the world – the Portland Race.

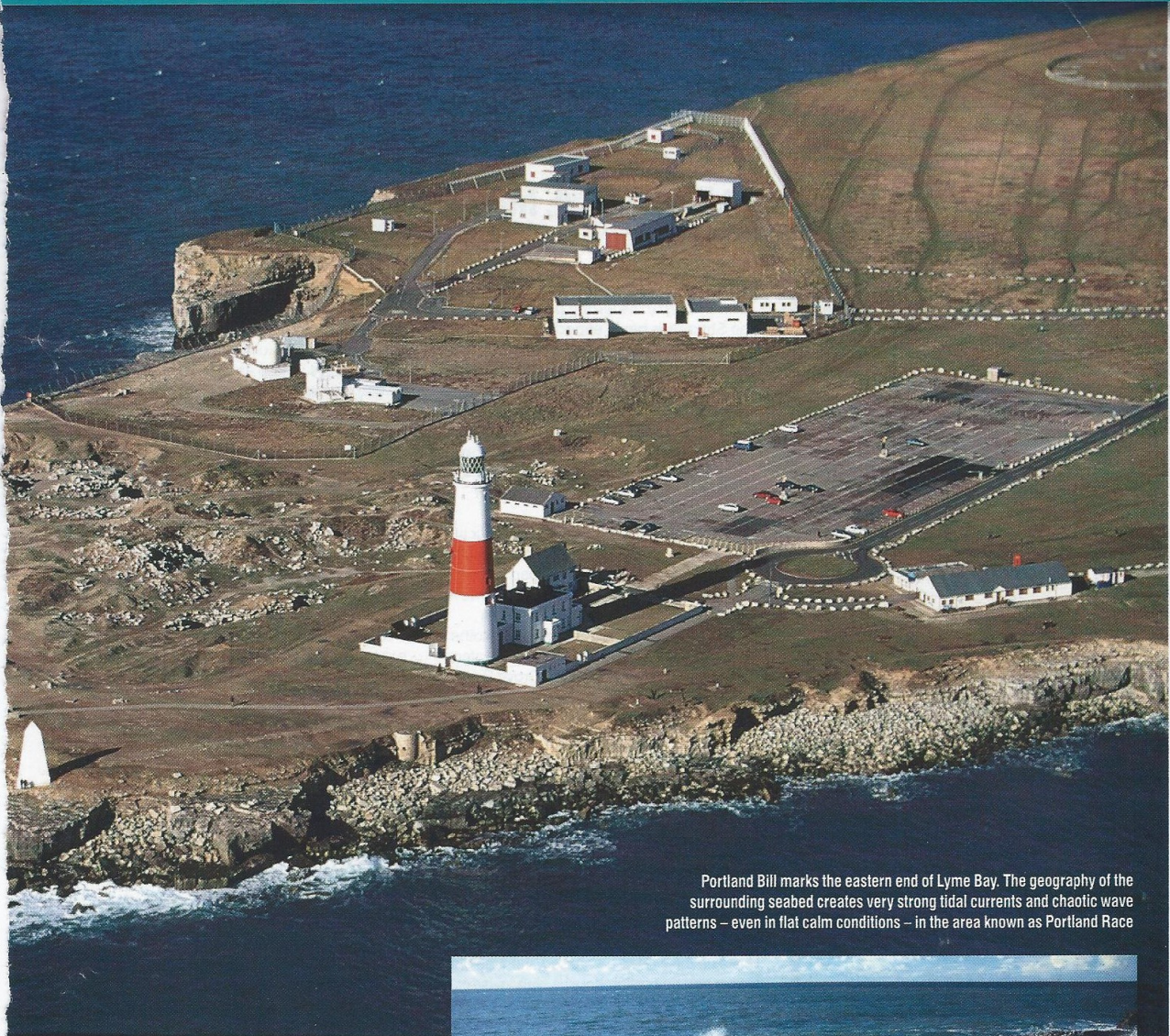
Deep in Lyme Bay, the grinding pebbles of Chesil Beach have been the scene of tragedy. Unable to reach shelter to the east of the Bill and its race, many a ship has been driven onto the beach to be smashed against the steeply shelving stones, her crew drowned in the vicious undertow.

