



Trail

Sea feud cocktail

Explore how a scenic site
helps and hinders Padstow

Time: 90 mins

Distance: 1¼ miles

Landscape: coastal

Tucked halfway along Cornwall's north coast, Padstow is a small town with a big reputation. Crowds flock here to enjoy the natural scenery and sample the local seafood.

Thanks largely to TV chef Rick Stein, Padstow has gained a reputation for fine dining. But there's much more to Padstow than its crab pasties. This historic working town has endured time in the doldrums and enjoyed days in the sun.

This trail explores how Padstow's fortunes are shaped by its landscape. Along the way we'll follow in a saint's footsteps, find a lost railway and discover how Padstow survived a mermaid's curse.

Location:

Padstow, Cornwall

Start:

Padstow Tourist Information Centre,
North Quay PL28 8AG

Finish:

Jubilee obelisk, Dennis Hill, PL28 8DR

Grid reference:

SW 91995 75510

Be prepared:

The route includes a shared cycle path and sections without pavements. The final stop is uphill at the top of a farm field.

Wear sensible shoes, watch for traffic and expect crowds in summer.

Directions



To begin, make your way to the Tourist Information Centre, the large red brick building by the harbour. It is opposite The Shipwrights pub at the end of the North Quay.



Route and stopping points



- 01 Padstow Tourist Information Centre, North Quay
- 02 North Quay, Padstow Harbour
- 03 The Old Custom House, South Quay
- 04 The Seafood Restaurant, Riverside
- 05 Camel Trail information board (SW 92180 74765)
- 06 Junction onto Dennis Lane (SW 91942 74486)
- 07 Jubilee obelisk, Dennis Hill

01 Padstow Tourist Information Centre, North Quay

We begin exploring Padstow at the place many visitors start - the town's Tourist Information Centre. This building is a replica of a 19th century fishing warehouse, hence its size.

It stands where the town's first stone harbour was built, almost five hundred years ago during the rule of King Henry VIII. The town itself is even older. Padstow was recorded in the 1086 Domesday Book, when it was valued at 10 shillings - that's 50p! There is evidence though that people had settled here before the Romans invaded Britain in AD 43.

The reason for Padstow's long history is its unique location. The north Cornish coast is a rugged landscape, where fierce sea tides pound steep black cliffs. Padstow is tucked in the west bank of the Camel Estuary, where the River Camel enters the Atlantic. This estuary is one of north Cornwall's few natural harbours. It shelters Padstow from coastal storms yet allows quick access to the sea.

We will find out more about the sea in a moment. For now, notice how Padstow's visitor information centre symbolises the town. Its size and origins are signs of Padstow's current popularity and its historic past. It's also the first example we'll see of how Padstow has adapted over the centuries to its changing fortunes.

Directions

With the Red Brick Building behind you, face the car park beside the harbour. Bear right towards an old pub across the road, The Shipwrights. Don't cross the road though - keep the harbour on your left and follow the road around it. Take care as there is no pavement for some stretches. Stop when the road bends to the left and look out over the harbour.

02 North Quay, Padstow Harbour

Stop here for a moment and take in the sights and sounds of Padstow's busy harbour. Today the bustle comes from visitors enjoying the shops, bars and restaurants. But this area was once a hive of different activity. By the 1500s Padstow had become a large port.

Padstow's location attracted boats from the Bristol Channel, Wales, Ireland, France and Scandinavia. Working boats filled the harbour and their cargoes were loaded and unloaded along the quaysides. At the busiest times so many were moored here we could have crossed the harbour by walking over their decks.

Cornish goods exported through Padstow included slate, tin, copper and fish. Imports meanwhile included coal, glass, timber, butter and linen.

These days, yachts and cruisers often outnumber working boats. The harbour itself has changed too. According to local legend, a mermaid lived in the River Camel until she was shot by a visiting fisherman. As the mermaid died, she put a curse on the town. The river filled with sand and the harbour shrank.

The blame really lies with the tides, which sweep sand into the Camel Estuary. The sand builds up into large ridges called 'bars'. There are three between Padstow harbour and the open sea, including the Doom Bar - named after the way it traps and wrecks ships.

These sandbars are visible at low tide, especially from the town war memorial or the last stop on our route, Dennis Hill. The expanses of sand almost look like lakes of custard poured into the river. By the 1530s there was so much sand in the river that Padstow harbour silted up and shrank. Look at a map of the town and we can sense its original size. The harbour was located in Middle Street, today's town centre.

Also look around the nearby streets. Most of the buildings are from the 18th and 19th centuries but the street layout is much older. One example is The Drang, named after a local term for a narrow passage. Such winding lanes show where buildings quickly sprang up to meet the retreating harbour.

Directions

Keep the harbour on your left and continue following the road. Stop when you are opposite the last building on the right, the Custom House Hotel.

03 The Old Custom House, South Quay

We are now on the opposite side of the harbour, a fitting place to look into the flipside of Padstow's maritime heritage. Despite the original harbour silting up, Padstow remained a busy port into the 19th century. The town's snug location and sea trade also encouraged illegal activities. Chief among them was smuggling.

