



DORSET *UNSPOILT BEAUTY*

The UK's south coast has so much to offer and Dorset, only a couple of hours from London, is a beautiful and often overlooked treasure.

Wherever I find myself in the world, my heart always brings me back to Dorset eventually. With quaint villages, quirky traditions and open green fields, my childhood home is a picturesque county in the UK's south west and best summed up by the fact there are more kilometres of footpaths and bridleways than roads.

It's been contested whether Dorset strictly qualifies as part of the West Country – a corner of England best known for its farmland, thick countryside accents and love of fermented apple drink – and it is often overlooked by tourists, who drive through on their way to neighbouring counties.

Dorset, however, has all the traits of a proud West Country county – including its own award-winning Town Crier – and has plenty to offer. Plus, only a couple of hours drive down the motorway from London, it's an easy weekend getaway for those travelling from the capital.

One of Dorset's biggest pulls is its coastline. I've always proudly pointed out that this county defies the British stereotype in as far as it boasts beautiful fine golden sandy beaches. Whether they have the weather for many sunny beach days is another matter. However, you'll regularly see resilient Brits walking their dogs along Studland Bay beach all year round.

A quick chain ferry ride across from Sandbanks – one of the world's priciest residential areas and a favourite with footballers – the protected beach stretches for four miles, eventually leading to Old Harry Rocks.



It might sound like a musical festival, but Old Harry Rocks is actually a series of bright white chalky rock stacks. Looking out at them from the top of the blustery Handfast Point, there are breathtaking views across the water to Bournemouth and as far as the Isle of Wight, as well as the beachside town Swanage – a main stop on the route taken by the heritage Swanage Railway.

For adventurous days out it's hard to beat Poole Harbour. The second largest natural harbour in the world – after Sydney which, granted, beats it by a long way – its waters hold five islands. The headline act is Brownsea Island which is accessible by boat and

This spread, clockwise: The Cobb Lyme Regis; Thomas Hardy's Cottage; Swanage Heritage Railway; Dorset Coastline; Worbarrow Bay.



*“The Cobb is where Meryl Streep stood with Jeremy Irons in the poignant scene from *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*.”*

heralded for its wildlife, including the rare red squirrel and its resident peacocks. It was also the spot of the very first Scout Camp by Lord Baden-Powell in 1907.

Growing up, weekends were spent exploring the harbour and Dorset’s coveted Jurassic Coast. There are no dinosaurs sadly, but the Jurassic Coast is an UNESCO natural World Heritage Site, covering 185 million years of earth’s history over 95 miles of epic coastline. It also makes for some fantastic opportunities to dig up your very own fossils.

Geology fan or not, Durdle Door is a must for anyone who finds themselves in Dorset. Thousands of years of steady coastal erosion has created two beautiful curving pebbly beaches and one iconic archway, Durdle Door. Make the walk down the steep hodgepodge steps to the beach to get the full effect of the mighty stone arch – just don’t think about the walk back up.

Follow the chalky coastal path up and away from here to Lulworth Cove. A picture-perfect sweeping bay, here you’ll find little boats bobbing on the water while tourists tuck into fish and chips on the

rocks and seagulls squawk hungrily overhead.

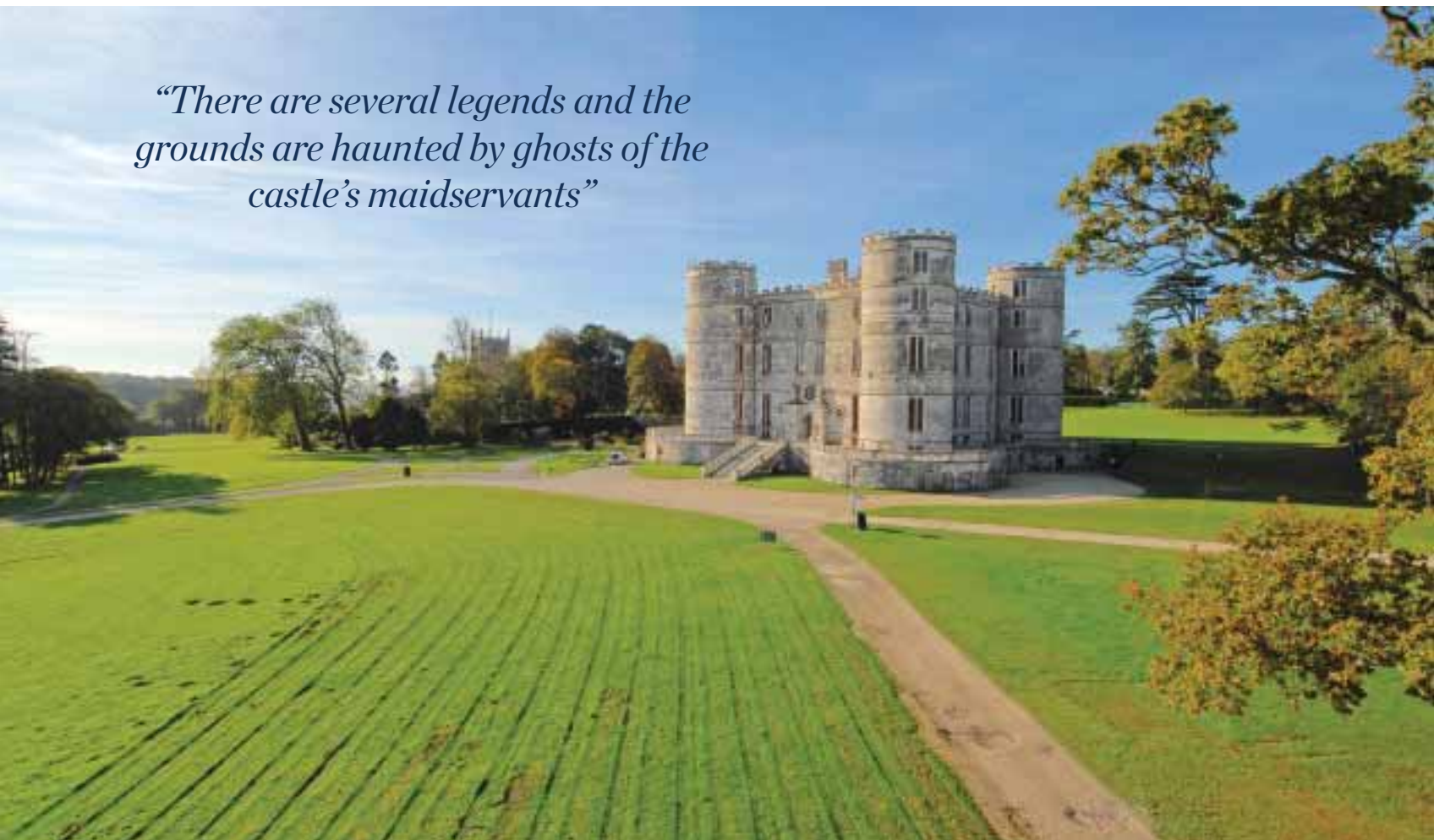
It’s hard to believe that this is all part of a sprawling family estate, the upkeep of which has served as employment for many locals for generations.

