



Royal  
Geographical  
Society  
with IBG

## From shipping to shopping

A self guided walk from Old Portsmouth to Southsea



Explore Britain's only city on an island  
Discover how the coastal position influenced the town  
Find out why a naval base was established here  
See how the maritime heritage remains important today

[www.discoveringbritain.org](http://www.discoveringbritain.org)

the stories of our landscapes  
discovered through walks







## Contents

Introduction	4
Route overview	5
Practical information	6
Detailed route maps	8
Commentary	11
Further information	41
Credits	42

© The Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers, London, 2013

Discovering Britain is a project of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

The digital and print maps used for Discovering Britain are licensed to the RGS-IBG from Ordnance Survey

---

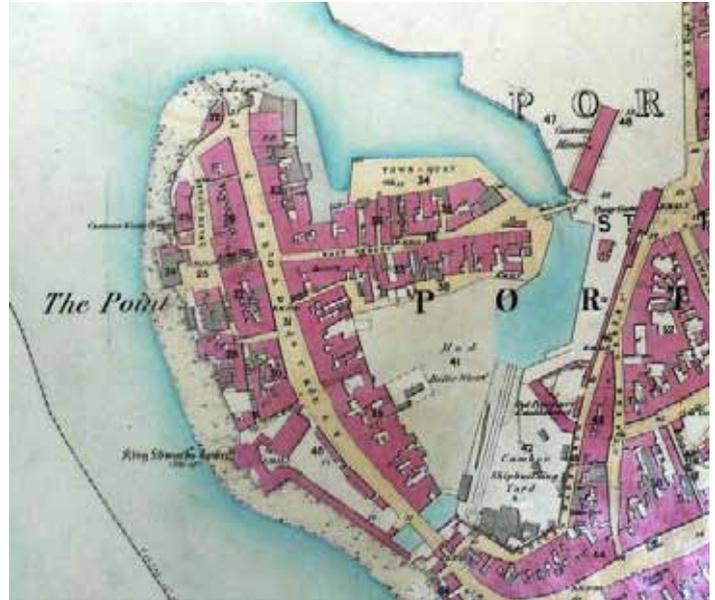
# From shipping to shopping

## Discover the rebirth of historic Old Portsmouth

For many people Portsmouth on England's south coast is a stopping off point on the way to other more glamorous places but it's a fascinating place in its own right and deserves a visit.

Portsmouth is the only UK city on an island, bounded by water on all sides.

Once a low-lying boggy marsh susceptible to flooding, the vast natural harbour attracted first the Romans, then the Royal Navy which set up their headquarters here.



Ordnance Survey map of Portsmouth Point (1858)  
Wikimedia Commons

This waterfront walk reveals how the city grew from humble beginnings to become one of the world's most important naval bases.



The Spinnaker Tower  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Find out why the dockyard, once said to be the largest industrial installation in the world, was transformed into a twenty-first century shopping centre.

Learn about the development of Portsmouth as a seaside resort in the Victorian era. See how WW2 bombing devastated the city.

Discover how a renewed respect for Portsmouth's heritage and history is reinventing its identity.

# Route overview



---

## Practical information

<b>Location</b>	Portsmouth, Hampshire, Southeast England
<b>Getting there</b>	<p><b>Train</b> - The nearest railway station is Portsmouth Harbour (not to be confused with Portsmouth and Southsea station). Half hourly services run to London, Southampton and Brighton. Hourly services to Bristol and Cardiff.</p> <p><b>Car</b> - Easily accessible from the A3 and M27. Many car parks including Gunwharf Quays and Portsmouth Point (charges apply).</p> <p><b>Bus</b> - Served by a variety of local and long distance services. The bus station is located at The Hard next to Portsmouth Harbour railway station.</p> <p><b>Bicycle</b> - National Cycle Route 2 passes near the walk route. There is a bicycle rack at Portsmouth Harbour station.</p>
<b>Start point</b>	Portsmouth Harbour railway station, PO1 3PA
<b>Finish point</b>	South Parade Pier, Southsea PO4 0SW
<b>Onward journey</b>	The walk is linear so you are advised to return to the start of the walk by bus. Please refer to Directions 18 for details.
<b>Distance</b>	4 miles
<b>Need a shorter route?</b>	Option for a shorter walk by stopping within view of South Parade Pier.
<b>Level</b>	Gentle - A flat route around the old town and waterfront.

---

### Conditions

The route mainly follows the Millennium Promenade trail which is well surfaced.

### Suitable for

**Families** - Plenty along the seafront to interest children. Take care crossing roads especially near the car ferry terminal and on the old walls (Stops 11 and 12).

**Wheelchairs and pushchairs** - A mostly flat route with diversions available to avoid steps.

### Refreshments

Plenty of places to stop for drinks and food in the town and along the seafront. The Spinnaker Cafe and The Bridge Hotel both in Old Portsmouth are recommended.

### Facilities

Public toilets available at the bus station, Gunwharf Quays (Stop 5), Point Battery (Stop 11), Clarence Pier (Stop 15) and D-day car park.

Baby changing facilities at Point Battery, D-day car park and Clarence Pier.

### Places to visit

**Portsmouth Historic Dockyard** is open from 10am most days of the year. Access to the site is free though charges apply for the museums and to board the ships. Attractions include **HMS Victory**, **HMS Warrior** and the **National Museum of the Royal Navy**.