Once west of the Bill it may be difficult to turn back, so the westward passage needs a great sense of commitment. The passage eastwards is complicated by the need to time arrival at the Bill from a departure point 20 miles or more to the west.

PRPA/Patrick Roach



CLASSIC CROSSINGS – Lyme Bay and the Portland Race



Portland Bill marks the eastern end of Lyme Bay. The geography of the surrounding seabed creates very strong tidal currents and chaotic wave patterns – even in flat calm conditions – in the area known as Portland Race

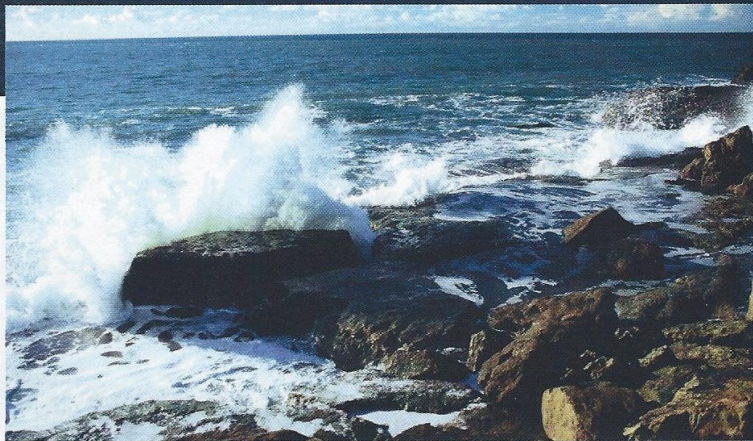
The trip in either direction can be challenging, then, but with careful planning and a good forecast could also be the highlight of a Channel cruise.

Tides

The tides in the west of Lyme Bay follow the general pattern of the Channel, flooding east and ebbing west. The headland of Start Point doesn't disturb the flow enough to create any major problems, and streams within the bay are weaker than in mid-Channel. Portland Bill, on the other hand, is a tidal phenomenon.

Portland Bill tides

The limestone lozenge of Portland protrudes five miles into the east-west tides of the Channel. The flow is compressed by this obstruction creating rates of up to six knots off the Bill. The eastgoing flood flows south along the west side of Portland, accelerating as it nears the Bill, while to the

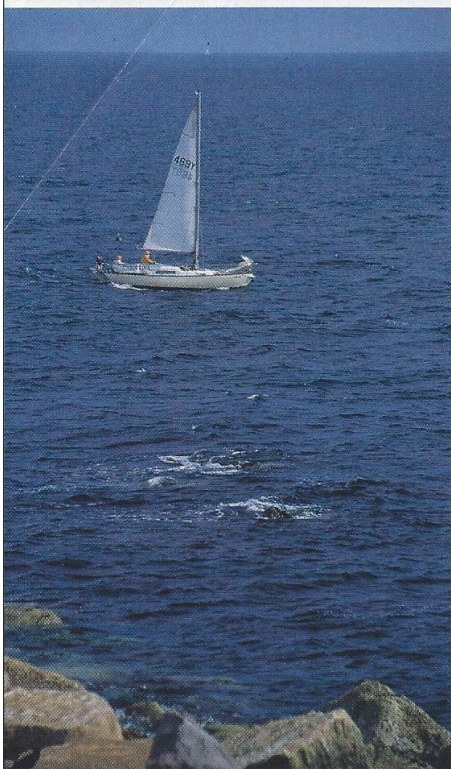


▲ Waves crashing against the rocks close to Portland Bill

east of Portland a large eddy is created, also resulting in a southwards flow between the Shambles Bank and Portland.

