

PUBS WORTH THE WALK · DEVON · EXMOOR

The Blue Ball Inn Walk

Countisbury, near Lynmouth

Above the Bristol Channel – Countisbury Moor to the Foreland Circular from the Blue Ball Inn

DISTANCE 4.7 miles 7.5 km	TIME 2 hours approx.	ASCENT 1060 ft 330 m	DIFFICULTY Moderate some steep ascents
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OVERVIEW

This is a walk through some of Exmoor's most dramatic coastal country, where open upland gives way to isolated farmland, wooded cliffs and the wide sweep of the Bristol Channel, with amazing views across Lynmouth Bay to finish. **Go on a clear day!** The early stages offer a sense of the high, exposed landscape that makes Countisbury so distinctive. Farms sit in folds of the land, partly sheltered from the weather, while the sea and the distant Welsh coast provide an ever-changing horizon.

The character of the walk changes as you reach the South West Coast Path. Here, the route winds through woodland and along steep coastal slopes as you head towards Foreland Point. The woods around Glenthorne Cliffs reflect the influence of the historic Glenthorne estate, while the shape of the headland hints at the more demanding terrain beyond. There is an optional, tougher detour around Foreland Point itself to see the lighthouse (adds 500 feet climb) for confident coastal walkers; the main Coast Path route described takes the 'pass' before turning back towards Countisbury.

The return brings another change of mood, as the path climbs back towards the high ground beneath Butter Hill. Across Lynmouth Bay, roughly two miles away, sit Lynmouth and Lynton, their connection made visible by the remarkable cliff railway climbing the hillside between them, clearly visible in the right weather. Keep going towards Countisbury, where the Blue Ball awaits at the top of the hill.

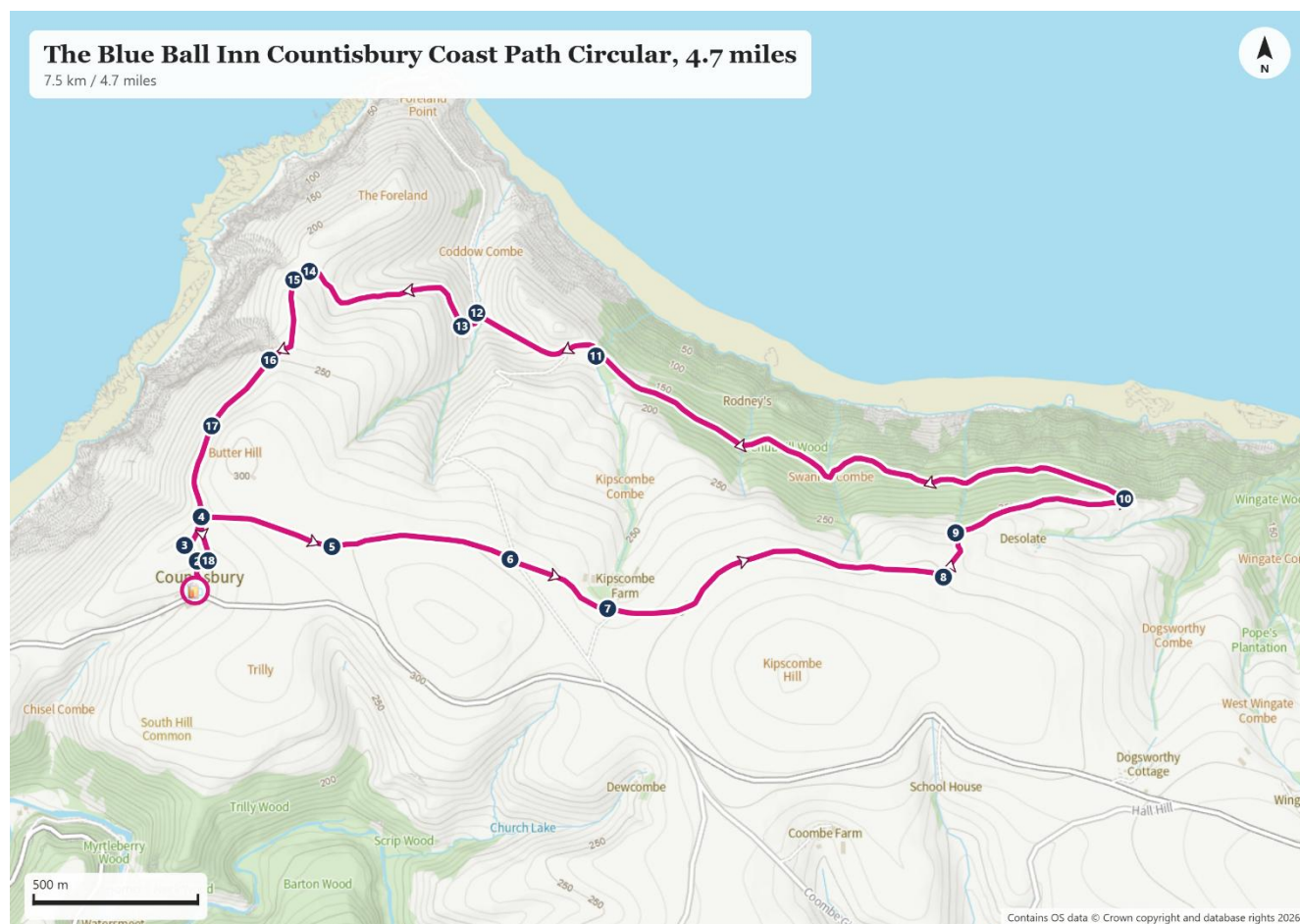
START / FINISH	Blue Ball Inn, Countisbury, EX35 6NE	Elevation Total ascent: 1060 ft 829 ft 991 ft 372 ft 829 ft 0.00 mi 2.33 mi 4.66 mi ELEVATION PROFILE
PARKING	Pub car park; options on A39 to Porlock.	
GRID REFERENCE	SS 747 497	
WHAT3WORDS	///bootleg.weedy.guideline	
PATHS / TERRAIN	Field tracks; stony footpaths; some steep	
PUBLIC TRANSPORT	Daily bus between Porlock & Lynmouth.	
TOILETS	Only at The Blue Ball Inn.	