**The D-Day Museum** near Southsea Castle (Stop 17) is open from 10am most days of the year. Entry charges apply.

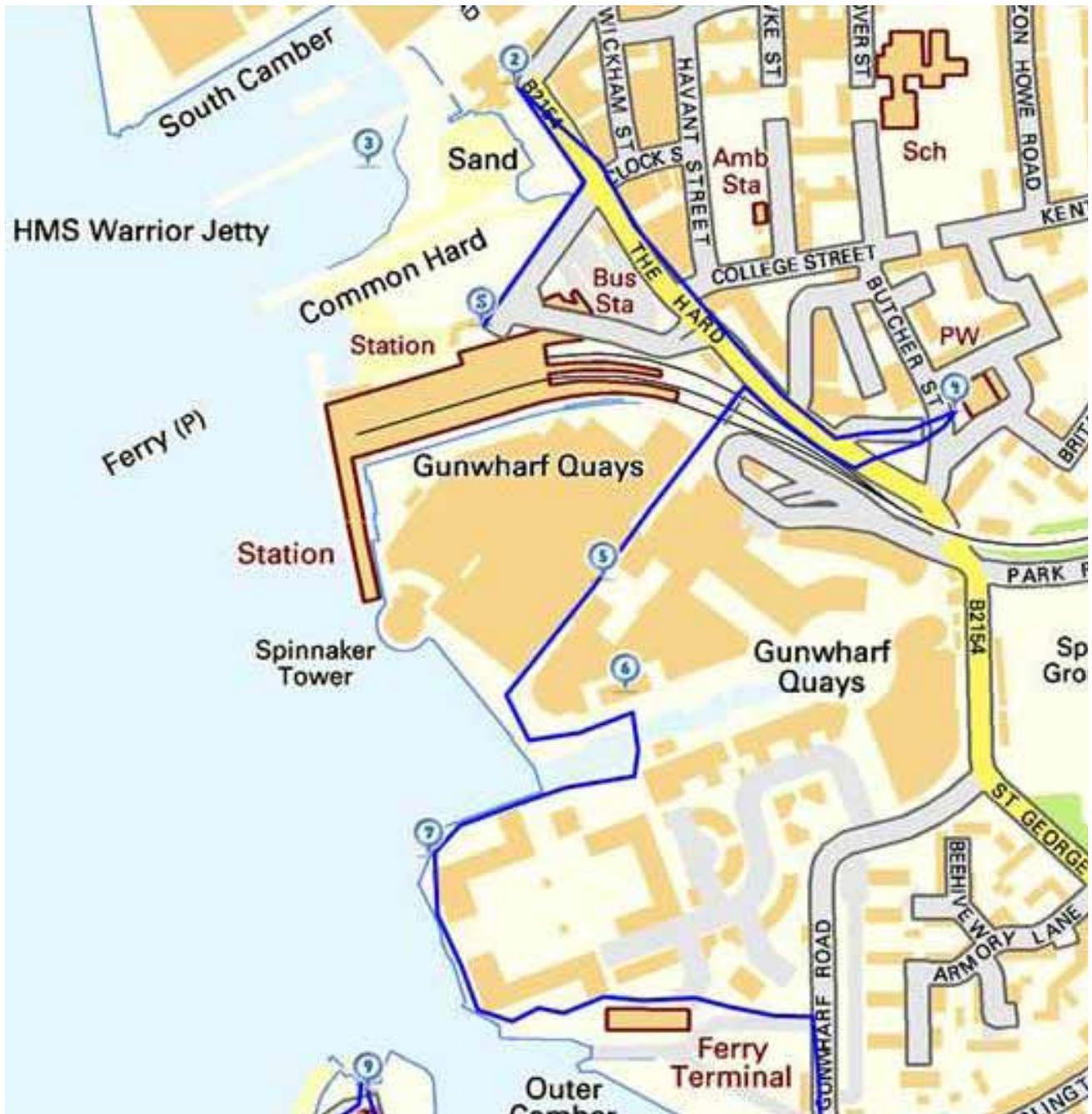
### Tourist information

Portsmouth Visitor Information Service is inside the D-Day Museum, Clarence Esplanade, Southsea PO5 3NT

There is a visitor information desk inside **Portsmouth City Museum** (open Tues - Sun) on Museum Road, PO1 2LJ.

---

## First part of route



### Stopping points

1. Portsmouth Harbour railway station
2. Victory Gate, Portsmouth Dockyard
3. HMS Warrior
4. St George's Square
5. Gunwharf Quays shopping centre
6. The Old Customs House pub
7. View over Portsmouth Harbour



## Second part of route



### Stopping points

8. The Camber
9. Spice Island Inn, The Point
10. Quebec House, Bath Square
11. The Round Tower, Capstan Square
12. The Square Tower
13. Royal Garrison Church, Governor's Green
14. King's Bastion

## Third part of route



### Stopping points

15. Clarence Pier
16. Royal Navy War Memorial, Southsea Common
17. Southsea Castle
18. South Parade Pier

# 1. Welcome to Old Portsmouth

## Portsmouth Harbour railway station

### Directions 1a

To begin the walk make your way to Portsmouth Harbour railway station. Find the bicycle rack beside the station steps. Stop in the area between the bicycle racks and a snack bar for a good view out across the water.

Welcome to this Discovering Britain walk in Portsmouth. Most people probably know Portsmouth for two things: a place to catch a ferry to the Isle of Wight or France and home to Nelson's famous warship, HMS Victory. But there's much more to discover in this fascinating city.

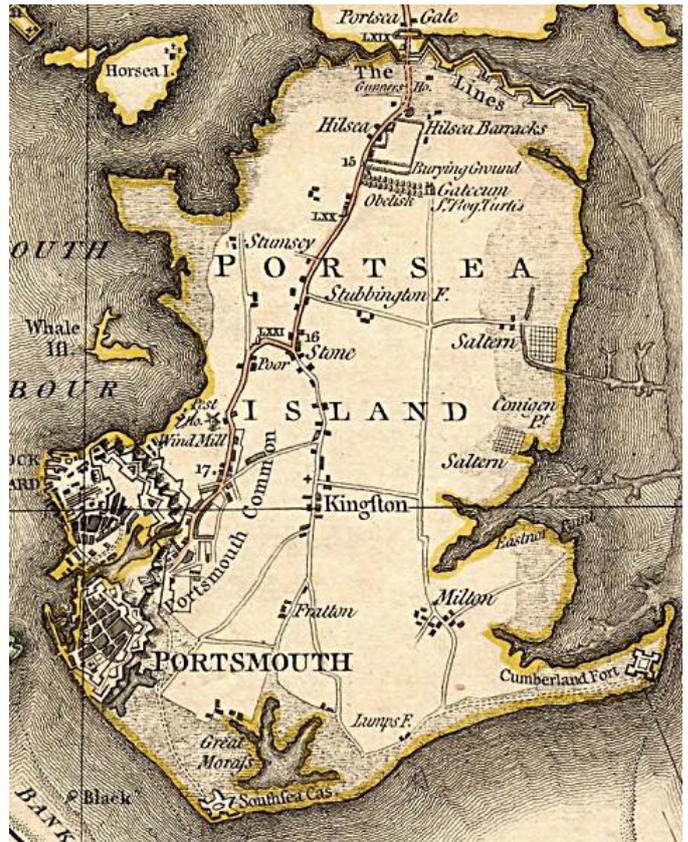
You may not realise but you're standing on an island. To the north, south, east and west there's water all around you. In fact Portsmouth is the only city in the UK situated on an island. It's a bit like Manhattan but without the skyscrapers!

On this walk we will discover how Portsmouth has developed over the centuries from a geographical perspective.

We will see how the natural assets of this location have been used through the ages to form a major naval base making the most of the magnificent and easily-defended harbour.

We will also find out how the position of Portsmouth, less than a hundred miles away from Britain's historic enemy, France, has led to successions of defensive structures being built to defend our coast.

Closer to our lifetimes we will discover how the city was affected by German bombers who wreaked havoc during the Second World War especially in 'Old Portsmouth' where the walk begins. We will see the effects of this wartime devastation and find out how development and town planning in the post-war years, both good and bad, has left its mark on the city. We will also consider the regeneration of Portsmouth and how, in more recent times, this island city has used its seaside location and unique maritime heritage to become a major base for tourism.



1791 map showing Portsea Island bounded by water  
© Portsmouth University Geography Department

---

This walk was created by Martin Haslett, a town planner from Leamington Spa. Although he lives 100 miles away in the Midlands he has a special interest in Portsmouth's history and its future.

**Martin:** Though I was not born here, generations of my ancestors were Portsmouth people and I've had a special fondness for it since coming here regularly as a child. I have seen the enormous changes to the local economy over the decades and have been pleased to see, as a town planner, that so much more care is now taken of the historic areas than was the case when post-war rebuilding was taking place in the 1950s and 60s. I remember my family regretting how the city lost so much of its character as council flats were hurriedly erected to house people made homeless by bombing. They would be pleased to see Old Portsmouth today, reborn as an area with a very special historic character which is recognised and respected.

**Much of the route follows the Portsmouth Millennium Trail which is marked by a chain pattern in the pavement and large white information boards. Use the chain to help you navigate the walk route.**



#### **Directions 1b**

From the railway station follow the road ahead alongside the wire fence. Turn left towards the ship in the water and continue up to the imposing buildings of the Historic Dockyard. Stop at the dockyard gates.

---

## 2. Natural harbour

### Victory Gate, Portsmouth Dockyard

Here at the Dockyard entrance we stand at the focal point of Portsmouth – its vast natural harbour. It's difficult to appreciate from here on the ground but if you look at a map you'll see Portsmouth harbour is huge. It stretches nearly 5 miles inland and provides a deep and wide anchorage for ships.

It was for these geographical reasons that the Romans first came to this part of England and built a fortress at Portchester on the north shore of the harbour.

