

Crail to St Andrews

WALK FACTS

Distance: 11 miles/17.7km.

Maps: OS Landranger 1:50,000 Sheet 59 or OS Explorer 1:25,000 Sheet 371

Start: Grid Ref: NO 611 078 Car park for the Church Hall, Crail. This is signposted off the A917 to the Cemetery Car Park. As much of the route passes through agricultural land, dogs MUST be kept on a lead and under strict control.

Finish: Grid Ref: NO518160. University of St Andrews Students' Residence Car Park in Albany Place.

Notes: Ideally, two cars, a helpful driver for one car, or the local Stagecoach Fife bus service No 95 from St Andrews to Leven are required to complete this walk.

Grading: This is a linear walk that follows good paths, including the route of a former single track railway, some country roads and foreshore tracks. The railway line, dating from 1887, and which was closed in 1969, once carried goods and passenger traffic from Dundee through Leuchars Junction to St Andrews and on to Edinburgh and served all the towns, villages and farms along the Fife coast.

It is good day-walk for any fit, competent walkers. Some less well-maintained tracks through boggy ground should also be expected. The foreshore part of the route, in particular, can be exposed to cold, onshore winds therefore proper protective clothing is required as well as a first aid kit and adequate food and water. A route plan, up-to-date map for the area, a good compass - and the ability to use them to navigate effectively - are also recommended.

The Kingdom Fife has some of the most picturesque towns and villages to be found in Scotland and the East Neuk in particular is steeped in history. Very popular as a holiday resort there is an abundance of quiet secluded spots for relaxation, spectacular sea views, family walks etc. The local people are very friendly and inviting and many of the local events and galas held in the area throughout the summer are great tourist attractions. The tiny harbour at Crail is perhaps the most photographed and painted in the whole of Scotland, if not the UK.

Fife Council is eager to promote and formalise a new, continuous Fife Coastal Route from the Forth to the Tay bridges. Presently, the path is reasonably intact south of Crail, but not so well established to the north. Evolved over many years, its existence owes much to the goodwill of farmers who have accepted that walkers make use of the strip of land left behind when fences are moved inland ahead of the advancing North Sea. There has been a marked increase in the number of people walking the route although Fife Council continues to encounter problems in securing 'formalised' access agreements with the landowners. The negotiation of binding access agreements will undoubtedly take time.

If using the local bus service, alight at the first stop in Crail and walk northeast along the gravel roadway past the Church Hall to the old cemetery. If using a car, leave from the Church Hall car park. From the old cemetery car park turn left up the short stretch of road past the new cemetery and a barrier onto a rough double wheel-track leading towards the caravan site. Keep left on reaching the first of the caravans. This path goes through livestock pasture and onto lush green path up to the garden boundary of Smithfield where it bears sharp left then emerges by the side of the A917 St Andrews - Crail road at Chance Inn.

Cross carefully over onto the B9171 road signposted for Colinsburgh and ahead to the old railway bridge beside which a Kingdom of Fife Millennium Cycle way sign indicates a 'circular' route going off to the right. Follow this up the wide track past Ragfield beside the route of the dismantled railway.

At Grid Ref NO584109, approximately 400 yards/365 metres past the ruins of Cookston, and before reaching a bridge across the track, a low stone wall breaks to the right. Follow the footpath to the left-hand side of this wall towards a strip of trees, passing through an old gate then to the right of a fence line, taking in the spectacular view north eastwards over St Andrews Bay to the Angus coastline and the hills beyond. Cresting the low rise beside the trees, the rooftops of the village of Kingsbarns with its ancient church spire dating from 1630 comes into view. At the end of this path the A917 is reached - previously crossed at Chance Inn.

Kingsbarns was a thriving little place, circa 1852, when linens were manufactured for the Dundee market. The largest and best flag-stones in the country were obtained near the village and a fine quality marble

was occasionally found. Historically the village grew as an agricultural settlement. Its name came from the barns used to store grain here prior to transport to the Royal Castle at Crail and the Palace at Falkland in medieval times. Little now remains of its small, tidal harbour built around 1810 by the Earl of Kellie that lies approximately ½ a mile/800 metres east from the square. The harbour could berth vessels of up to 100 tons/101.6 tonnes that shipped grain and potatoes to Newcastle and London as well as import coal and drainage tiles for the local farming community. Its deterioration was rapid however and by the end of the century it was used by small fishing boats up until 1927 after which it fell into disuse eventually leaving only the outline of the walls still visible. There are many fine 18th and 19th century buildings in the village including the primary school dating from 1822 which is the oldest still in use in Fife. The village was designated a conservation area in 1973.

Turn left and walk northwards past the unusually large square, the church; originally built in 1630 and extensively altered in 1811, and the hotel - an early 19th century, former coaching inn originally known as the Cambo Arms Hotel, recently reopened (2004) as 'The Barns at Kingsbarns' and the only public house and restaurant in the village. From the northern edge of the village, continue along the footpath on the east side of the A917 for 110 yards/100 metres to where a wide, walled double track known locally as the Drony Road, leads off to the right and down to the shoreline. Note the vertical, sandstone gate posts at the entrance to the fields surrounding the village and unique to this area that have no hinge brackets but square recesses cut into them to support the gate.

On reaching the shoreline here it is necessary, due to Fife Council being unable to secure access agreement with the landowner at Boghall Farm, to walk along the beach of soft coarse sand and shingle past Airbow point and around Babbet Ness to where the Coastal Path resumes. The ruin of an ivy-clad, roofless salmon fisher's bothy is passed then a high wall is reached at a junction of the track. Follow the track to the seaward side of the wall then inland along the southeast bank of the Kenly Water - frequented by herons, ducks, dippers and many other species of birds - as far as the metal bridge near Burnside Farm. Some years ago, but only at low tide, the Coastal Path crossed 'stepping stones' at the mouth of the Kenly Water and on around the headland but current access safety legislation now rules this out and the route has formally been realigned on more inland paths. Cross the bridge and walk up to the track beside the farm house and turn left.

A short distance up the tarmac road a rough wide track leads off to the right between the fields to a cluster of large green sheds. The route is well signposted here as it swings northwest then north to rejoin the shoreline. Approximately 400 yards/365 metres from here the unusual shore stack of Buddo Rock is reached and 875 yards/800 metres further on is the Buddo Ness. From here the path - greatly improved on its condition some time ago - 'hugs' the side of the cliff face to reach the seaward end of Kittock's Den. Around 1¼ miles/2 km from here is the Rock and Spindle so called since the main rock closely resembles a spinning wheel. This volcanic plug, revealed when the surrounding layers of calciferous sandstone became worn away by the actions of sea and weather, is the centre of a series of vents and fissures in the area.

The path continues along the cliff top past the Maiden Rock, another large sandstone shore stack and once a part of a larger rock mass. Because it was harder than the surrounding material, it has better resisted the sea's erosion although the weather continues to sculpt and diminish its features. The grassy area around the base of the rock was once a popular place for picnics and the rock a challenge for would-be young climbers. From here the route is easily followed past the caravan site* down to the car park. There is a good view from the path to the rocks below and show, at low tide, the twisted and tilted rock strata that is the result of violent earth movements and disturbances many thousands of years ago.

*** At the time of writing (February 2005) a serious landslide that destroyed the path here some time ago still awaits a suitable diversion being negotiated with the caravan site owners, or an alternative method of stabilizing the ground to reinstate the path can be found, extreme care must be taken when passing through the area. Numerous signs display disclaimer notices for walkers.**