

MOSTLY DORSET 2016

Saturday 17th September

Dorset had been chosen for a week's getaway after we'd enjoyed a previous holiday in the county some years before. Quite some years before, to be honest, about three decades ago, with our two young children. This time was to be more sedate, as befitted our advanced age, although the self-catering accommodation close to Charmouth was frankly more befitting to a younger couple.

The bedroom was the length of the bed, while the width allowed standing room only at the side of the bed that wasn't bang up against the wall. The bathroom was bathless and the tap hopeless. I shall not mention the tap again. Perhaps.

However, the place was clean with up-to-date decor, albeit on the arty and not entirely practical side. Having arrived the previous afternoon, we were pleased to see some morning sun and after a minor incident with the small dog next door yapping at my ankles as we left, we were soon driving towards Abbotsbury.

Since we were in possession of a voucher, we arrived at the Abbotsbury Subtropical gardens in high spirits, as there's something intrinsically satisfying about using up a voucher. The drive there along the coast road overlooking Chesil Beach had been scenic and undulating, so we already felt in a holiday mood as we made our way towards the Colonial Restaurant for a morning cappuccino that we drank while sitting outside in late summer sun.

The gardens themselves were planted out with a great many trees of all varieties from different parts of the world, so that much of our time spent walking around was in dappled shade, with the rustling of leaves overhead and around us.



A subtropical red bridge?

It was very tranquil, with bushes, plants and flowers underplanting the trees along the way. As ever, we both enjoyed taking many photos and commenting on the different specimens we came across. It easily made up for the holiday irritations so far, as the stupidly small bedroom and the aggressive, yappy dog faded into insignificance. I'm not quite so sure about the tap, though...

There were a number of paths meandering around the different areas and I was happy to wander (mainly because I have very little sense of direction) within the wooded and sheltered valley leading down towards the sea at Chesil Beach. This topography produces the microclimate that allows the subtropical planting to flourish, although I also enjoyed the Mediterranean section and other planting.

At noon, we meandered back to the Colonial Restaurant, built unsurprisingly in the colonial style, with a raised wooden veranda looking out over the gardens. The lunch menu was a little lacking in choice for non-meat eaters, but we were happy with our home-made fishfingers in a roll, complete with salad leaves and garnish. Our view from the veranda was grand – and the "fishfingers" when they arrived were more like three small portions of fish. I failed to finish them!

Alan had a notion to go back to a place in the garden that led to the Jurassic Coast View Point. The site map warned of a steep grassy slope that became slippery in wet weather, but it was a dry day, so that didn't seem a problem. The only problem was that the gate giving access to the steep slope and the view was padlocked, so we had to meander back into the garden.

The meandering was pleasant, however, and this time we both crossed a Burma rope bridge that we'd merely photographed in the morning. It was a very moving experience, mostly in the swaying sense, but surprising fun. After that mildly daring venture, we decided we'd leave the delightful gardens and try to find a stone circle that Alan had discovered via the internet.



Alan hanging in there

I'd hoped Dorset would have signposted its ancient heritage well, but as we traipsed along one likely looking farm track, retraced our steps and tramped along a far less likely looking public footpath to no particular avail, my hopes were sinking fast. Alan was sure the stone circle was close, but neither of us could discern anything except fields of unidentified green vegetable-like crops.

In sheer tenacity, we ploughed on (but not in the farming sense) until we came to a stile that looked vaguely promising. Alan climbed over it to see if he could spot some circular prehistoric masonry in the distance, but remained perplexed. However, I happened to spot a small sign on the gate courtesy of Dorset County Council with the handwritten word "Stones" and an arrow. This was promising, so we walked in the direction of the arrow with a certain amount of resurrected hope, only to find not a stone circle, but a stone something-or-other.



Found, one long barrow (The Grey Mare & her Colts)

There was no sign and therefore no information, but our extensive knowledge of prehistoric monuments (!) led us to believe it was a long barrow. The burial chamber was ruined and the capstone had fallen down, but it looked Neolithically impressive nonetheless. We took photos and felt happy enough with our find, but decided to abandon the stone circle search because dark clouds were gathering ominously in the direction from which we'd come.

As we hurried back to the car, it was touch and go whether we'd be caught in a humongous shower, but the Stone Age gods were with us and we stayed dry. In fact, we drove out of the threatening weather completely as we returned to Charmouth, where we relaxed for the rest of the day, albeit on an uncomfortable sofa. It had been an excellent day and even the tap didn't get to me 😊

Sunday 18th September

I slept much better than the previous après-arrival night and even stopped myself from any profane utterances when water from the tap shot out and doused me liberally down my front. Why on Earth would a tap over a small washbasin be designed to dispense water via a horizontal chute rather than a traditional downward opening? It's asking for trouble!