Portsmouth itself was founded about 800 years later in 1180 when a wealthy merchant, Jean De Gisors, was looking for a safe anchorage to keep his fleet of ships and a place from which to trade. In the southwest of the island was a small inlet from the sea called the Camber. It was a sheltered place for his ships and an ideal place to start a town. You'll see why later on the walk.

Under instruction from King Richard I a dock was built in 1194 and in due course Portsmouth evolved and became the base of the English Navy.

Its strategic location on the South coast of England, protection by the natural defence of the Isle of Wight and the very narrow harbour entrance made it virtually impregnable to attack from the sea.

Despite this Portsmouth was a key target for attack from France particularly during the Hundred Years War fought between Britain and France between 1337 and 1453 for control of the French throne. These raids necessitated the construction of defensive earthworks and a basic rampart in the form of a mud wall and ditch was built around the town.

It was not until the fifteenth century that the defensive possibilities of the town's location were properly recognised and stone fortifications built which we'll see later. Eventually Portsmouth became a completely walled town.



Top: The Queen Anne coat of arms at Victory Gate  
Bottom: Historic Dockyard  
© Rory Walsh RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

---

During the reign of the Tudor kings and queens the fortifications were further improved and by the eighteenth century Portsmouth had become Britain's chief Naval base with facilities for shipbuilding, boat repair and maintenance.

Portsmouth's location just across the water from Britain's traditional enemy, France, had a lot to do with its growth as a naval base as did the plentiful supply of local Hampshire oak trees for building ships.

By the Victorian period Portsmouth had become pre-eminent as a Royal Navy town and the Dockyard was said to be the largest industrial installation in the world. By this time most of Portsmouth's working population was employed by the Navy or the Dockyard or in service industries supporting them, like the supply of food and, especially, drink! This over-reliance on one employer has led to serious problems in the local economy, an issue we'll hear more about later.



A 1900 postcard of HMS Victory in Portsmouth  
Wikimedia Commons

While you are here take some time to explore the area. Although there is a charge for entry to the individual attractions you can walk freely into the Dockyard and see a lot from the outside, especially Nelson's HMS Victory in dry dock.

### Directions 2

When you are ready return to the Dockyard gates and go a few steps along the promenade back towards the station. Stop by the bronze statue of a man and a young girl commemorating the Portsmouth 'mudlarks'.

---

### 3. Donkey rides and deckchairs

#### HMS Warrior, The Hard

We haven't got very far on our stroll round Portsmouth and we're stopping again. This impressive ship is HMS Warrior, the first iron-hulled, armour-plated vessel built for the Royal Navy. It was constructed in 1860 in London by the Thames Ironworks and Shipbuilding Company.

HMS Warrior was the first 'modern' warship and had many advantages over the traditional wooden warships, not least the strength of its iron cladding, a powerful engine for speed and massive fire-power. Most importantly it was over one-and-a-half times as big as its French rival!

We should also point out the name of this place: The Hard. The Hard was a paved or hardened area or slope which allowed boats to be hauled out of the water.

It's here that we also start to see the rise of a second industry which has become important to Portsmouth's identity and economy: tourism. In the Victorian era the coming of the railways made travel cheaper and easier and as a result seaside towns became popular destinations. A whole new suburb - Southsea - grew up alongside Portsmouth to cater for a new breed of holidaymakers.



Reinventing Portsmouth as a tourist destination  
© National Railway Museum / Science & Society  
Picture Library

If you look towards the railway station beyond the HMS Warrior you will see that the platforms have been built out over the sea. These were designed to enable passengers travelling to the Isle of Wight (just a stone's throw across the water) to transfer easily from train to ferry.

More recently the construction of the bus terminus on reclaimed land next to the railway station has made this an even more efficient transport interchange.

---

Portsmouth had capitalised on its role as a Navy town for centuries so that in post-war years, with the decline in the size of the Navy, dependence on one employer became a serious problem for the city. Great efforts were made in the mid-twentieth century to attract different forms of employment and with some success. For example, the UK headquarters of IBM were built on reclaimed land at the north end of the harbour and tourism has remained an important employer.

Now it's less of the 'bucket and spade' tourism of earlier years and more heritage tourism based on Portsmouth's maritime history and particularly its collection of historic ships: the Mary Rose, HMS Victory and HMS Warrior. Around half a million visitors a year come to the Historic Dockyard and crucially they spend money in other parts of the city while they are here.



The Historic Dockyard has encouraged heritage tourism in the city  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

### Directions 3

Continue ahead on the main road (The Hard). Pass the bus terminal on your right taking care when crossing the entrance and exit ways. Pass several railway arches on the right then cross the road to a post box. Continue along Ordnance Road towards the large church in St George's Square.

---

## 4. From Georgian splendour to 1960s tower block

### 90 St George's Square

Although we've only walked a short distance this church and the surrounding square are actually in a different suburb of Portsmouth called Portsea.

The enormous demand for men to serve in the Royal Navy and work in the Dockyard led to substantial extensions to the town in Georgian and Victorian times.

A whole new suburb, Portsea, was built to house the workers on what had once been farmland. Much of this consisted of very poor housing, now long gone, but there were also 'respectable' terraces and squares like St George's.

You will need to use quite a bit of imagination because this area was ravaged by bombing in the Second World War. Not much of it remains but you can still see the original church in the centre of the square and a few of the Georgian houses.



The mixture of building designs in St George's Square  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Portsmouth, like most port cities in Britain, was very heavily bombed with the Royal Navy Dockyard and its facilities being the main target. 930 people were killed and over 1,200 seriously injured. Over 6,000 homes were destroyed, another 6,000 seriously damaged and nearly 70,000 slightly damaged. In all over half the city's houses were damaged to some extent, a much higher proportion than most other cities. Bear this damage in mind as we walk around Portsmouth today.

St George's Square is a good example of this. Facing the church, look to the left and you'll see a row of classical Georgian houses oddly juxtaposed with a 20 storey tower block. You'll see many tower blocks of flats like this one dotted around the city, built of concrete and brick, in the modern style of the post-war age. They were hastily erected in the 1950s, often out of scale with the surrounding townscape and totally out of character in terms of design.

---

Not only have opinions about architecture changed since these were built but you also have to remember that there wasn't time or money to think about the effect the hurriedly-built council houses and flats were having on the character of the city – people were homeless after the bombing.

Fortunately, much of the development in the later decades of the twentieth century has been rather better and the historic character of Old Portsmouth is now respected. We shall see something of this at the next stop.

Before you leave the square you might like to look at the heritage interpretation boards and the memorial to the great Victorian engineer, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, who was born in Portsea.



Memorial to Brunel, born in Portsea  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

#### **Directions 4**

With the monument and boards commemorating Brunel behind you, cross back over the road. Turn right then go into the railway arch signposted Gunwharf Quays. Go through the tunnel and into the arcade of shops. Stop when you reach a plaza area on the left with tables and chairs.

---

## 5. Torpedoes and trainers

### Gunwharf Quays shopping centre

Standing here amongst the big brand shops and restaurants of this modern, twenty-first century shopping centre, Portsmouth's past seems very far away indeed.

Before the eighteenth century the land on which you're standing didn't exist. Three hundred years ago you might be under water! Almost all of the area now known as Gunwharf was mud flats only exposed at low tide. It wasn't until the first decade of the eighteenth century that some 60,000 square yards of mud bank were surrounded by a stone wall and filled in with earth, reclaiming this land from the sea.