OTHER PUBS NEARBY

The Rockford Inn, Rockford (EX35 6PT) is one of my favourite pubs!

Try also **The Staghunters Inn (EX35 6PS)** at Brendon. **The Rising Sun** at Lynmouth is on most lists!

THE ROUTE



DIRECTIONS

Countisbury is a cluster of NT cottages, a church and the Blue Ball Inn. It's easy to drive past it as you round a bend on the A39, 10 miles from Porlock. Should you drive past, note that the A39 drops steeply down to Lynmouth from the here on one of the UK's most dramatic coastal roads – a bucket list 2 miles in its own right for some - with limited opportunity to turn around until you reach the bottom.

Park in the large car park across the road from the pub. If it's full, there are a couple of options within a mile, back in the Porlock direction, at Barna Barrow (Postcode: EX35 6NE Grid Reference: SS 752 495 What3Words: buzzing.strikers.dusty) and Countisbury Common (Postcode: EX35 6NE Grid Reference: SS 758 494 What3Words: clearcut.running.harmlessly).

Part 1 · Blue Ball Inn to the South West Coast Path steps 1–10

- 1** From the pub car park, take the cut-through to the lane leading up to St John the Evangelist Church. At the church gate, a footpath marker gives you a choice: enter the churchyard straight ahead or bear right past the front of a cottage. I recommend the **churchyard route**, with a quick look inside the church if it is open, before continuing along the path to the **left** of the church door. **2**
- 2** Follow the path straight ahead to a wooden footpath gate at the far side of the churchyard. You emerge onto open grassland, with a mast visible on top of Butter Hill ahead. (You will return on lower ground to the left of that mast later). For now, **drift right** towards the wall, then follow the wall as it curves **right** around the corner, in the direction of Barna Barrow. **4**
- 3** Continue with the wall on your right, following the gently rising grassy track between the gorse. At a **fork** in the path, bear **slightly left**, rather than heading directly towards the high point of Barna Barrow. **5** You may see a section of the A39 to your right, with access to parking at Barna Barrow from there.

- 4 Continue straight ahead on the broad, grassy track between the gorse and heather, heading in the direction of Kipscombe Farm. The track **arcs right**. Look out for a footpath marker directing you across a driveway here, **6** with County Gate marked 2¾ miles away. Follow this route across the field track in the direction of a small stand of beech trees ahead. Kipscombe Hill lies to the right of the trees; a popular spot for grazing Exmoor ponies.

- 5 Cross the driveway serving the farm and cottages, then continue straight ahead, with the beech trees on your left. **7** First views of Foreland Point open up to your left. Keep going following the field track to a wooden farm gate. Pass through into the field beyond, which may be occupied by sheep.