On the ebb the pattern is reversed, with the main flow to the east and an eddy to the west. The result is that the tide flows

south on both sides of the peninsula for all but two hours of each tide. The fine balance between these two flows determines the flow rate and direction of the tide around the Bill itself, and the violence and position of the Race. ▶



▲ A yacht passes off Pulpit Rock, Portland Bill clear of the awash rocks visible in the central foreground

Other headlands

- St Alban's Head: eastgoing from +0545 Dover, westgoing from -0045 Dover
- Start Point: eastgoing from +0455 Dover, westgoing from -0120 Dover

Portland Race

Between The Shambles bank and the Bill the bottom is rocky and uneven. All this at a place where the tide is being compressed and where currents are meeting from opposing directions. A rocky ledge extends from the Bill causing an upwelling of water as the east/west tide meets this obstruction. The southward flow from both sides of Portland are directed into this area by the slant of Portland's coast, adding to the turmoil and creating a stretch of water that seems to have a life of its own. Waves leap and break in seemingly random directions – high even in calm weather, and unbelievably steep. Many of the shoreside visitors to the Bill have come just to see the Race, admiring its impressive violence and power from the safety of a clifftop picnic spot or as they enjoy tea and scones at the Lobsterpot Café.

■ In his *Shell Channel Pilot*, Tom Cunliffe describes the Portland Race as: 'the most dangerous extended area of broken water in the English Channel. Quite substantial vessels drawn into it have been known to disappear without trace.'

THE PASSAGES

1 Westward, inside the Race →

The inside passage saves several miles of sailing in the wrong direction to round The Shambles bank, especially if departing from Weymouth. However, the passage can be dangerous in adverse conditions and should be avoided in the presence of a south-westerly swell or strong south to south-west winds. In these conditions it would be more pleasant, anyway, to stay in the fleshpots of Weymouth or Poole than to commit to a long, lumpy crossing of Lyme Bay.

Leaving Weymouth or Portland harbour at HW Dover -0200 will have the average yacht off the Bill at slack water for this part of the English Channel. The tide off the Bill, however, will be running at 2.5 to 5 knots, giving a wonderful lift westwards. Clearing the Nothe at Weymouth or Portland Harbour breakwaters, the eastern edge of Portland at Grove Point is clearly visible. Steer for a point about 100 metres from the cliff. Maintain this distance from the cliffs right round to the Bill.

Approaching from farther east join the Portland coastline no farther south than Grove Point, making due allowance for the southerly set of the tide as you approach. From here the tide will begin to run in earnest and the Portland coastline will pass swiftly. Gradually the cliffs decrease in height as Portland tapers from The Verne to the Bill. As Church Ope Cove is passed the Race may well be in sight. Soon a derrick used for lifting small fishing boats up the cliff will be passed, then the old Upper and Lower lighthouses stand white against the terraced fields and the current red and white striped lighthouse is ahead. The

strip of calm water inside the Race is often clearly defined. This can be a tense time with the cliffs to one side and the leaping, heaving water of the Race to the other.

Beware buoys

As you'd normally cover this passage under engine keep a careful watch ahead for pot marker buoys. These are often small and can be dragged under the surface by the strength of the tide. This is definitely not the time to get a rope around the prop.

The white pyramid beacon marks the southernmost tip of the Bill. Soon after this the square block of Pulpit Rock is passed and then open water lies to the west. To avoid being set back into the Race by the southgoing tide running down the west side of Portland, maintain a north-westerly heading for a mile or so after passing Pulpit Rock before laying a course for Start Point.

Given a helpful breeze the rest of the passage should be relaxing and straightforward and using the timings above there will be a fair tide for most of the 40 miles from Portland Bill to Berry Head.

Berry Head will be the first land over the horizon and at night the two flashes of its light at an elevation of 58m is an excellent guide for the approach to Brixham, a mile beyond on the north side.

2 Westward, outside the Race →

The inside passage has its advantages, but if conditions are not suitable or the approach is from farther east than Poole it is usually preferable to pass outside The Shambles banks and the Race. The same



▲ Portland lighthouse and the white pyramid beacon marking the tip of the Bill

CLASSIC CROSSINGS – Lyme Bay and the Portland Race



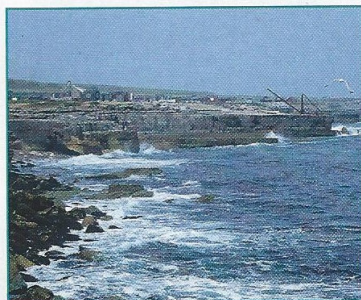
conditions that would require a good offing be given to Portland and The Shambles would apply equally to St Alban's Head, so a yacht coming from Poole or the Solent would already be taking a more southerly track. From Weymouth the outside passage requires a long detour compared to the inshore route.

