Weird and wonderful in equal measure, the Isle of Portland is a cabinet of curiosities on Dorset’s Jurassic Coast. Expect the unexpected as you walk around this intriguing island.

WORDS: PHILIP THOMAS  PHOTOS: TOM BAILEY
Beyond the rooftops of Fortuneswell, the shingle bank of Chesil Beach sweeps into the hazy distance, a wave-built barrier sheltering the Fleet lagoon from the sea. Stretching for 18 miles it’s Britain’s longest beach and you won’t get a better sense of its scale than from up here. I’m standing on Verne, the hill at Portland’s northern prow, and I’m doing my best imitation of Yeates, the hill at Portland’s northern prow, and I’m its scale than from up here. I’m standing on Verne a wave-built barrier sheltering the Fleet lagoon bank of Chesil Beach sweeps into the hazy distance, behind many a rockfall allegedly the prime culprits long-eared, warren dwellers, highly superstitious about the furry, mention the fluffy white tail disappearing into the scrub.

A word to the wise while you’re here. Don’t as often happens in a dream, the strangest things can pop up unexpectedly, and on this occasion – a degree or two west of nowhere – it was a red postbox. Curiosity lured me in for a closer look. Turning the key and opening the little door, curiosity hider me in for a closer look. Turning the key and opening the little door, I was greeted by a rendition of Elvis Presley’s ‘It’s New or Never’ and a mosaic diorama framing a mirror. Apparently it’s art, and later enquires revealed it had something to do with Weymouth and Portland’s biennial B-side festival. It’s an artwork installed by Katarina Rose is an artwork installed near Easton during Portland’s b-side arts festival in 2016: www.b-side.org.uk

BUNKERS FOR THE BIG GUNS
The High Angle Battery’s 12-ton guns could rain down 9-inch shells onto the exposed decks of enemy vessels attacking Portland Harbour.

POST-MODERN ‘Murining the Land’ by Katarina Rose is an artwork installed near Easton during Portland’s b-side arts festival in 2016: www.b-side.org.uk

A SLEEPING STONE-SHIFTER
At Portland Bill, blocks of quarried stone were lowered into barges by these hand-winched cranes called derricks.

If you must bring them up in conversation, they’re also the bringers of bad luck at sea. If you must bring them up in conversation, ‘underground mutton’ is the acceptable term. It’s not every day that a walk brings you up close to one of Her Majesty’s reformatory institutions, yet in a surreal twist I had come to expect of this place, the trail broke through an old outer wall of HMP Portland and I found myself walking gingerly along the perimeter road. Scarpering down a narrow path that cuts across the cliff face, I made my escape along the trackbed of the former Portland Branch railway. Surrendered to nature, the boulder-strewn and scrub-smothered ground of East Weare slopes down a rocky shore. Perhaps it was the way the sunlight bounced off the limestone cliffs, or maybe the chatter of grasshoppers in undergrowth, but in the humid August air, the atmosphere of this feral nether realm felt uncannily exotic. Even the tepid waters of the English Channel seemed to twinkle with a Mediterranean hue. A samba-ing set of gaudy blue butterflies completed the illusion.

In Portland’s quarries. For reasons less clear, stone were lowered from behind the low cliffs and scrub-smothered ground of East Weare slopes down a rocky shore. Perhaps it was the way the sunlight bounced off the limestone cliffs, or maybe the chatter of grasshoppers in undergrowth, but in the humid August air, the atmosphere of this feral nether realm felt uncannily exotic. Even the tepid waters of the English Channel seemed to twinkle with a Mediterranean hue. A samba-ing set of gaudy blue butterflies completed the illusion. As so often happens in a dream, the strangest things can pop up unexpectedly, and on this occasion – a degree or two west of nowhere – it was a red postbox. Curiosity hider me in for a closer look. Turning the key and opening the little door, I was greeted by a rendition of Elvis Presley’s ‘It’s New or Never’ and a mosaic diorama framing a mirror. Apparently it’s art, and later enquires revealed it had something to do with Weymouth and Portland’s biennial B-side festival. It’s an artwork installed near Easton during Portland’s b-side arts festival in 2016: www.b-side.org.uk

Leaving Portland’s forgotten branch line, the coast path arrives at the ever so idyllically secluded beach of Church Ope Cove, where the ruin of Rufius Castle is pitched perilously on the cliffs above. The tides of time have washed up Viking raiders and smugglers on a shore once busy with nets and boats. In the shadow of the 19th-century stronghold are the remains of St Andrew’s (Portland’s first parish church) and in the graveyard you’ll find one or two eye-catching headstones. As anyone versed in the tales of Robert Louis Stephenson knows, the skull and crossbones are the hallmark of pirates, and here they are carved into several tombs. But before you judge the cemetery’s occupants too harshly, a more innocent explanation tells us that this cutthroat symbol was a humble acknowledgement of man’s mortality long before it was adopted by the terrors of the high seas. I don’t know about you, but I prefer the legend.