- 6 Continue straight ahead on the distinct grass track, which leads towards an old hay feeder in the field, then the path heads off at an **arc slightly to the right**, towards an obvious gateway in (what was once) the fence. From this gate, walk in parallel to the boundary wall at the bottom of the field, roughly 30m below you. Aim for the metal farm gate – one of the gate posts has a fading splash of yellow paint, the clue that you're on the footpath.

- 7 Cross the next field **diagonally to the left**, to the corner. You'll see a metal farm gate, and some more obvious footpath signs, including a finger marker pointing towards the Coast Path. This is an elaborate electric gate, but fear not, there's a footpath gate to the right. Pass through and join the farm track on the other side of the gate. **8**

- 8 Now follow the stoney farm track downhill in the direction of the coast. Within 100m of the gate, a footpath marker shows the way, off to the **left** - over a hump, and then steeply downhill on a grass track between the ferns with wonderful sea views.

- 9 At the next footpath marker **turn right, not left** (look closely at the marker for the yellow arrow clue). Turning right feels counter intuitive since our destination is to the left. But we're not yet at the coast path, which is somewhere below us - we need to zig zag a little more to drop further down the slope.

- 10 Continue downhill on an easy path which eventually levels out, again offering superb views, now in both directions – Bossington to the East and Foreland Point to the West. Unseen, we're passing below an old farm here called Desolate, hidden above us. I can imagine how they feel in Winter! And here's the footpath marker announcing the South West Coast Path. **10**

Part 2 · South West Coast Path back to The Blue Ball Inn *steps 11–18*

- 11 Take the path to the **left**, signposted for Lynmouth. This initial section along the coast path enters Chubhill Wood, dropping downhill before levelling out on a good path between rhododendrons on the slopes above and below the path, and native trees, reminiscent of the Exmoor combes further inland. Pass a sign for the National Trust's Glenthorne Cliffs — named for Glenthorne House to the east of us, the dramatic neo-Tudor seat of Rev. Walter Stevenson Halliday, who owned the entire parish of Countisbury in the 19th century and shaped much of the wooded coastline along this walk.

- 12 Eventually, this section of the walk breaks out of the trees to provide a clear view of the sky, and then rounds a corner to pass another National Trust sign, for Gurney Woods. The path drops onto the private driveway here of Rodney's Cottage, hidden lower down the cliff below us. But a wonderful sight – the owners have set up a simple 'honesty café' at this spot – some coolboxes offering refreshments, some seats and a table – and a link to a PayPal account should you wish to contribute, with money promised to be put towards buying seed to encourage birdlife to this part of the woodland. **11**

- 13 Continue up the drive beyond the wooden gate. Just over the crest ahead of you, join a tarmac road. It's the access road for Rodney's Cottage, and for the Foreland Point Lighthouse and the Lighthouse Keepers' Cottage (available as National Trust holiday accommodation).

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- 14** Follow this road downhill towards a small bridge over the road, just visible below you. As you proceed, notice that the Foreland isn't a straightforward protrusion of land into the sea, but has its own conical shape, with a 'pass' separating it from the hillside inland. The South West Coast path follows this pass, which is signposted to the **left** just beyond the bridge. **12** *If you wish to continue to the lighthouse, and follow an alternative path around the headland, continue on the driveway. The route adds an extra mile and another 500 feet of elevation to your route. It's quite a narrow path in sections above high sea cliffs, with walking on some scree – it's a route more suited to **experienced and confident coast path walkers**, and why the South West Coast Path uses the pass described.*
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- 15** Having turned left to continue on the South West Coast Path, a flight of steps allows you to gain height quickly along this, the steepest section of the climb back up to Countisbury. After the steps, the rest of the climb is quite reasonable, and there are some conveniently positioned wooden benches for a rest (or to enjoy the view) as you ascend.
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- 16** Just beyond the second bench, you complete the 'pass' section and wonderful sea views open up again to the West, where Lynmouth, Lynton and the cliff railway connecting them is easily seen across Lynmouth Bay. You can also make out the famous coast road of Countisbury Hill, with its one in four gradient (25%). *If you wish, from here you can drop down a little to your right to pick out a path to the high point of the Foreland (c.700 feet), and you get a sense of the scree along the alternative path around the headland.* **14**
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- 17** Our route is to the **left**, up a steep-ish slope on a wide grass track. Take care as you ascend here as you can walk close to the cliff edge in parts, especially near an area marked Great Red on OS Maps. **15** The Coast Path then curves to the **right**, beneath Butter Hill with its communication mast, and continues to rise but more gently now. **16**
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- 18** As you reach the top you spot the tower of the Countisbury Church over the brow, **17** and the familiar open grassed area where you turned towards Barna Barrow at the start of the walk. Retrace your steps to the Blue Ball Inn from here.
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Wider walking country

