

**WALKING ON
THE ISLE OF WIGHT**



About the Author

Paul Curtis left the world of office administration to write this guidebook, having enjoyed writing a popular blog about a 2008 solo cycling trip from Boston to San Diego. He loves travelling, particularly long-distance hiking and cycling, and enjoys getting away to as many wonderful places as possible in his free time. He fell in love with the Isle of Wight on his first visit in 2008, and returned periodically to walk there before making it his home in 2011.

In addition to his US adventure, Paul has cycled from Amsterdam to Sarandë in Albania and from Calais to Istanbul, hiked across Switzerland and has completed several long-distance walking trails in the UK including the North Downs Way, the Thames Path and the Hertfordshire Way. He has designed a South of England figure of eight walk, stretching from Dover to Land's End and centred on Windsor. He is a solo, romantic explorer in the Wainwright tradition and believes that guidebooks should first and foremost be about finding the most beautiful routes and providing precise, accurate descriptions.

Paul lives and works on the Isle of Wight.

WALKING ON THE ISLE OF WIGHT

by Paul Curtis

CICERONE

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For my friend Ruth

Updates to this Guide

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Front cover: The Needles (Walk 4)













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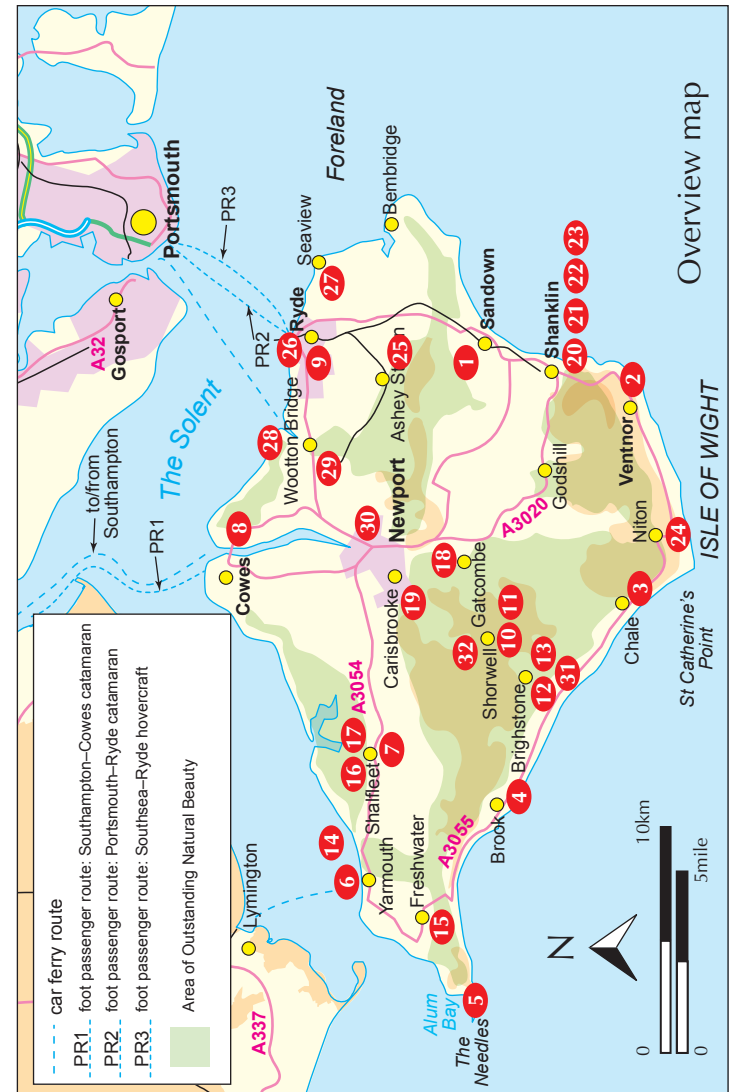
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Route symbols on OS map extracts (for OS legend see printed OS maps)	Features on the overview map
 route	 Urban area
 start/finish point	 Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty/National Scenic Area
 start point	 400m
 finish point	 200m
 alternative start/finish point	 75m
 route direction	 0m





Cliffs near Ventnor (Walk 2)

INTRODUCTION

It is surprising that, in spite of the Isle of Wight's beauty and elegance, this peaceful and perfect-sized island is often dismissed simply as a place to go for a long weekend or somewhere to send children on school trips. Perhaps it is because many visitors tend not to penetrate the island beyond the resorts and the tourist attractions. But those with curiosity are likely to fall in love with this place; its variety of scenery and understated aesthetic qualities are appreciated most by those on foot, with almost everywhere being accessible courtesy of the green buses which stand out on the landscape. The Isle of Wight is made for walking!