From Weymouth the East Shambles (East Cardinal) buoy is about 7NM. Time your departure from Weymouth to arrive here for HW slack. Be aware that there will be a south-west set towards the Race once Grove Point is astern. After HW there is a strengthening set across The Shambles bank with rates attaining almost three knots. Fortunately, this side of The Shambles there is no shortage of searoom.

With wind or swell from the south-west, a good offing – up to two or three miles – may be required to clear the rough water over and around The Shambles. In any event, the direct course for Start Point from a mile or so clear of St Alban's Head passes clear to the south of The Shambles.

3 Eastward, inside the Race

It can be difficult to time departure from Brixham or Torquay for arrival west of Portland to take advantage of the short



▲ The low cliffs on the eastern side of Portland Bill

window for an eastwards passage. The best arrival time is HW Dover +0500. As Portland is approached there is a strong set towards the Race so if the timing is right to continue make for a mile or so north of the Bill, making the final approach from north-west.

It is important not to be late, so the likelihood is that you'll arrive with time in hand. The west of Portland is no place to linger in strong south-west to west winds so an early decision to go south of The Shambles could save some discomfort and anxiety later. Given a good forecast make for a point two miles north of the Bill and wait out of the tide below the cliffs at Blacknor.

Rounding Pulpit Rock the set towards the Race can be very strong, especially later in the period. By Dover -0600 this can reach five knots at Springs. An hour later it can be as high as six knots and there will be a foul flow along the east side of Portland of up to two knots.

Once past Pulpit Rock the track is a reverse of the westward passage, staying within the narrow band of calm water between the rock and the Race until clear of Grove Point. If making for a destination east of Weymouth wait until north of Grove Point before turning away from Portland.

4 Eastward, outside the Race

Making for Weymouth the detour outside will probably be to avoid bad conditions at the Bill, the extra miles prolonging a rough passage. With a south-westerly wind and a fair tide there should be little difficulty but with wind against tide the Shambles again needs a good offing.

Timing is less critical than the inshore route and, if the destination is further east, is likely to be governed more by the demands of the Solent tides. However, with streams south of The Shambles attaining almost four knots, a fair tide is essential, meeting the foul tide in the weaker streams of Lyme Bay.

PRACTICAL NAVIGATION

LANDFALLS

Weymouth

WP: 50°36.71N 02°26.18W (60°, 0.5NM from front leading light)

Weymouth is the quintessential English seaside town. Developed as a resort by the Victorians, it remains a popular family holiday destination. The wide, gently shelving beach of fine golden sand is perfect for bathing and the seafront is a traditional mix of guest houses, amusements and shops, and with a wide promenade featuring an ornate Victorian Clock.

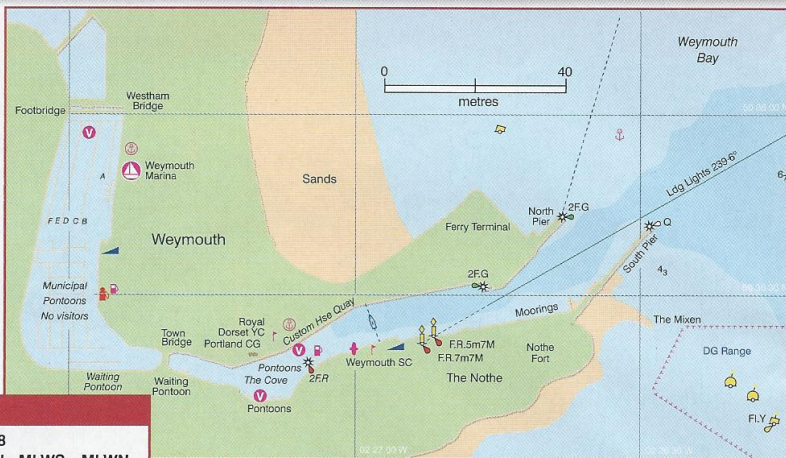
Approach and entry

The harbour is in the River Wey, protected at its entrance by a breakwater and The Nothe, on which stands the Nothe Fort. At night leading lights on The Nothe give an entry bearing of 240°T. The north pier has fixed green lights (2F.G.9/7m.6M(ver), the South pier has a flashing white light (Q.10m.9M.).