Gunwharf Quays was once part of the naval dockyard  
© Martin Haslett RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

It's the name of this shopping complex - Gunwharf Quays - that gives us a clue to its history. It was actually part of the Dockyard. When wooden ships were dry-docked for repair or refit, their guns would first be off-loaded at the Gunwharf (otherwise the weight of ordnance – guns, cannonballs, powder etc – would rest on the ship's keel and, without the support of water surrounding the hull, would damage the ship). Later Gunwharf became home to HMS Vernon, the Navy's torpedo training school.

Today we are here to look at the modern development of the site and how it has incorporated some of the original buildings of the HMS Vernon shore establishment. When it closed in 1986 the decision was taken to retain the best of the naval buildings and to develop the area as a shopping and leisure centre.

It's important to note how those two words are often found together. Shopping is now seen as one of the UK's principal leisure activities and here the combination of these two uses keeps the area busy throughout the day and night. It doesn't suffer from the rather closed and empty appearance that you often find in older shopping centres.

---

In the case of this new development, 'leisure' takes on a whole new meaning. Gunwharf Quays contains not only shops, bars and restaurants but also a cinema, bowling complex, art gallery, casino, nightclub, a hotel and marina as well as over 300 new apartments and office spaces. In this way the redevelopment of redundant Ministry of Defence land has revitalised this part of the city and helped to make it a destination for a wide range of activities and further helped to broaden the city's economy.



Gunwharf Quays as seen from the Spinnaker Tower indicates how large the dockyard used to be  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

### **Directions 5**

Continue through the shopping centre until you reach the waterfront. From here there is a good view across the water to Gosport and you may see boats and ferries plying the harbour waters. Turn left and follow the path round the corner until you reach The Old Customs House pub.

---

## 6. Shopping for history

### The Old Customs House pub, canal-side

Away from the shops we can now see why this site was chosen for the Dockyard. The canal here was a natural sea creek which once led to a large lake known as Mill Dam which was used in medieval times for ship repairs.

If you take a little time to wander round the canal side you'll see many reminders of the area's maritime past from cannons to mine casings, ships' figureheads to torpedoes. There has been a real attempt to integrate the maritime history and heritage into the twenty-first century design here.

See if you can spot how old buildings fronting the canal have been incorporated into the new complex. The red brick Old Customs House pub and the Loch Fyne restaurant opposite were once part of the HMS Vernon torpedo school.



The Customs House pub then...  
© MCDOA



and now...  
© Martin Haslett RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

#### Directions 6

With the Old Customs House Pub behind you, cross over the canal via one of the bridges. Turn right and pass the ship's figurehead towards the waterfront. With the modern apartments behind you stop here on a promontory where there's a good view of the extent of the harbour.

---

## 7. A drowned valley

### Gunwharf apartments with view over the Harbour

With your back to the new apartments look out over Portsmouth's vast harbour. This is a good point to get a sense of the geography here.

If you imagine the harbour as the shape of a funnel, the narrow entrance to your left is the neck and if you look right you can make out the wide, roughly triangular shape of its body.

Geographically speaking, Portsmouth Harbour is what's known as a 'ria' or drowned river valley.



An aerial view of Portsmouth Harbour taken from 2,000 feet showing Gunwharf Quays at the neck of a funnel-shaped drowned valley  
Wikimedia Commons courtesy of the UK Government

This was once a valley with a small stream that flowed from Portsdown Hill (the elevated ridge you can see off in the distance to your right) into the river Solent (the body of water separating the mainland from the Isle of Wight). This stream created a small river valley, but when sea levels rose at the end of the last Ice Age the river valley was submerged or 'drowned'. The result of this geographical process is often a very large estuary at the mouth of a relatively small river as we see.

#### Directions 7

Continue on the riverside path (following the Millennium Trail chain) around the back of the new apartments. The path goes slightly downhill then through a gap in the wall to emerge at the marshalling area for cars to the Isle of Wight ferries. Follow the brick wall on the left to emerge at the main road. Turn right and walk past the ferry terminal. Take great care for traffic especially if a ferry is loading or unloading.

Follow the road that veers to the right, White Hart Road. Pass the fish market and turn right into Feltham Row. Follow the waterside walk until you reach a white clapboard house at the end of the path.

---

## 8. Original settlement

### The Camber



Fishing nets and ferries - The Camber is Portsmouth's original harbour  
Martin Haslett © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

It was this small inlet protected from the sea that was first chosen by Jean de Gisors in the twelfth century as a base to anchor his shipping fleet. As the name Camber suggests the land arches inward here creating a natural harbour and protection from rough weather. Portsmouth grew up around this harbour and fishing, trade and shipbuilding became its main industries.

The old architecture and warehouses have been replaced by modern apartments and you're more likely to see sailing boats and other pleasure craft than working boats but there are still some fishing boats in the Camber and you might be lucky enough to see fish being landed.



The Camber appears in the Cowdray Engraving, a 1545 map of Old Portsmouth  
© Kester Keighley

---

While this is Portsmouth's historic commercial port just north of us is the modern working port where a large dock is used for importing fruit and vegetables. In fact seventy per cent of all bananas brought into the UK and all Moroccan citrus fruit arrive through Portsmouth.

We have just walked past the ferry terminal for the Isle of Wight but the international ferry port is located next to the commercial port north of the city and from there you can catch ferries over to France and Spain. Portsmouth is second only to Dover as a ferry port, handling over 2 million passengers and over 600 thousand vehicles a year. It's another important contributor to the diversification of the local economy.

Just before the end of the footpath you will see a row of houses including a white clapboard house jutting out over the water. Notice that several of these houses have direct access to the water. This would have been very useful for seagoing people when travelling by water was the most efficient means of getting around the city.



Left: A ferry leaves Portsmouth for France  
Right: Houses on the Camber have direct access to the water  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

### Directions 8

Walk to the end of the footpath and turn right along Broad Street. At the end of Broad Street look out for the metal tram tracks still visible in the cobbled road. A tram once brought passengers all the way to the tip of Old Portsmouth from where they could catch the ferry over to Gosport. Stop by the old ferry slipway next to the Spice Island Inn.

---

## 9. Old Spice

### Spice Island Inn, The Point

As we have already discovered Portsmouth began life as a small fishing and trading port and this area, known as The Point, was once an overcrowded warren of crooked buildings and alleyways. The rest of Portsea Island remained sparsely populated by farmers eking out a living on the low-lying marshland.

On old maps this area is sometimes called Portsmouth Point but it was also known by another more colourful – or should we say odorous – name, Spice Island. This was the main port for importing spices from the Caribbean.

Like all ports the area was awash with sailors on shore leave and The Point became notorious for its many pubs, brothels and lewd behaviour.

It was also notorious for press gangs. When the Navy had trouble recruiting enough men to work on their ships they used press gangs to seize able-bodied men and force them into service at sea. A famous etching by Thomas Rowlandson shows The Point as a bustling, bawdy place, a far cry from the pleasant, gentrified area we can see now. It was known as The Wapping of Portsmouth and there were said to be 53 pubs on The Point alone.



Thomas Rowlandson's *Portsmouth Point* (1791)  
Wikimedia Commons



Press gangs in a 1780 cartoon  
Wikimedia Commons

Although this was the centre of the old town, subsequently the main administrative, educational and shopping centres developed outside of the historic area leaving The Point as a backwater. This process was brought about in part by the very constricted site of the old town with the harbour on one side and the defensive ramparts on the other. The absence of the usual functions of a city centre has meant that Old Portsmouth has now become a pleasant residential area with a complete lack of shops, making it pretty well unique in Britain.