Nearly half the island is a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, but this is misleading as almost the entire island can rightly be called beautiful. There are jaw-dropping views such as those from the magnificent coastline of West Wight, St Boniface, Culver and Brading Downs, St Catherine's Point and the Needles. And there is also a gentler, more intimate beauty at countless locations unknown even by many islanders, such as remote Newtown Harbour, an 'undiscovered' balcony trail near Gatcombe, and even the scenic path linking urban Carisbrooke and Newport.



Yaverland cliffs (Walk 9)

The island's default scenery is graceful, undulating downland, very attractive to the eye, and if you walk in any direction for up to 5 miles you would almost certainly glimpse the sea. Tree-lovers are also well catered for, with the large and lonely Brighstone Forest being particularly attractive, situated on top of the magnificent West Wight ridge of downs and offering enchanting sea views from its southern fringe. And sea-lovers will be enamoured with the Coastal Path: simply a stunner! Only thrill-seeking walkers or those not interested in anything except alpine scenery would be disappointed with the Isle of Wight.

There are an incredible 525km (326 miles) of footpaths on an island of just 381 square kilometres (147 square miles), and there are more footpaths and bridleways than roads. Such a choice of where to walk means that walkers can experience all the diversity the island has to offer – not only scenery but also many of the 2000 or so listed buildings – and that the trails are not too crowded, except on very popular routes in high season.

The Isle of Wight is an ideal size for a walking holiday – not so small that visitors can become familiar with it in under a week, yet small enough to walk from Bembridge on the east coast to the Needles on the west coast in a single day. Away from the few towns and sometimes cheesy (yet charming) coastal resorts, the island is genuinely a walker's paradise: an

overused term, but definitely applicable in this case. This is not just because of the consistently attractive, varied scenery and preponderance of footpaths, but also because of a particularly mild, temperate climate, exceptionally good access to walks via public transport, and optimum levels of safety – the last of which makes it an especially good destination for beginners and families to try some walking.

The fact that the Isle of Wight is not teeming with walkers all year round is everyone else's loss and your gain.

GEOGRAPHY AND LANDSCAPE

The island is diamond-shaped, about 37km (23 miles) from Bembridge (east) to the Needles (west), and 21km (13 miles) from Cowes (north) to St Catherine's Point (south). This makes it small enough to cross by car in about an hour, but large enough to offer a huge variety of interest in terms of both natural landscape and towns and villages. First-time visitors may be surprised at just how close the mainland seems; from Yarmouth it is only 1.5km (1 mile) away. On clear days and from lofty vantage points, the mainland coastline can be seen as far as Bournemouth and the Isle of Purbeck to the west and Beachy Head to the east – which perhaps contributes to disagreements over whether the island is more a part of southwest or south-east England. But on the south-facing

coasts the open sea seems endless; the eye looks towards France but never sees it.

There are, in effect, eight towns on the island: Yarmouth, Cowes, East Cowes and Ryde on the north coast, the resorts of Sandown, Shanklin and Ventnor on the east coast, and Newport in the centre. The sprawling and ambiguously defined village of Freshwater comprises most of the far west. Unlike many towns on the mainland, each feels unique and has a special character. Villages and hamlets are numerous and all maintain a distinct identity, derived from a sense of location and history; they are much more than their constituent streets and buildings. Some, notably Godshill and Shorwell, are decidedly photogenic, with an abundance of thatched cottages and attractive stone houses.

But it is the downland that really makes the island great, and it is thoroughly explored in these walks. There can be said to be three major stretches: from Newport east to the sea (St George's Down to Culver Down); the 'southeast downs' which form an arc around the village of Wroxall; and from Carisbrooke southwest to the so-called 'Back of the Wight' (the southwest coastline from Chale to Freshwater Bay and the villages just behind). The key to mastering the geography of the island is familiarity with the downs.

The sea around the entire island, both the Solent and English Channel proper, is notoriously rough and has claimed numerous ships and lives. The south is very prone to cliff erosion and landslips because of its secondary layer of gault clay (known as



'blue slipper'). When rain permeates the gault it moves forward, causing the instability. This process, together with rising sea levels after the last ice age, created the Undercliff between Ventnor and Niton. Today erosion and landslips still cause problems, not least Coastal Path diversions – the island is continually getting smaller. The Blackgang Chine attraction, located on a cliff-top near Niton, has particularly suffered over the years, and in 1928 a major landslip a little to the east caused an irreparable breach in the old Niton to Blackgang road.