Regaining the clifftop, the coast path weaves across the fractured ground of Southwell Landslip. Beyond Portland’s southernmost village, the trail enters some of the island’s long-abandoned quarries, where rough-hewn blocks of Portland stone were cut out from behind the low cliffs and winched down to waiting barges. Half-dressed blocks still litter the landscape as if someone has given up on a life-size game of Tetris, while rusting derricks wait dutifully for a load that isn’t coming. After years of plunder, these chiselled shores are the hallmark of pirates, and here they are carved into several tombs. But before you judge the cemetery’s occupants too harshly, a more innocent explanation tells us that this cutthroat symbol was a humble acknowledgement of man’s mortality long before it was adopted by the terrors of the high seas. I don’t know about you, but I prefer the legend.

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headland is a magnet for coach parties, drawn by the candy cane lighthouse at its tip. Its retired predecessors take a back-seat while tourists crowd around the main attraction. Obligatory snaps taken and cream tea scoffed, I re-join the trail where it’s elbowed away from the coast by an MOD site. The path climbs past the Old Higher Lighthouse and along the precipice of Portland’s walk-like western flank. Up in front, an imposing complex of grey buildings looks like the nefarious creation of a Bond villain. As it happens, the former Admiralty Underwater Weapons Establishment was the centre of a real-life espionage thriller, when members of the Portland Spy Ring were caught leaking its secrets to the Soviets during the Cold War. Passing dejected wartime lookouts, I follow the rut of a precarious, cliffy tramway and arrive in the Tout Quarry Sculpture Park. My journey’s end, it’s fitting to see how Portland’s quarries have also come full circle. Returned to nature, these once unsightly cavities enjoy a new lease of life as spaces for creativity. To describe Portland as ‘quirky’ would be an understatement. It’s an eccentric acquaintance whose eyebrow-raising anecdotes leave you intrigued, bemused and amazed. With more than a few surprises up its sleeve, I wouldn’t put anything past this enigmatic isle – it’s a wacky adventure waiting to happen.

Guiding Lights
The lighthouses of Portland Bill have a long and distinguished history of saving lives at sea, dating back to 1716 when the Old Higher and Old Lower houses were originally built. Today the red-striped newcomer (completed in 1905) is the star attraction, and is one of 271 lighthouses still guiding ships through Britain’s treacherous waters. They are among the most spectacularly located buildings around Britain’s coastline and each has a story to tell. Here are seven stunners we think you should see...

**THE OLD ONE**
Flamborough Head
Built in 1866, Flamborough’s chalk tower is the oldest surviving (and complete) lighthouse in Britain. But despite that accolade, it was only ‘scientifically’ a lighthouse from 1866 is still in use.

**THE EVEN OLDER ONE**
Dover
Proposed against a Saxon church and contained within the bailey of a Norman castle, Dover’s Roman ‘Pharos’ is the oldest lighthouse building in Britain, around 2000 years old. A walk across the White Cliffs of Dover takes you to its predecessor, the South Foreland Lighthouse - the first to use an electric light.

**THE WILD ONE**
Cape Wrath
The trek out to Scotland’s most northerly point feels like reaching the ends of the Earth. Perched above the stormy waters of the Atlantic and a grinding hile from the nearest village, you’ll be surprised to find there’s a café at the lighthouse here. Find out more about getting to the Cape Wrath Lighthouse at www.visit-capewrath.com

**THE HAUNTED ONE**
South Stack
On a tiny granite islet connected to Holyhead by a precarious footbridge, the South Stack lighthouse is reputedly haunted by a spectral keeper called Jack Jones. Jones was killed by rockfall as he struggled to the lighthouse on a stormy night in 1853. Today the lighthouse leads you to its predecessor, the South Stack Lighthouse.

**THE LITERARY ONE**
Godrevy
Godrevy Lighthouse is said to be the inspiration for Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse. The lighthouse, though she set the novel on Chesil Beach.

**THE SHINGLE SENSATION**
The shingle bank of Chesil Beach sweeps into the hazy distance... Stretching for 18 miles it’s Britain’s longest beach.

**THE ICONIC ONE**
Fortuneswell
Propped up against a Saxon church is Portland’s Old Higher Lighthouse is now a holiday cottage, while the lower is home to a bird observatory.

**THE SENSATION**
A natural barrier created by waves, it’s estimated there may be as many as 160 billion pebbles on Chesil Beach.

**THE TIPPING POINT**
This Flintstonesque bridge once carried waste material from Tout Quarry across the tramway to be tipped over the cliff.