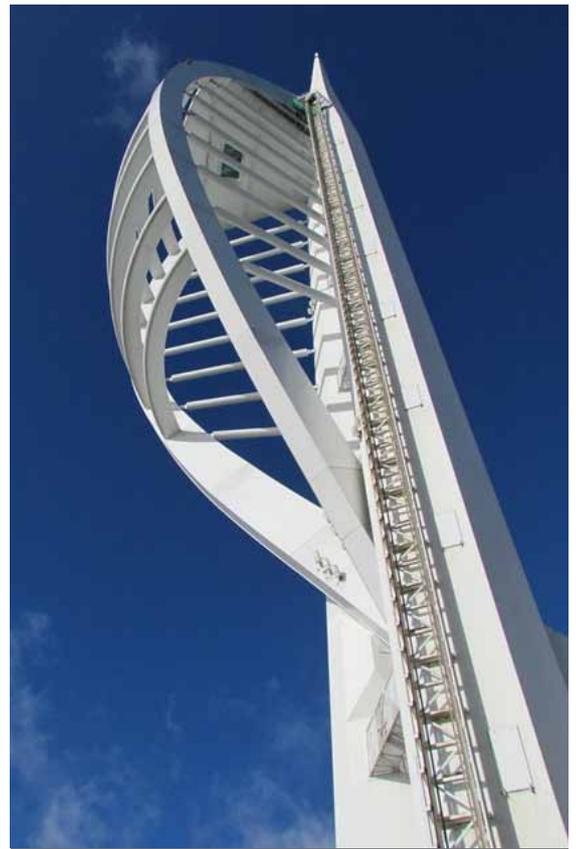
---

---

This is a good place to look over to the Spinnaker Tower. Built originally as a millennium project it forms part of the redevelopment of Gunwharf Quays.

You'll often find a 'landmark' building like this one included in big new developments. It's a chance for the architect to make a major architectural statement and to give a 'sense of place'. Here the height of the building contrasts with the wide open views of the harbour and its novel design is now often used as a symbol of Portsmouth.

The idea of the 'landmark' building has gained approval in recent years but it's not a new phenomenon. Many older planning schemes had a similar focus using perhaps a church or monument though they probably didn't use the term 'landmark' building then.



The Spinnaker Tower, the 'landmark building' of regenerated Portsmouth  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

---

### Directions 9

From the slipway turn to the left and walk around The Point towards The Still and West Country House pub. Walk along Bath Square to the left of the pub. Stop when you reach a white clapboard house on your right – Quebec House.

---

## 10. Man versus sea

### Quebec House, Bath Square

This white clapboard house, Quebec House, was built in 1754 as a sea-water bathing house. Sea bathing was thought to have curative or therapeutic value and became fashionable in the eighteenth century.

Step out onto the viewing platform (to the left) from where you have a good view across the water to Gosport on the other side.

Now look down and see if you can spot the large pieces of rock that have been deliberately placed here to defend the water's edge from the eroding effect of the tide. These rocks aren't native to the area; they have all been brought here from afar. Before the water's edge was strengthened with sea walls and imported rock, the natural coastline here was mud and marsh which made it very susceptible to flooding.

Bounded by intertidal harbours on either side, the Solent to the South and a narrow tidal strip called Ports Creek to the North, Portsea is technically an island. With not much of the island above sea level, large areas have always been at risk of sea flooding. Notice the floodgates installed here to keep out strong surges especially at very high tides and during storms.



Quebec House with floodgates outside  
Martin Haslett © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



Some of the rock armour used to strengthen the sea wall  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

#### Directions 10a

With Quebec House behind you, walk into Bath Square then turn right into West Street. Follow the cobbled road with a red brick wall on your right. Continue on West Street until you reach the corner with Broad Street. Stop outside what was once The Seagull pub and look across at the modern apartments slightly to the right.

---

Although modern these new houses made of brick, wood and glass are at least sympathetic to the character of this original part of the city. Built using natural materials like wood and subtly echoing the style of Georgian houses they have been designed to fit with the original townscape and shape of the original housing plots. Compare these to the tower blocks we saw earlier at St George's Square or to Spice Island House to get a sense of how planners can get it both right and wrong.



Left to right: Former Seagull pub, Spice Island House, and a sympathetic new development  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

### **Directions 10b**

Turn right into Broad Street and continue away from The Point. Turn right down Tower Alley and head for the round stone tower. Stop in the small square outside the Round Tower known as Capstan Square.

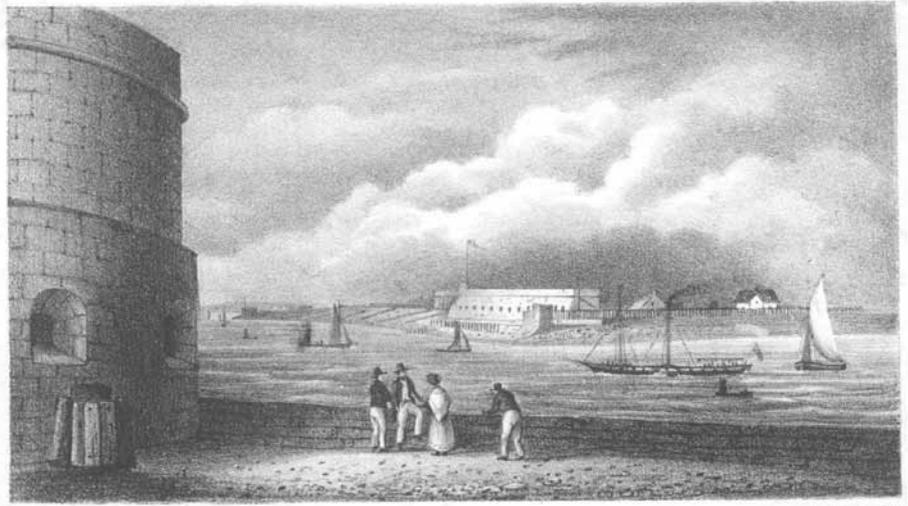
---

## 11. Defending the harbour

### The Round Tower, Capstan Square

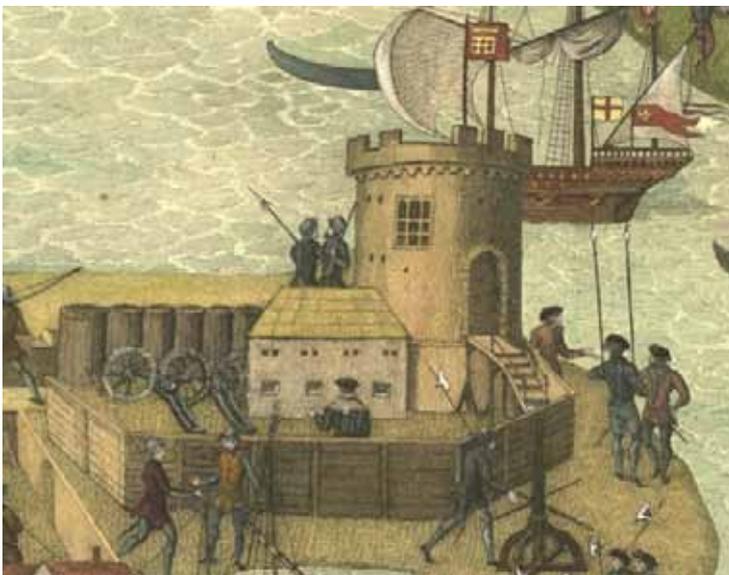
Here in Capstan Square we are standing at the narrowest part of the harbour entrance and have a clear view across the water to Gosport.

Look just to the right of the entranceway you came through and on the ground you can see the links of a chain. This is actually a replica of a chain that once stretched from here across the mouth of the harbour to a similar tower positioned at Gosport.