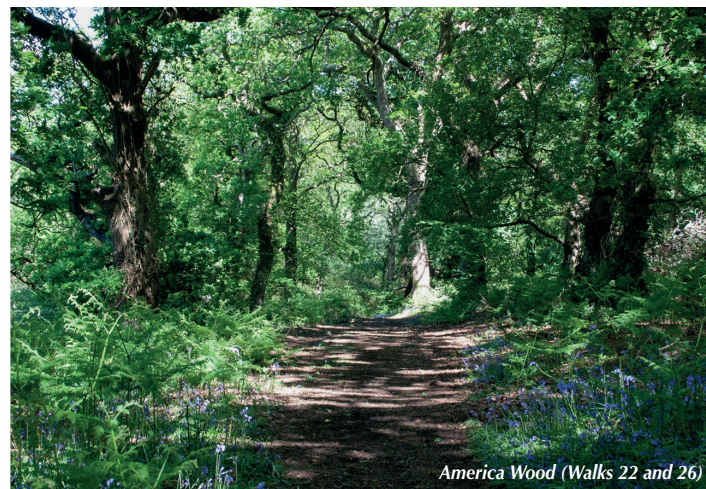
But erosion is not all bad. One positive by-product is that it constantly reveals new fossils. The island is nicknamed the 'Dinosaur Isle' because of the large number of fossils that may be found, especially on the beaches

at Compton Bay (see Walk 4) and Yaverland (see Walk 9). Along the Back of the Wight, erosion has enlarged several 'chines' (a local term for a breach in a sea-cliff) and created caves, such as those below Tennyson Down.

The north of the island has a firmer geological foundation, its hard clays supporting a surprisingly large and varied range of woodland (some ancient). These include eerie Parkhurst Forest, America Wood and numerous smaller woods, although deforestation has occurred regularly throughout the ages. Much planting of non-native but red-squirrel-friendly trees (such as the Scots pine and the sycamore) has taken place over the past 100 years, but the trend now is to increase the proportion of native species while also increasing biodiversity.



Effects of erosion (Walk 3)



America Wood (Walks 22 and 26)

Unusually, all rivers on the island flow north. The Medina and Western Yar are remarkable for their oversized estuaries (from Newport to Cowes, and Freshwater to Yarmouth respectively). The Eastern Yar flows from Niton to Bembridge, and Newtown River and Wootton Creek are fed by multiple streams.

The National Trust has a very strong presence on the island, owning and maintaining precious areas such as Newtown Harbour and the Needles Batteries, and there are a total of 41 Special Sites of Scientific Interest (SSSIs), which include woods, downs and marshes. All in all, the landscape features of the Isle of Wight are expertly protected, whether by the National Trust, Forestry Commission or the council.

A POTTED HISTORY

There are two principal theories as to the origin of 'Wight'. The root word may have originated in the Iron Age and been subsequently altered many times, including by the Romans who called the island Vectis; the original definition apparently meant 'little appendage'. Another theory is that 'Vectis' is unrelated to previous names, and that the root of the modern name derived from the original name for Carisbrooke: Wihtgarsburh – possibly named after a Saxon king.

For the vast majority of the Earth's history, there was no Isle of Wight as such, as the island we know today was part of the mainland. Dinosaurs arrived some 125 million years ago when the region was then situated near the Equator, and today 'Dinosaur

Isle' is world-renowned for its fossils, especially along Compton Bay, the beach at Yaverland and Bouldnor Cliffs. Finds are often not particularly significant – commonly fossilised iguanodon footprints – but skeletons of *Hypsilophodon* and *Neovenator salerii* have been discovered.

It was only during the past 8000–10,000 years that an island was formed, caused by the sea flooding the Solent valley at the end of the last ice age and subsequently eroding the coastlines. In those days, the island was wholly covered by oak and elm, and it was only in about 3000bc that the sedentary agricultural lifestyle started to replace the hunter-gatherer way of life – trees were felled and cereals cultivated, allowing more complex societies to develop on the fledgling island.

Trading routes were soon established over the downs, and today's walkers will be reminded of life in this Neolithic period by communal burial mounds, known as barrows, alongside these routes, notably on the Back of the Wight. The Long Stone near Mottistone is a more tangible ancient monument; it is likely that Neolithic people met here to discuss and debate.