The estate’s jewel in the crown is Lulworth Castle. An impressive 17th century building perched on a hill, it was originally built as a hunting lodge and spot to entertain aristocracy. A fierce fire in 1929 left only the shell intact, but visitors can still explore the restored interior and take in the panoramic view from the roof of the tower.

There are several legends and the grounds are allegedly haunted

This spread, clockwise: Lulworth Castle in Dorset; Durdle door; Shaftesbury Dorset Golden Hill; Old Harry rocks

“There are several legends and the grounds are haunted by ghosts of the castle’s maidservants”



by ghosts of the castle’s maidservants. They clearly haven’t scared visitors away though and the popular grounds have become synonymous with the music festival Camp Bestival, which it hosts every year.

Throughout the summer Dorset is littered with festivals of all shapes and sizes with Camp Bestival and Lamar Tree Festival, held in a Victorian Garden on the border of Dorset and Wiltshire, dominating the music genre.

For a real taste of Dorset culture, however, there are the array of folk festivals that take place across the county. There are more folk festivals in Dorset than you can shake a stick at which, ironically, is exactly what they often do – if you’ve ever seen Morris Dancing in action, you’ll understand.

Brought up in a small countryside village, as a child the Wimborne

Folk Festival held in the thriving market town Wimborne Minster was the highlight of my year. The usually quiet streets were suddenly packed with busy stalls selling vibrant clothing, pungent incense and meaty pastries. The crowds would only part to make way for teams of folk dancers who, with their bells, colourful costumes and clacking sticks, would put on performances.

While it’s changed and expanded over the years, the Wimborne Folk Festival is still incredibly popular, welcoming tens of thousands of visitors over the three days, with some genuinely travelling from overseas.

Another quintessential corner of Dorset can be found in the market town of Shaftesbury – more specifically, on Gold Hill. The street is lined with a row of picturesque thatched-roof cottages on a thigh-burning steep hill and is known for starring in a famous advert

Where to stay

Clavell Tower

Looking out over Kimmeridge Bay and the dramatic Jurassic Coast, this 19th-century tower has seen its fair share of drama. Originally built as an observatory in 1830, it was left abandoned around World War One and was almost lost to the sea below after decades of severe cliff erosion.

Fortunately, the Grade II listed landmark was saved and meticulously moved, brick by brick, away to safety. Now, renovated inside, it stands as a beautifully quirky and surprisingly modern four-storey holiday home for two.

landmarktrust.org.uk

Loose Reins

With rolling green fields and plenty of bridleways, it’s no surprise that Dorset has so many keen horse riders. Nestled in rural east Dorset, near Shillingstone, guests at this luxury glamping spot stay in their own cozy wooden cabins, the style of which ooze US pioneer spirit.

Surrounded by beautiful Dorset countryside, it’s all about getting in touch with nature and relaxing after a long day in the saddle mastering Western Riding on your noble steed. The guided horseback trails take in stunning views over the Wessex Ridgeway and sweeping fields.

loosereins.co.uk



for Hovis bread, back in 1973. It sounds obscure, but it's a beautiful old-timey view and people still gather at the top for photos.

Back in the 21st century, more recently, Dorset's coastal beauty was put centre stage in the TV show *Broadchurch*. It was filmed on location around the Jurassic Coast, but it was the towering sandy cliffs of West Bay that were the real backdrop to the award-winning crime drama. In reality West Bay is a sleepy seaside town, known for beach days and fresh seafood.

Dorset is probably better known for its literary connections, namely Thomas Hardy. The author of *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *Tess Of The d'Urbervilles* was a local, born near the county town of Dorchester, and his novels were deeply inspired by his surrounding countryside landscape. Fans can even visit Hardy's

Cottage, the home where the author was born in 1840 and wrote his early work.

While Jane Austen wasn't a local – she was born in nearby Hampshire – she was known to have holidayed in the coastal town of Lyme Regis. She even based a dramatic scene in her book *Persuasion* on the Cobb, a historic stone pier surrounding the harbour where, for decades, people have strolled along the top wall to take in the views. The Cobb is also where Meryl Streep stood with Jeremy Irons in the poignant scene in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

Dorset is a buzzing and quintessentially British county, packed with enough epic coastline views, historic houses and quirky town culture to make overlooking it a big mistake. Then again, I'm bias.