As its name suggests, this hotel was the site of Padstow's customs office. Founded in the 1600s, this was where customs officers collected taxes on cargo imported through the harbour. Smuggling was a way to avoid paying these taxes and became widespread in British coastal towns.

As the rugged North Cornish coast had fewer safe harbours it was less thoroughly policed than the south coast. Smugglers took advantage of this and landed goods at secluded seasonal coves. Around Padstow, goods like tea and spirits arrived from the West Indies. During the 18th century an estimated 80% of the tea drunk in Britain was smuggled, while so much gin arrived illegally it was used for cleaning windows!

Smuggling declined after the Napoleonic Wars with France ended in 1815. The British victory made highly taxed goods, like alcohol and tobacco, cheaper and easier to trade, plus many of the returning soldiers were recruited as customs officers.

Local people in Padstow found another way to improve their fortunes. The harbour became a migration route. As Padstow faces the Atlantic, the town attracted boats from Canada and the Americas. For small fees some of these visiting ships took Cornish families back with them.

By 1857 around 6,200 people had migrated through Padstow to Canada. Some estimates suggest that around 20,000 Canadians have Cornish ancestors. Cornish surnames like Pascoe and Trevelyan are widespread across the Atlantic.

Other locals left for Australia. Around 3 per cent of Australia's population (over 768,000 people) have Cornish roots. Some were convicts, transported while Australia was a British penal colony. Many Cornish families though migrated for work. From the 1840s Cornwall's historic mining industry began to decline. Many skilled Cornish miners swapped digging local slate and tin for Australia's copper and gold.

Directions

With the harbour on your left, continue past the hotel. Carefully pass a car park entrance and continue along the pavement. Keep the car park on your left with a large metal warehouse beyond. Stop when a side road emerges from the right. You should be opposite The Seafood Restaurant, a coloured brick building with a glass front..

04 The Seafood Restaurant, Riverside

These days one of Padstow's visitor attractions is the range of places to eat. The Seafood Restaurant is the flagship business of celebrity chef Rick Stein. Since opening his first kitchen in Padstow in 1974, Stein has grown a catering empire here. Besides this restaurant, it includes St Petroc's Bistro, Stein's Fish & Chips and Rick Stein's Café.

Stein's interests in Padstow also include shops, a pub, a hostel, a cookery school and several holiday cottages. These businesses boost the local economy by creating hundreds of jobs and encouraging thousands of visitors. Stein's links with Padstow also provide national publicity and presence.

But not everyone is happy about these developments. The poet John Betjeman lived in nearby Trebetherick and often wrote about the Camel Estuary coast. For some people, Padstow's upmarket restaurants feel miles away from Betjeman's poems of seaside picnics with "*sand in the sandwiches, wasps in the tea*". Some cynically call the town 'Padstein' and cite problems with crowds, traffic, noise and disruption.

Padstow's fame makes it a desirable place to live. Ironically this makes living here more difficult. Demand for housing outstrips supply. Locals have to compete with holiday rentals and second home buyers. As a result, property prices have rocketed here in the last 20 years. Today's average house costs over £380,000, making Padstow one of Britain's most expensive coastal towns.

Buyers who can afford Padstow prices tend to be older and are often retired. This in turn affects the number and types of jobs available. Fewer permanent jobs and higher prices mean Padstow's population has shrunk like the harbour.

What do you think of Padstow's situation? Overall does it benefit or suffer? Whatever your view, this town highlights complex issues - locally and nationally.

Directions

Continue along the footpath and pass the warehouse. Here the footpath stops at the entrance to another car park. Carefully go into the car park and bear left, with Stein's Deli and Stein's Fish & Chips on your right. Take care for traffic all the time and use pedestrian crossings marked out on the ground.

Pass the National Lobster Hatchery on the left and go past the warehouses. Continue ahead onto a tarmac path with the River Camel on your left. From this point on take care for cyclists. When you pass the buildings, the path narrows by a stone wall with a post set in the ground. Go through the gap then stop at the information board to the left of the path.

05 Camel Trail information board (SW 92180 74765)

We have now joined part of the Camel Trail. This 17-mile path runs through Cornwall from Padstow to Wenford Bridge. It is especially popular with cyclists. Look at it with the river on our left and we can work out why.

The route is flat and gentle with few sharp turns. And can you spot a large metal bridge in the distance? These features reveal the Camel Trail's origins. Instead of whooshing wheels and ringing bells, this route was home to thundering steam trains. The Camel Trail follows two former railway lines.

Padstow's first railway was built in 1831 to take sand from the River Camel to surrounding farms. Dredging the river helped ships navigate the harbour, while the salty sand made useful fertiliser. In 1899 the line was extended to take Cornish china clay and fish to London. The route also made Padstow a popular seaside resort. Generations of holidaymakers arrived here on 'Atlantic Coast Express' trains. Then in 1967 it was all change. Padstow station closed.

Britain's early railways were built by competing companies. After the Second World War the government took them all over, which proved very expensive. So in the 1960s they asked civil servant Dr Richard Beeching to reduce the railway network. The controversial 'Beeching axe' shut 2,000 stations and removed 5,000 miles of track.