The islanders were no match for the Roman army, which invaded in AD43 led by Vespasian, the future emperor. The island never really flourished under Roman rule; seven or eight villas were built for the wealthy – the ones at Brading and Newport

have been preserved and are open to the public – but no towns or roads were constructed as they were on the mainland. However, one industry started during Roman times was to last for centuries: stone quarrying at Binstead. Winchester and Chichester cathedrals, as well as the island's first Quarr Abbey, were built using Binstead stone.

After the Romans left in the fifth century, Saxon King Cerdic conquered the island. A large Jutish migration around the same time probably led to intermarriage between the Germanic tribes; certainly Cerdic's nephew Stuf was known as a Jute who became the first recognised king of the island. This Jutish kingdom ended with a bloody invasion by Caedwalla, King of Wessex, in 685, who slaughtered much of the population and forced surviving islanders to convert to Christianity, apparently in line with the whole of the rest of Britain.

Viking raids posed a problem towards the end of the Dark Ages, the island briefly serving as an important strategic base. But with the invasion of the Normans in 1066, and the construction of Carisbrooke Castle shortly after, the security of the island against further attack was greatly enhanced (and to this day there has not been any subsequent, fully successful invasion).

Formal governance created official ties with the mainland. William FitzOsbern – close relative of William the Conqueror – became the first Lord of the Isle of Wight, which became a

hereditary title after Henry I granted it to FitzOsbern's nephew Richard de Redvers (the designer of Newport). The last Lord was Isabella de Fortibus, who was either persuaded or coerced into selling the island to King Edward I, and thus it was fully incorporated into the kingdom. Governors were appointed thereafter until the role was abolished in 1995.

Constant concern about a foreign invasion proved justified when in 1377 the French launched devastating raids on the ports of Newtown, Yarmouth and Newport – but they were forced to withdraw after failing to capture Carisbrooke Castle. This was 25 years after the Black Death had already decimated much of the population. After subsequent attacks, Yarmouth Castle was built by Henry VIII, but the island continued to generally decline until the 1600s, when a fledgling shipbuilding

industry in Cowes proved successful and Newport began a gradual renaissance. The 1700s saw the rebuilding in grand style of the old manor houses at Gatcombe, Appuldurcombe and Swainston by their wealthy owners, perhaps reflecting relatively prosperous times for both the island and the country as a whole.

By the turn of the 1800s there was a new fashion for leisure travel among the well-to-do. In 1796 regular Solent crossings started between Portsmouth and Ryde, and several distinguished visitors came to discover what the island had to offer. The poet Tennyson relocated here for several years; and Dickens, Keats, Darwin and several other notables all visited. Two of today's premier attractions opened in this early period: the gorge of Shanklin Chine in 1817 and Blackgang Chine amusement park in 1843; and the multicoloured sands of



INTRODUCTION

Walk number	Walk title	Distance	Time
1	Sandown to Ventnor	10.5km (6.6 miles)	2½hr
2	Ventnor to Chale	12.3km (7.7 miles)	3½hr
3	Chale to Brook	13.2km (8.3 miles)	3hr
4	Brook to Alum Bay	11.9km (7.4 miles)	3hr
5	Alum Bay to Yarmouth	8.7km (5.4 miles)	2½hr
6	Yarmouth to Shalfleet	12.7km (7.9 miles)	3hr
7	Shalfleet to East Cowes	16.7km (10.4 miles)	4hr
8	East Cowes to Ryde	12.7km (7.9 miles)	3hr
9	Ryde to Sandown	19.1km (11.9 miles)	5½hr

If recreational walking is the island's crown, then the Coastal Path of about 70 miles must be its jewel. The path circumnavigates the island, and throughout its length offers ever-changing scenic variety. Compare for instance the wildness of the Back of the Wight to the very tame stretch between Sandown and Shanklin, or the sheer drama of the far south and far west sections with the gentle inland meanderings between Cowes and Yarmouth. Every stage of the Coastal Path is worth doing in order to appreciate the sheer diversity of the island's coastline.

The Path is presented here as nine stages in a clockwise direction. While the route can of course be walked on consecutive days, accommodation is very limited west of Cowes

and Ventnor, and the coastline is no exception, so it may be prudent to make good use of the fast and usually frequent bus services for these stages to get between your accommodation and the start or finish of the route. Only the southwest stages served by infrequent bus route 12 could cause logistical difficulties in this regard. Due to the ever-present problems of erosion and landslips, there may be diversions in place on some short stretches, but conversely paths closed for some time in Bembridge and Colwell because of landslips have recently been professionally and sensitively restored.