The Blue Ball is well placed for much more than this circular route. Walkers can explore the high moors and the tracks around Countisbury Common, descend towards Lynmouth and Lynton, or follow the valleys inland towards Watersmeet, and the East Lyn at Brendon (**Rockford Inn and Staghunters Inn**). It's also close to 'Lorna Doone' country – head for Malmsmead, inland below County Gate.

The South West Coast Path offers further possibilities in both directions, of course, including the wooded cliffs towards County Gate, near Glenthorne.

Glenthorne itself is worth knowing about, even though this circular walk does not visit the house. The historic estate shaped much of the wooded coastline to the east, and its spectacular setting has attracted extravagant praise. It is another reminder that the landscape here has been experienced in different ways over the centuries: as a place to live and work, a private estate, a dangerous stretch of coast, and now a destination for walkers.

THE STORY

Imagine Countisbury before the A39

It is easy to see Countisbury as a handful of cottages, a church and a pub beside a spectacular road. But that is the view of a visitor passing through. For most of its history, Countisbury was a community living on the high ground above the sea, connected to its neighbours by tracks, paths and difficult routes through the hills. The road has made the place easier to reach, but it has also changed the way we see it.

The writer John Presland, in *Lynton and Lynmouth: A Pageant of Cliff & Moorland* (1917), gives a vivid sense of what the old route could be like. He describes the steep climb from Lynmouth, where strong winds could whip the red road dust into swirling clouds. It is a reminder that the hill we now negotiate in a car was once a formidable obstacle for people, animals, carts and coaches. From Porlock, the modern visitor crosses the high ground before Countisbury flashes into view; from Lynmouth, the road rises steeply towards the inn and the moor beyond.

The Blue Ball's position makes sense when you imagine that older journey. The inn stood on the route between Porlock and Lynmouth, near the top of the climb out of the latter. It was a place to pause, take refreshment and prepare for the next stage. A photograph of a coach and horses stopping outside in 1907 provides a glimpse of that world just as motor transport was beginning to change it. The inn's history is not simply an attractive backstory: its location was once a practical part of travelling through Exmoor.

A settlement hidden in the landscape

Look beyond the cottages and you begin to understand why the settlement is so scattered. Farms occupy hollows and folds in the land, seeking some shelter from the weather on this exposed coast. The farm called Desolate, which you pass above on the descent towards the coast path, seems almost to announce its own situation. It is a name that invites you to imagine a winter day when the wind and rain have settled over the hills.

Countisbury was never a large village in the conventional sense. The Domesday survey of 1086 recorded a settlement with woodland and pasture as well as cultivated land; Presland's account gives a glimpse of a working community with livestock and resources adapted to the local landscape. By the nineteenth century, the parish covered around 3,512 acres. The Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales, published in the 1870s, recorded 176 people and 38 houses.

The population later declined, and the settlement remains dispersed. In the modern landscape, the A39 divides the cluster of cottages and the church from the wider parish of farms and open ground. The road brings many people through, but it can obscure the older geography: a community spread across the land rather than concentrated around a village street.

A hilltop with a longer history

The high ground above Countisbury has long offered both a place of refuge and a vantage point. The Iron Age promontory fort at Wind Hill, often called Countisbury Castle, lies nearby. Local tradition associates the area with the Battle of Cynwit in 878, when a Saxon force led by Odda defeated Viking forces associated with Ubba. The precise location and details of the battle remain matters of historical interpretation, but the setting makes clear why this headland would have been strategically important.

The name Countisbury is often interpreted as meaning something like "camp on the headland". What is clear is that this is high ground with commanding views over the coast and the routes inland. The remains of the fort, the old tracks and the later road all speak to the importance of movement and visibility in this landscape.

The medieval history is another reminder that Countisbury was not an isolated backwater. The manor belonged to Ailmar in the time of Edward the Confessor, before passing into Norman hands after the Conquest. Around 1200, Henry III granted the manor, along with Lynton, to Ford Abbey. Presland also records the abbey's historic fishing rights along this stretch of coast. The land supported livelihoods, provided resources and connected communities, even where travel was difficult.