Enter around the south pier on The Nothe obeying the mandatory control signals.

TIDES

HW Dover -0438			
MHWS	MHWN	MLWS	MLWN
2.1m	1.4m	0.4m	0.8m



IPTS: No lights showing – entrance clear, enter or leave with caution. Two reds over one green – entry and departure prohibited.

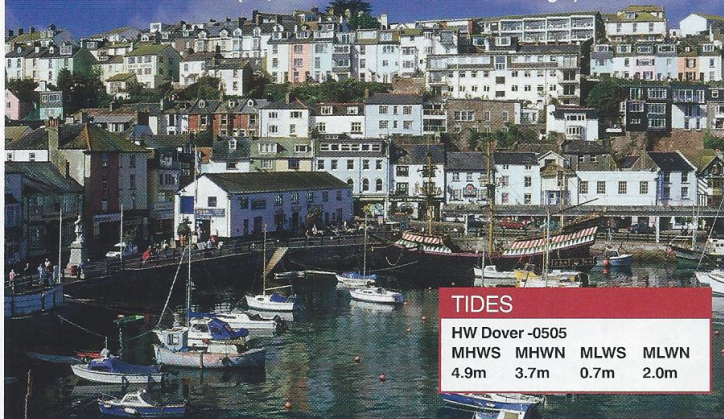
To starboard on entry is the ferry quay which serves a high speed service to the Channel Isles. Beyond this is the harbour office and berths for larger visiting yachts. To port are resident boat

moorings and a fuelling berth, close to which is Weymouth Yacht Club. There are berths in the Cove for smaller visiting craft. On both sides of the harbour are several good pubs. The Town Bridge lifts to give access to the marina which has serviced pontoon berths.

■ Harbour master, tel: 01305 206426, VHF Ch12
■ Marina, tel: 01305 767576

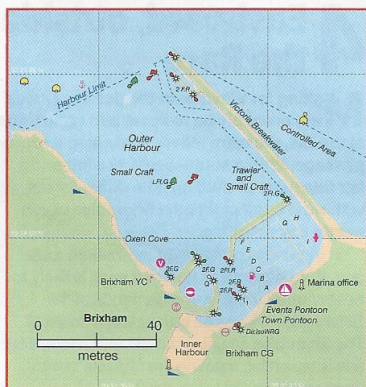
Brixham

WP: 50°24.41N 03°30.90W (50°, 0.6NM from Victoria breakwater light)



TIDES

HW Dover -0505			
MHWS	MHWN	MLWS	MLWN
4.9m	3.7m	0.7m	2.0m



Brixham is a busy fishing harbour and popular holiday destination. The marina gives good shelter behind its wavescreeen but the outer harbour can be unpleasant in north-west winds.

Approach and entry

Approach from the safe water buoy (Morse code A). Head for the marina via the Main Fairway (Dir.IsoWRG). Give way to fishing vessels and keep a watch for warning lights and departing boats from the fishing vessel basin.

■ Harbour master, tel: 01803 853321, VHF Ch16/14 Brixham Port
■ Marina, tel: 01803 882929, VHF Ch80
■ Yacht Club, tel: 01803 853332

Portland

WP: 50°35.1N 02°24.08W (90°, 0.5NM from East Ship Channel, Fort Head)

Portland harbour was once a major naval base and is an excellent ship harbour. For a yacht however, the very size of the harbour can be a problem as there is sufficient fetch to allow an uncomfortable sea to develop in strong winds.

There are moorings laid in the season near Castle Cove Sailing Club. Visitors moorings may be available through the Sailing Club or through the Royal Dorset Yacht Club. Or anchor near the New Channel beacon, clear of the moorings.