Finally, it is intended that the Isle of Wight Coastal Path be included as part of the England Coast Path set to be completed in 2020.

SOUTH COAST

WALK 1

Sandown to Ventnor

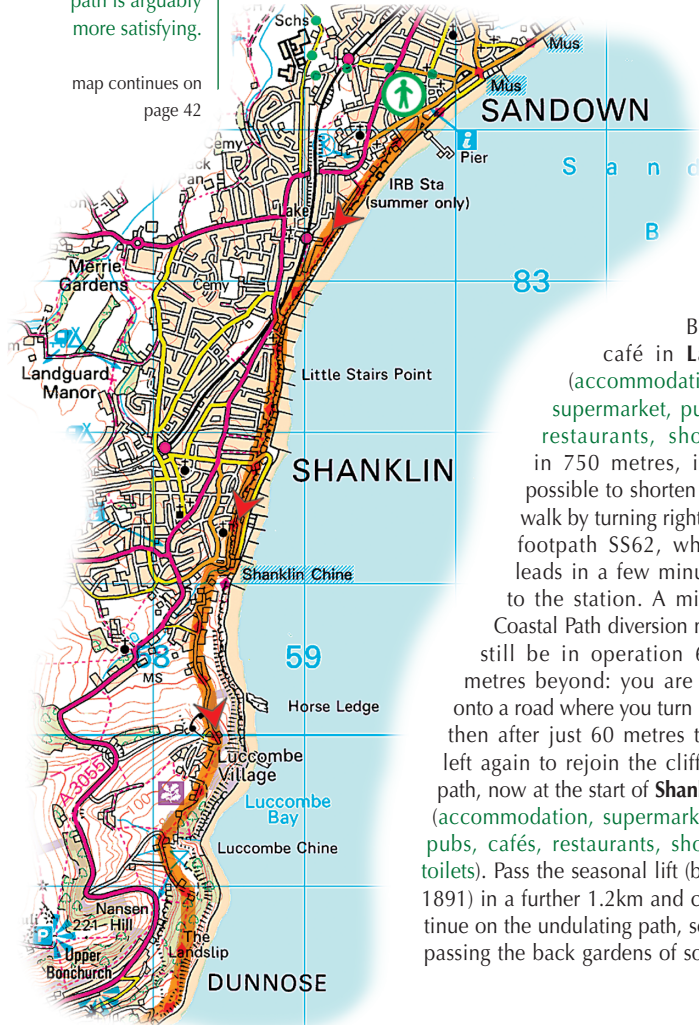
Start	Sandown Pier
Finish	Ventnor
Distance	10.5km (6.6 miles)
Grade	Easy to Shanklin, then moderate
Time	2½hr
Refreshments	A sprinkling of seasonal cafés between Sandown and Shanklin. One seasonal café beyond Shanklin (9.7km).
Public transport	To start: bus routes 2, 3 and 8, and train (short walk); from finish: bus routes 3 and 6
Parking	Long-stay car park in Station Avenue; also possible beside the pier
Early finish	Lake Station (1.2km), Shanklin Old Village (4.7km, bus route 3), top of Devil's Chimney (7.4km, bus route 3)

The heavily used clifftop path between the two premier resorts on the island, Sandown and Shanklin, makes for an easy, brisk 45min stroll and can even be enjoyed at night. After descending to the beach past the entrance to Shanklin Chine, the route climbs the numerous Appley Steps to lovely Rylstone Gardens in the Old Village and continues up Luccombe Road with its fine, dignified houses. The Landslip follows – a riot of greenery with intermittent sea views. Make a short detour to the old church at Bonchurch, and end this particularly varied walk along the sea wall linking Bonchurch and Ventnor.

Facing the pier at **Sandown** (accommodation, supermarkets, pubs, cafés, restaurants, shops, toilets) turn right. After 200 metres go right by the Ferncliff Path sign to head steeply uphill. Shortly go left up steps and left at the top through Ferncliff Gardens to emerge on a clifftop

It is also possible to walk to Shanklin along the shore but the cliff-top path is arguably more satisfying.

map continues on page 42



path. ◀ This easy concrete path may be rather tame, but that in no way detracts from the enjoyment: the sea views are mostly uninterrupted, and there are frequent benches on which to sit and enjoy the view.