Capstan Square and the view towards Gosport (1850)  
© Portsmouth City Council

Each night the chain was drawn across the harbour entrance using a capstan (a type of winch) to prevent enemy ships from entering. The iron square you can see here with a round hole in the middle might well have been where the capstan was positioned.



The Round Tower in an engraving of 1545  
Notice the capstan at the bottom right used to pull  
a chain across the harbour entrance  
© Kester Keighley

The Round Tower is our first view of Portsmouth's fortifications. The old town was once completely enclosed by stone walls but now only a fraction of the original walls remain.

Portsmouth had rudimentary defences by the fourteenth century. Then in 1386 a Royal Commission was appointed to investigate its defences and recommended improvements in the form of earth ramparts and a moat, supplemented by wooded structures. War with France in 1415 led to building further defences, probably including the Round Tower; these were the town's first stone-built fortifications.

---

We can clearly see why this place was chosen for these new defences: this is the narrowest point of the harbour entrance with the shoreline at Gosport only 200 metres away. This enormous natural harbour can only be entered through these narrow straits making it relatively easy to defend.

Nature has made the entrance even easier to protect. The shape of the channels in the seabed and the nature of the tides would have made this port difficult to enter by an attacking ship whose captain was unfamiliar with the local topography.



The view from inside the Round Tower  
Martin Haslett © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



The stone defensive walls  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

### Directions 11

You now have a choice whether or not to walk along the top of the walls.

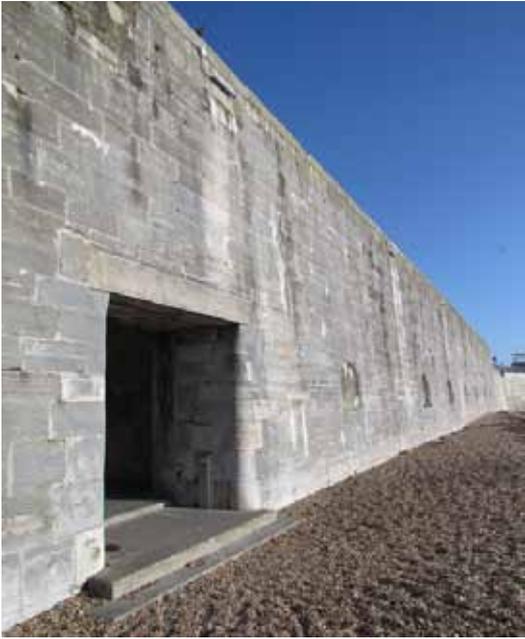
**To walk along the walls:** follow the signs to the Round Tower and walk at high level towards the Square Tower.

**To continue at street level:** go back to Broad Street and keep the tower on your right. Head towards a group of bronze statues then go through the gap in the wall behind them. Stop on the beach.

---

## 12. Squaring up

### The Square Tower



This section of the town's defensive wall was known as the Eighteen Gun Battery. It dates back to the seventeenth century but, like most of the other fortifications, was altered in Victorian times. Guns were positioned along here to protect the harbour entrance.

At ground level one of the gun emplacements has been converted into a 'sally port'. A sally port is an opening built into the wall to allow the soldiers to 'sally forth' from inside the city walls and fight the enemy outside on the beach.

The charming colour drawing below shows that there were once buildings either side which survived until the 1970s.

The 'Sally Port'

Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

#### Directions 12a

**If you are walking on top of the wall,** stop when you reach the square shaped tower.

**If you are on the beach,** go back through the sally port and turn right. Follow the wall up to the Square Tower.

The Square Tower probably dates back to 1494 but, like the Round Tower, it has been altered since in order to keep up to date with military technology and defensive design.

The tower's original stonework was replaced in 1827 so though the structure dates from the fifteenth century, the bricks that you see today are much newer than that.



Colour drawing of the Sally Port (c.1950)  
© History in Portsmouth

---

There is a gold bust of Charles I on the street side of the tower. This is actually a fibreglass replica. The original statue was set here in 1635 but was probably destroyed during the English Civil War when images of the monarchy were less than popular.

You'll notice that we have moved a little away from the narrowest point of the harbour entrance but this position would still have been invaluable in protecting the town. It gives wider views out to sea to see approaching boats and it is in an elevated position to mount guns.



Charles I bust on the Square Tower  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

### Directions 12b

**If you are on the wall** continue past the Square Tower. Take care at high tide as the water can splash over the wall. When you reach the noticeboard for the Saluting Platform turn left and descend the stone steps. Head towards the square and pass the statue of Admiral Nelson. Stop outside the ruined church on the green ahead.

**From the street** keep the walls on your right and pass the Square Tower. Look up for the bust of Charles I. Bear left towards the square with Nelson's statue in it and stop outside the ruined church on the green ahead.

---

## 13. A poignant memorial

### Royal Garrison Church, Governor's Green

Portsmouth was a garrisoned town which meant the town kept a permanent army presence and the Royal Garrison Church was the army's church.

This building has a long and chequered history in the defence of town and country. The church was founded in about 1212 by the Bishop of Winchester as part of a complex of buildings serving as a hostel for travellers and a hospital for the sick and elderly.

After the dissolution of the monasteries in 1540 it was used as an ammunition store before it became part of the Governor's House. Charles II married Catherine of Braganza here in 1662.



The church appears on the Cowdray map in its early form as a complex of hostel buildings  
© Kester Keighley



Royal Garrison Church  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

The church was badly damaged by German bombers in the Second World War. A firebomb gutted the interior of the nave but the chancel survived almost intact and it's still a very fine example of a Victorian Army church interior.

Rather than try and restore the church it was decided to retain the buildings as a ruin and as a fitting memorial to the Blitz. Do go inside if you have time (it's open most days).

#### Directions 13

From the front of the church take the path off to the right and walk up the stone steps of the grassy embankment to stand overlooking a square moat.

**To avoid the steps:** keep the church on your left and follow the path alongside the bastion. Turn into the tunnel and continue onto Nelson's Bridge. Stop halfway across when you are over the water.

---

## 14. In the footsteps of Nelson

### King's Bastion

This rectangular ditch bounded on one side by a brick wall and earth ramparts and on the other by the sea wall might not look like much but this is in fact a major part of the surviving defences of Portsmouth known as the King's Bastion. It's just a small part of what were once more elaborate fortifications.

The defensive structures originally built on the land side of the town, including fortified walls and artillery positions, were removed in the 1870s as they were no longer needed. The land was used for building new barracks, recreation grounds, and an extension to the Dockyard.

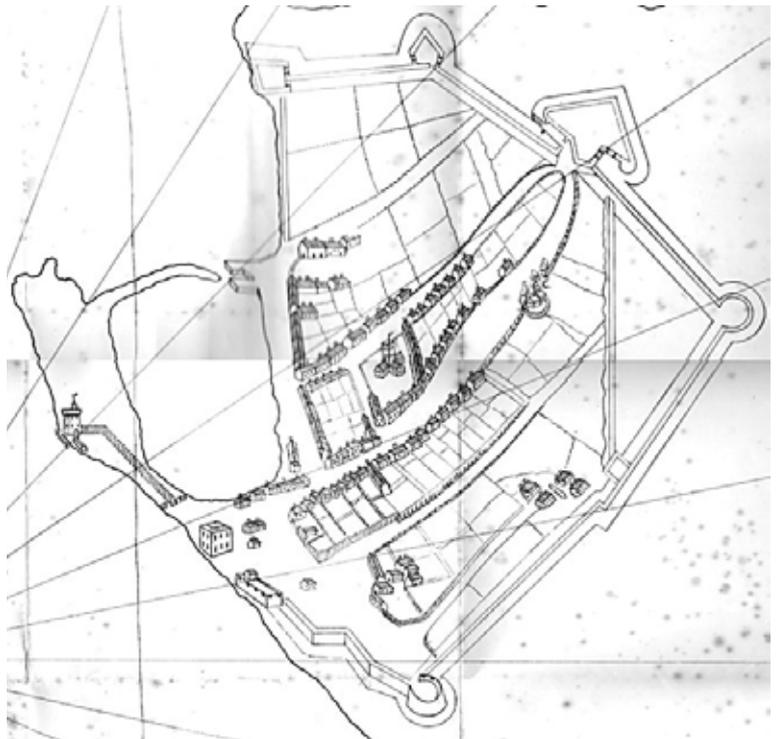
However, the fortified walls that you can see here for protecting the seaward side of the town were retained as they still had some defensive use.