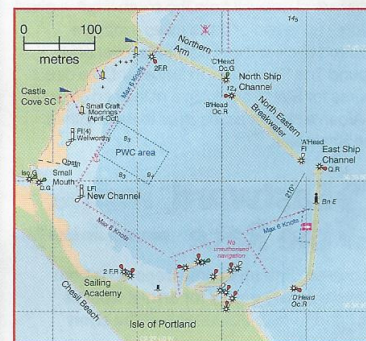
TIDES

HW Dover -0438			
MHWS	MHWN	MLWS	MLWN
2.1m	1.4m	0.1m	0.8m

Approach and entry

Yachts should enter by the North Ship Channel and report to Portland Harbour VHF Ch74 before entering or leaving.

■ Harbour master, tel: 01305 824044 VHF Ch74
■ Castle Cove Yacht Club, tel: 01305 783708



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Torquay

WP: 50°27.03N 03°31.57W (165°, 0.4NM from Haldon Pier Light)

Nelson's fleet used Torquay Bay to shelter from heavy weather during the blockade of the English Channel. The resort was billed as England's Riviera by the Victorians and their legacy remains to this day – villas are perched on the hilltops, gardens line the seafront and elegant facades grace the main streets. The wide Promenade is lined with palm trees and the waterfront is currently enjoying a rejuvenation.

Approach and entry

The narrow entrance can be tricky in rough weather due to backwash from the breakwaters but shelter is good inside the marina although in strong south-east winds some swell enters.

- Harbour master, tel: 01803 292429, VHF Ch16/14
- Marina, tel: 01803 214624, VHF Ch80

TIDES

HW Dover -0500			
MHWS	MHWN	MLWS	MLWN
5.5m	4.4m	0.8m	2.2m



CHARTS AND PILOTS

- Imray: C5
- Admiralty: Small craft folio 5601

Pilot books

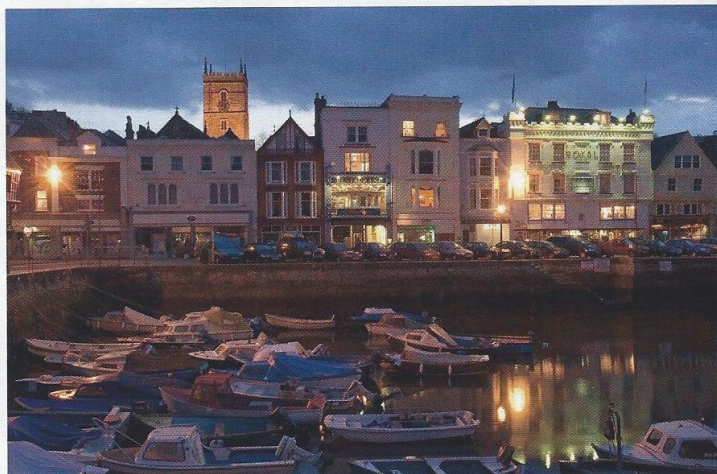
- The *Shell Channel Pilot* by Tom Cunliffe, Imray, £29.95
- *Fearsome Passages* by David Rainsbury, Imray, £15.95
- Books and charts available from www.ybw.com, tel: 02380 333051

Dartmouth

WP: 50°19.53N 03°32.88W (148°, 1.5NM from Kingswear Lt.)

TIDES

HW Dover -0510			
MHWS	MHWN	MLWS	MLWN
4.9m	3.8m	0.6m	2.0m



▲ Dartmouth, at the mouth of the River Dart, has a long naval history

Dartmouth is a beautiful town at the mouth of its river and has a long naval history. The harbour is crowded with moorings and is crossed by a chain ferry. There are many options for berthing on both sides of the river but it gets very busy during the season and finding a space can be difficult.

Approach and entry

Enter between Combe Point and the Mew Stone, leaving the Castle Ledge starboard-hand buoy to starboard and approaching the Kingswear light (IsoWRG3s9m8M) on a bearing of 328°. At night this is in the white sector of the light. Harbour dues are payable on entering the harbour limits and are collected punctiliously.

- Harbour master: VHF Ch16/11 'Dartnav', tel: 01803 832337
- Darthaven Marina, VHF Ch80, tel: 01803 832337
- Dart Marina: VHF Ch 80, tel: 01803 833351
- Royal Dart YC, tel: 01803 752272
- Water Taxi, VHF Ch06/08, tel: 01803 833727