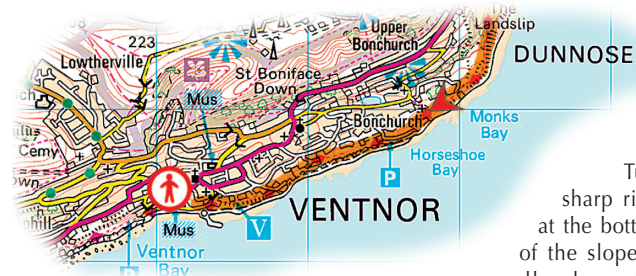
By a café in Lake (accommodation, supermarket, pubs, restaurants, shops) in 750 metres, it is possible to shorten the walk by turning right on footpath SS62, which leads in a few minutes to the station. A minor Coastal Path diversion may still be in operation 650 metres beyond: you are led onto a road where you turn left, then after just 60 metres turn left again to rejoin the cliff-top path, now at the start of **Shanklin** (accommodation, supermarkets, pubs, cafés, restaurants, shops, toilets). Pass the seasonal lift (built 1891) in a further 1.2km and continue on the undulating path, soon passing the back gardens of some



Keats Green

rather quaint-looking hotels in Keats Green, named after the poet, who frequently visited Shanklin. At the end of the green, descend past a metal barrier all the way to the shore, perhaps visiting **Shanklin Chine** halfway down – it's worth paying the admission charge if only to experience the island's oldest tourist attraction.

Shanklin Chine was opened to the public as early as 1817, and was as popular in the Victorian era as it is now. As well as its beautiful foliage, pretty trails and diverse bird- and animal-life – including resident chipmunks – the Chine boasts a 12m (40ft) waterfall and romantic summer-night illuminations. There is also a permanent exhibition about the wartime Pipe Line Under The Ocean (PLUTO), which ran from the Chine to Cherbourg transporting petrol for Allied troops. The idea came from Lord Mountbatten and was apparently very successful – the enemy never knew about it, and 56,000 gallons of petrol per day was transported this way during 1944.



To end the walk, or perhaps have lunch, turn sharp right on exiting the gardens to reach the centre of Shanklin Old Village (pubs, cafés, restaurants, shops, toilets) via the upper gate of the Chine. Bus stops are just up the hill.

At the road behind the Smugglers Haven turn right for bus stops.

Turn sharp right at the bottom of the slope to walk along the shore; pass the Fisherman's Cottage, then after 150 metres go sharp right up the inconspicuous 'Appley Steps'. At the top, although the Coastal Path continues straight ahead, detour through pretty Rylstone Gardens first. Continue with the sea to the right this time; then when the path ends, return through the gardens, pausing to admire the charming small hotel in its grounds and perhaps have a cuppa in the tea rooms.

Aim for, and exit at, the far right corner of the gardens. Turn right then immediately left to ascend Luccombe Road with its large elegant houses. ◀ In 400 metres turn right on a signposted footpath into a field, and immediately left, keeping close to the hedge (or stay on the road if too muddy). Go over a stile in the far corner to return to and continue along the road, enjoying lovely sea views.

Keep straight ahead at a junction and shortly continue on a footpath through woodland. Ignore ways off. After 1.3km, head up steps to enter **The Landslip** (so called because of the erosion and intermittent landslides that have affected the area since the last ice age), again ignoring ways off the main path and following Coastal Path signs.

After 550 metres, to shorten the walk, take V65c up the notorious 'Devil's Chimney': a tough 10min climb up 225 steps, one section narrowly wedged between cliffs. ◀

Otherwise, the path continues to wind around The Landslip's foliage. After 800 metres, turn right – initially up three steps. After 150 metres bear left and left again at



Sea wall to Ventnor

the next junction, but not before detouring a short way to the right to see isolated St Boniface Church at **Bonchurch** (limited accommodation, pub, restaurant), nestled in its pretty churchyard (see Walk 21).

Shortly after this junction there is a choice of paths; take either, as both eventually emerge on a sea wall at Wheelers Bay (if taking the upper path bear left at the end). Continue along it to reach the seafront at **Ventnor** (accommodation, supermarkets, pubs, cafés, restaurants, shops, toilets). For the main shopping street and bus stop, turn sharp right up the slope opposite the Hygeia mosaic at the start of the seafront proper, and continue up Pier Street to the T-junction. Take a peak into Alexandra Gardens on the way: Elgar honeymooned at number three.