The earthen ramparts faced with stone, together with deep ditches, formed strong defences against enemy fire. The use of very thick walls became necessary after gunpowder came into common use.

This strategic location at the southern part of Portsmouth's defences looking out into the Solent with well-defended positions for artillery weapons was an ideal location to mount an attack on enemy ships.



The King's Bastion  
© Martin Haslett RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



A 1540 map of Portsmouth showing the defences around the town including the Round Tower, Square Tower and King's Bastion at the bottom left  
©British Library Collection

---

This area has traditionally been defended since the sixteenth century. Across the water is what remains of the Spur Redoubt, a small triangular fort built in 1680 designed to strengthen the line at what was then considered a vulnerable point in the bastion's defences.

Access to the Spur Redoubt was through a sally port under the curtain wall and a light wooden bridge across the moat. It was from here that Nelson is thought to have embarked onto HMS Victory before the Battle of Trafalgar in which he was shot and killed.

This location also gives us our first clear view of the Isle of Wight, the body of land visible across the water. Until 7,000 years ago it was connected to the mainland but melting ice sheets following the last Ice Age led to a rise in sea levels, flooding what was the River Solent and creating an island.



Remains of the Spur Redoubt  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

#### Directions 14

**From the steps:** continue along the path. Pass the first path to the left and take the second path on the left that bends sharply back downhill. Follow this path and go through the tunnel on to Nelson's Bridge then -

**From the bridge:** cross the bridge and turn right. The stone remains of the Spur Redoubt are on the left. Go left over another wooden bridge and head towards the Clarence Pier. Walk through the funfair and stop when you reach the pier building.

---

## 15. Candy floss and slot machines

### Clarence Pier

This striking (or you might even say garish) building is Clarence Pier. It's our first glimpse of a different side of the Portsmouth.

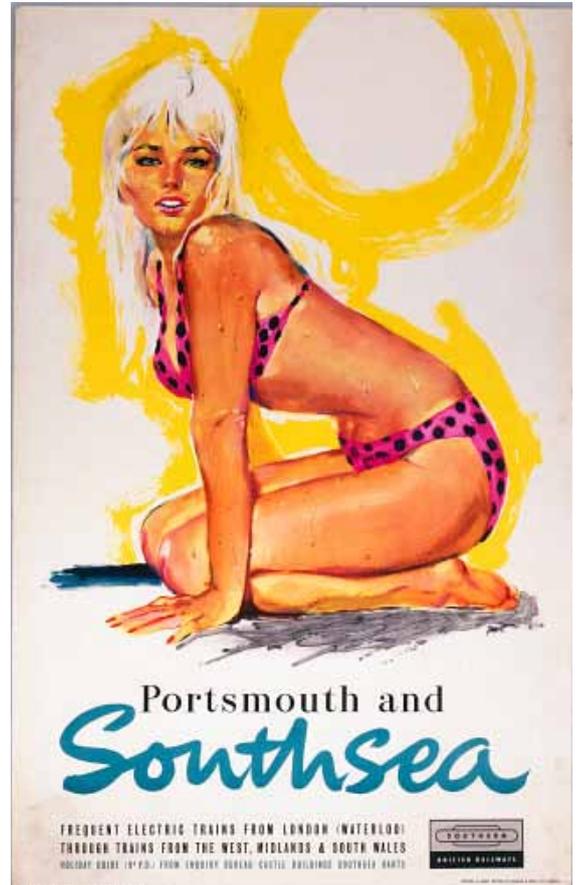
This area, known as Southsea, developed in Victorian times as a prosperous suburb and, after the expansion of railways in the 1840s, as a rather select seaside resort.

As we continue our walk you will see that Victorian Southsea has retained much of its original character. It's rather a genteel place so it is probably right that the authorities have ensured that amusement arcades and candy floss are banished to this small part of the resort!

Clarence Pier was originally built for entirely practical reasons: as an embarkation point for passengers travelling to the Isle of Wight by steamboat.

Piers are found all round the coast of Britain. They were originally designed as mooring platforms so that boats could dock at either low or high tide without risk of being grounded. They soon became places of entertainment for Victorian day-trippers – a place to stroll and be seen.

The original Clarence Pier was destroyed by bombs in the Second World War and was subsequently rebuilt as an amusement area...but without its pier!



A racy travel poster from 1958  
© National Railway Museum / Science & Society  
Picture Library

#### Directions 15

Continue along the Promenade looking out for various memorials on the right hand side including a large anchor dedicated to Nelson beside the hovercraft slipway. Stop across the road from the obelisk with a globe on the top.

---

## 16. Salubrious Southsea

### Royal Naval War Memorial, Southsea Common

The Royal Naval War Memorial is a prominent feature of the seafront. There are similar ones at Plymouth and Chatham. Originally designed as a First World War memorial, Naval casualties of the Second World War were added later. It is a suitable place to reflect on the terrible loss of life caused because this was an important naval town.

It is also a good vantage point to view Southsea Common and the buildings beyond. The Common was a marshy morass until the early-nineteenth century quite unsuited for the centre of a fashionable resort. The area had to be cleared, drained and laid with grass.

Although Southsea has seen some modern development - for instance you can see one or two tower blocks of flats built in the 1960s - generally the character of this Conservation Area has been protected.

The Queen's Hotel, the large Victorian red brick building visible across the Common, stands at the end of the Southsea shopping centre and certainly adds to the grander atmosphere of this part of the city.

Southsea's shopping centre is another way in which Portsmouth's urban geography is very unusual. The higher status shopping has congregated here including two department stores, a farmers' market, boutique shops and interior design stores all quite separate from the main shopping centre in Commercial Road where you're more likely to find the chain stores that can be found along nearly every high street in Britain.



Top: Royal Naval War Memorial on Southsea Common  
Bottom: The grand Queen's Hotel  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

#### Directions 16

Continue along the Promenade with the sea on your right and head towards the black and white lighthouse of Southsea Castle. Keep the aquarium on your left and follow the coastal path. Stop on a bench with the castle behind you and look across to the Isle of Wight.

---

## 17. Henry's castle

### Southsea Castle



*Southsea Castle (c.1850)*  
Wikimedia Commons

Guests arriving at Spitbank Fort hotel  
© Amanda Retreats via Wikimedia Commons

These are the remains of Southsea Castle which was built by King Henry VIII as one of a long line of fortifications along the coast from Cornwall through to Essex designed to protect the south coast against French invasion. Known as Device Forts or Henrician Castles some of the best known include Pendennis Castle in Cornwall, Portland Castle in Dorset and Walmer Castle in Kent.

Here at Southsea the defensive position is clear. This is the southernmost point of the island and there is a good view out into Spithead, the narrow water between Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight. It was from here that Henry VIII saw his famous battleship, the Mary Rose, sink in 1545 during a skirmish with the French. It lay on the seabed until being raised in 1982 and can now be seen in the Historic Dockyard where we started our walk.