From the high ground, the coastline and the approaches inland are laid out before you. The nearby Iron Age promontory fort at Wind Hill, often called Countisbury Castle, is a reminder that this commanding position had significance long before the coaching road. The traditional association with the Battle of Cynwit in 878 may be uncertain in its precise details, but the landscape makes the strategic logic easy to understand: from here, you can see who is approaching, and the steep slopes and exposed headland offer natural advantages to those holding the high ground.

It is worth imagining the height in human terms. Lynmouth lies at sea level; Countisbury stands around a thousand feet above it. The road connecting them gains or loses that height in less than two miles, with stretches as steep as one in four. In Snowdonia, a climb of a thousand feet would be a meaningful part of a mountain day. Here, it is concentrated into a short, uncompromising stretch of road, with the sea and the steep coastal slopes alongside. The modern driver experiences it as a test of nerve; earlier travellers had to contend with the gradient, the weather, the animals pulling their loads and the condition of the road itself.

Watching the sea

The high ground also gives a clear view over the Bristol Channel, one of the reasons the coast has long demanded attention. From Butter Hill, a former maritime lookout could be used to observe shipping. Today, the communications mast is a more obvious modern landmark, but the principle is much the same: from here, you can see a long way.

Foreland Point Lighthouse, first lit in 1900, was built to help vessels navigate this exposed stretch of the Channel. The headland, offshore hazards and powerful waters made the coast a place of risk as well as beauty. The lighthouse is not on the main route of this walk, but its presence is part of the wider story of the landscape you are crossing.

And then there is the lifeboat journey of 1899. The *Louisa* was hauled overland from Lynmouth towards Porlock Weir during the storm, a remarkable feat involving a large number of people and horses. The story gives the steepness of Countisbury Hill a different significance. It is one thing to descend it by car; quite another to imagine hauling a heavy lifeboat up from Lynmouth and onward across the moor in darkness and bad weather.

The estate beyond the woods

The wooded slopes along the coast are not simply a natural continuation of the moor. Much of the landscape around Glenthorne was shaped by the historic estate associated with Rev Walter Stevenson Halliday, who acquired land in Countisbury from 1829 onwards and became the lord of the manor. Glenthorne House was built in 1829–30, and Halliday's influence extended across the woods and cliffs along this part of the coast. The Blue Ball itself appears on the 1841 tithe map as a property owned by Halliday.

The estate's legacy is visible in the managed woodland and the paths that now allow walkers to pass through it. Glenthorne House is some distance to the east, beyond the route of this circular walk, but it belongs to the same landscape. It is a striking reminder that this apparently remote coast has also been shaped by wealth, landownership and the deliberate creation of a designed landscape.

There is a poignant contrast here with St John the Evangelist Church at Countisbury. The church has a history of support and investment, including work in the nineteenth century associated with the local estate. When I visited, though, I left feeling rather sad. Many of the churches I have visited this year have felt uplifting because of the evidence of people still caring for them, maintaining them and organising their lives around them. Countisbury's church felt as though it needed a congregation, and investment simply to prevent further decay.

Perhaps that is part of the story of the place. A church that once served a more substantial rural community now sits beside a road carrying visitors to the coast, while the farms and cottages are scattered across the parish. The building remains, but the life that once gathered around it is less visible.

The landscape we came to see

Countisbury has been many things: a working rural parish, a route across difficult country, a coaching stop, a lookout over the sea and now a place to pause on the way to Exmoor's coast. Its farms, church, fort, inn, lighthouse and old tracks each tell a different part of that story.

John Presland's writing is valuable because he looked closely at the details: the weather on the hill, the dust on the road, the farms tucked into hollows, the way the landscape could change character in a few steps. His book was published in 1917, but it encourages us to look beyond the obvious view and imagine how people once experienced this place.

Today, we arrive for a walk, a meal, a pint, or a view across Lynmouth Bay. The road makes that visit possible, but it can also tempt us to treat Countisbury as a passing moment between Porlock and Lynmouth. Stop here, and the place opens up. Stay at the Blue Ball Inn, or one of the National Trust-owned cottage, or the old Lighthouse Keepers' Cottage.

For centuries, people came through Countisbury because they had to. Today, we come because we can.

Don't walk past, go in....before it's not there anymore.

More pubs worth the walk across England and Wales, with a GPX download and OS Maps link for every route, at

pubsworththewalk.co.uk