Though meant to save money, closing Padstow's station had other costs. Padstow was cut off from its surroundings and trade declined. Visitors had to reach the town by road, which increased traffic and pollution.

The Camel Trail was created in the 1980s after the railway line was dismantled. Now around 400,000 people use the trail every year. Alongside health and environment benefits, it makes around £3million for the Cornish economy. Padstow profits as many visitors use it to start or complete holidays. The Camel Trail also creates local jobs; notice how many bicycle hire and equipment shops we passed.

This pleasant path is another example of how Padstow has adapted to its changing fortunes. Behind the scenery though is a controversial story. Again it's worth asking, has Padstow gained or lost overall? Either way, the Camel Trail is only the latest long-distance route here...

Directions

Continue along the Camel Trail, keeping the river on your left. Look and listen for cyclists you go. The path gently curves to the right past a footpath on the right signposted 'Newquay'. Carry on to until you reach another footpath on the right. The path is opposite a bench to the left of the Camel Trail (Grid reference: SW 92110 74469).

Take this path through the trees down a short flight of stone steps. At the bottom turn right. A small lake will be on your left. Keep the lake on your left and follow the path around it. The trees thin out and you will reach a T-junction with a house opposite to the right. Watch for traffic and look to the right along the tree-lined road.

06 Junction onto Dennis Lane (SW 91942 74486)

This narrow lane might not look like much but it's a very important chapter in Padstow's story. This is Dennis Lane, part of a road that goes all the way to Padstow harbour. The route is one of the oldest in Padstow - and perhaps the whole country.

Dennis Lane is part of the Saint's Way, another long-distance path. The Saint's Way spans Cornwall for 30 miles. From Padstow it goes to Fowey on Cornwall's south coast. The path's name and its route are clues to its use. From the 5th to 15th centuries, pilgrims used the Saint's Way to travel between Ireland, Wales and northern France.

Travelling between Ireland and France potentially meant a sea journey around the tip of the Cornish coast. This was time-consuming and dangerous; strong currents, especially around Land's End, could dash ships onto underwater rocks. So instead many pilgrims sailed to Padstow then continued over land to Fowey - or vice versa. The Saint's Way was basically a shortcut.

One person said to have used it was St Petroc, a 6th century prince. He landed in Padstow, probably from Wales, around 518 AD and founded a monastery. Padstow's name derives from 'Petrocs-Stow', the Cornish for 'Petroc's meeting place'. Legends say St Petroc performed many miracles in Padstow and then retired to nearby Bodmin, where he apparently lived to 100 years old.

There are many hints that this road predates St Petroc. Some suggest the route dates from the Iron Age (800 BC to 100 AD) and that drovers used it to move livestock around the country. Before then, the Romans used it as dropped Roman coins have been found along its length. The Saint's Way is an important reminder that centuries before it was a holiday haven, Padstow was a working town.

Directions

From the T-junction turn left. Continue uphill along the road; take care as there is no pavement. After a short distance you will reach two tracks on the left. Take the second one opposite a Saint's Way signpost. Follow this path a short distance to a waymark in front of a gate. Turn right at the waymark and follow the path uphill to another waymarked gate.

Go through the gate and into a field. Keep the hedge on your right and continue uphill to an old iron gate on the left of the hilltop. Go through this gate and turn left. Follow the paths to reach a stone obelisk.

07 Jubilee obelisk, Dennis Hill

Did you spot this obelisk on the horizon earlier? Located on top of Dennis Hill, it's visible for miles around. Dennis Hill is named from 'dinas', the Cornish word for fort, because its shape looks a bit like an Iron Age hillfort. In fact the hill is a natural landscape feature.

Notice how quiet this spot is compared with Padstow harbour. From up here we can enjoy a fantastic view over the town and the Camel Estuary. With the obelisk behind you, take in the scene.

The River Camel threads towards the sea and depending on the tides you might spot boats bobbing in the water or the yellow expanses of the sandbars. Padstow itself nestles on the left of the river. Look carefully and we can trace our route. Can you see the Red Brick Building in the harbour, cyclists on the Camel Trail and the Saint's Way threading between the houses?

From up here the town itself looks rather small beside the river. Over the centuries Padstow may have adapted but it hasn't greatly expanded. Its location on a steep river bank limits how much can be built. Padstow's changing fortunes - the shrinking harbour, mass migration and the loss of the railway - have also kept the town from growing. Instead Padstow has evolved and made the most of a limited amount of space.

Throughout this trail we have explored how Padstow's location has created benefits and problems. We have also explored how the town's physical features have shaped its economy and culture. Though this last stop offers a spectacular view, hopefully this trail has shown there is more to Padstow than pretty scenery. Padstow has a proud working heritage and is a town that has reinvented itself to survive.

Directions

When you are ready, retrace your way back though the field. Keep close to the hedge and make sure you close all gates behind you. Follow the track downhill to the Saint's Way signpost. To return to Padstow harbour you can either retrace your way back along the Camel Trail or follow the Saint's Way along Dennis Lane.