While we are here take a look out to sea. You will see 3 distinctive round Palmerston forts in shallow water built out of concrete and granite. They date from 1865 to 1880 and are part of a wider scheme of defences including a series of forts on Portsdown Hill to the north. Together these made the town one of the most strongly-defended places in the world but also made the old ring of defences around Old Portsmouth redundant.

One of these, Spitbank Fort, has been transformed from a military base into an exclusive hotel. At one time up to 150 soldiers were crammed in sleeping in hammocks to maximise space; now the fort has room for 18 guests who can enjoy a terrace hot tub, pool and champagne bar. Standing a mile out to sea, guests have to arrive at the £350-a-night hotel via taxi boat.

#### Directions 17

Continue around the castle and along the Promenade. The white pier ahead is the last stop on our walk. If you are short of time you can stop on the promenade when you have a good view of the pier. Ideally stop when you reach the pier itself.

---

## 18. The end of the pier

### South Parade Pier

The splendid South Parade Pier built in 1879 was, like Clarence Pier, originally built as a ferry terminal for the Isle of Wight. Like so many other piers around the country it has suffered from several fires one of which occurred during the filming of Ken Russell's lavish rock opera, *Tommy*.

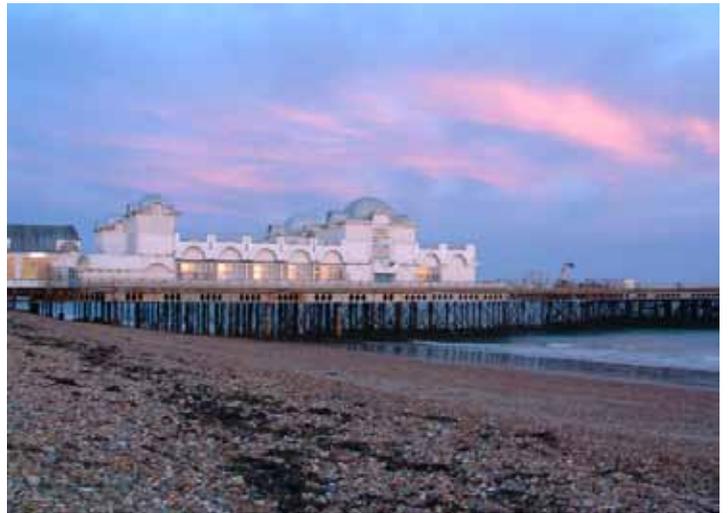
It's a testament to our continuing fondness for piers that it has been rebuilt rather than left to ruin. According to the National Piers Society, first set up by John Betjeman, we now have less than half the number of piers we had at the end of the last century. At the time of creating the walk this pier was up for sale so the future of this iconic structure is by no means guaranteed.

The pier seems a fitting place to end our waterfront walk. Much of the route has followed the Millennium Promenade which has opened waterfront land that had been closed to the public for centuries and was a fitting project to celebrate the millennium.

The route is marked by modern blue lights and a chain motif in the pavement recalling the chain which once protected the harbour entrance at times of attack.

On this walk we've discovered how the vast natural harbour was formed and why a settlement first emerged here in this sheltered spot. We've found out why Portsmouth became a naval base and why its naval history continues to enrich the town. We've done some shopping in a place that several hundred years ago would have been under water and walked in the footsteps of Lord Nelson.

We've also looked at the buildings and developments around us with more curiosity and considered how the city has changed in the post-war years both for better and worse.



The sun setting on South Parade Pier...  
© Tim Elliott via Geograph



Victorian postcard of Portsmouth Harbour  
Wikimedia Commons

---

The walk has taken you from the historic Dockyard, once awash with sailors, to the gentrified suburb of Southsea, now home to farmers' markets and upmarket boutiques. Like many port cities, Portsmouth is reinventing itself for the modern age but is still proud of its unique history.

I hope you've enjoyed discovering more about this unique place - which is the only city in the UK situated on an island - and I hope you've seen another side to Portsmouth beyond its role as a transport link between mainland UK and the Continent or the Isle of Wight.



Isle of Wight ferry at sunset  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

### **Directions 18**

To return to the start use the crossing outside South Parade Pier and turn left. Retrace your steps for about 100 metres then turn into Clarendon Road. Look for the bus stop on the left side of the road. From here take bus Number 1 to its terminus at The Hard next to Portsmouth Harbour railway station. Bus Number 1 runs every 10 minutes during the daytime from Monday to Saturday and every 20 minutes during the daytime on Sundays. Alternatively you can walk back to Portsmouth.

---

## Suggested places to visit

### **Action Stations**

[www.actionstations.org](http://www.actionstations.org)

### **Blue Reef Aquarium**

[www.blureefaquarium.co.uk/portsmouth.htm](http://www.blureefaquarium.co.uk/portsmouth.htm)

### **Explosion! Museum of Naval Firepower (Gosport)**

<http://www.explosion.org.uk/>

### **Fort Nelson - Home to the Royal Armouries national collection of artillery**

<http://www.royalarmouries.org/visit-us/fort-nelson>

### **Gunwharf Quays**

[www.gunwharf-quays.com](http://www.gunwharf-quays.com)

### **HMS Victory**

[www.hms-victory.com](http://www.hms-victory.com)

### **HMS Warrior**

[www.hmswarrior.org](http://www.hmswarrior.org)

### **Mary Rose Museum**

[www.maryrose.org](http://www.maryrose.org)

### **National Museum of the Royal Navy**

[www.royalnavalmuseum.org](http://www.royalnavalmuseum.org)

### **Portsmouth Historic Dockyard**

[www.historicdockyard.co.uk](http://www.historicdockyard.co.uk)

### **Portsmouth City Museums**

[www.portsmouthcitymuseums.co.uk](http://www.portsmouthcitymuseums.co.uk)

### **Royal Marines Museum (Southsea)**

[www.royalmarinesmuseum.co.uk](http://www.royalmarinesmuseum.co.uk)

### **Royal Navy Submarine Museum (Gosport)**

[www.submarine-museum.co.uk](http://www.submarine-museum.co.uk)

### **Southsea Castle**

[www.southseacastle.co.uk](http://www.southseacastle.co.uk)

### **Spinnaker Tower**

[www.spinnakertower.co.uk](http://www.spinnakertower.co.uk)

---

## Credits

The RGS-IBG would like to thank the following people and organisations for their assistance in producing this Discovering Britain walk:

- **Martin Haslett** for creating the walk and taking photographs
- **Caroline Millar** for editing the walk and creating the audio commentary
- **Rory Walsh** for testing the walk and taking photographs
- **National Railway Museum / Science & Society Picture Library** for kind permission to use various travel posters
- **Kester Keighley** for permission to reproduce details from the Cowdray engraving
- **Dominic Fontana** and **Tim Backhouse** for permission to reproduce archive images
- **Tim Elliott** and **Amanda Retreats** for additional images
- **Roger Hoefling** for helpful comments on the script





**Britain's landscapes are wonderful.**

**There is a tremendous variety within our shores - whether in the countryside, in towns and cities or at the seaside. And every landscape has a story to tell about our past and present.**

**Discovering Britain is an exciting series of geographically-themed walks that aim to bring these stories alive and inspire everyone to explore and learn more about Britain. Each walk looks at a particular landscape, finding out about how forces of nature, people, events and the economy have created what you see today.**

**The self-guided walks are fun, informative and inspiring. Prepare to discover something new, to be surprised and to find the unexpected.**

**Visit [www.discoveringbritain.org](http://www.discoveringbritain.org) to**

**Send your review of this walk**

**Search for other walks**

**Suggest a new walk**