However, it was another sunny morning and by 09:50, we were driving along some exciting Dorset-type narrow, leafy lanes. I say exciting, but in all honesty I found it nerve wracking, not knowing if a vehicle was going to zoom out at us from the next tight little bend. Once Alan had to reverse quite a long way to a large enough passing place – but we arrived safely at Forde Abbey, where even the car park seemed to exude a sense of peace in the September morning sun.

For once we didn't go straight away in search of coffee, but lingered in the charming walled kitchen garden, where a few people were snipping some carefully selected flowers. It turned out that our visit had coincided with the Autumn Splendour Flower Festival inside the house, so we paid the small fee to see inside the house, as well as our main exploration of the gardens.

Once through the kitchen garden, it seemed a shame not to take advantage of the Undercroft Tearoom we came across – and what a total delight it was! It had once been the working area of the abbey and had the most beautiful vaulted ceiling. It was uncrowded, served a good cappuccino and there were flower arrangements on the tables and windowsills. There literally seemed nothing not to like, although I'm not a great fan of double negatives.

However, it was time to wander expectantly outside into the 30 acres of gardens that have developed slowly since a Cistercian monastery was first built in the 12th century. It flourished for 400 years until Henry VIII's dastardly Dissolution of the Monasteries, when the abbey buildings changed hands over the centuries, until its current existence as a family home and working estate.

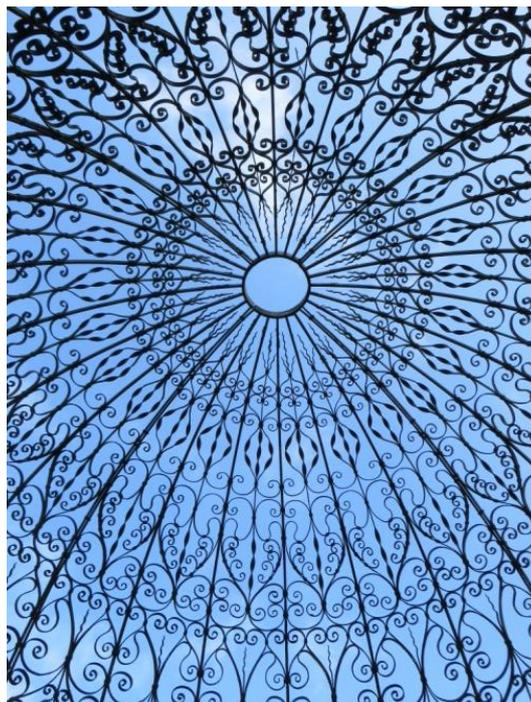
Meanwhile, our footsteps led us to the Long Pond by the front of the house and an avenue of vibrant planting, including dahlias, asters, heleniums and sedums. It felt heavenly to walk amid such late summer beauty under the blue-ish sky.



Tranquil Forde Abbey and its Long Pond

There were so many areas and beds of planting that decorated the expansive rolling grassland, amid many wonderful trees. It reminded me in places of my childhood and the hundreds of happy hours I spent in the park just over the road from where I lived. Memories of roly-polies down a grassy bank and the smell of daisies in the summer sun are synonymous with happiness for me.

At the head of the Long Pond was an Ionic Tempietto, although at the time we merely recognised it as a small circular temple with an amazing wrought iron domed roof over an equally small circular pond. It was quite beautiful and we took some time trying to take a worthy photo, whilst taking particular care not to fall into the small circular pond that was deceptively covered with pond weed.



Wrought iron perfection

Our meandering took us along different paths and past rather a lot of ponds. The only remaining monastic structure was apparently the Great Pond at the top of the garden. These days it brings water into the garden, but its original purpose was to power a mill for grain. Three cascades fall in line from the Great Pond, but the pond attracting by far the most attention was the Mermaid Pond, home of the famed Centenary Fountain. This fountain is the highest-powered fountain in England, with a maximum height of 160 feet/48 metres, created in 2005 and switched on three times daily during the summer months.



Centenary Fountain

It was our duty as tourists to view this spectacle and so at midday, we stood nonchalantly by the pond with a number of other nonchalant tourists, secretly transfixed at the sight of the soaring column of water releasing its cascade of spray to the vagaries of the ever-changing wind direction. Sadly, the blue sky was largely obscured by some fairly dense white cloud, but it was still fun to take photos and dodge the spray when the wind was blowing our way. We took so many photos, I wasn't sure whether I felt relief or disappointment when the fountain was turned off again after 15 minutes or so.

After a further wander that included admiring a satisfyingly named beech house (a structure made from pleached beech, an equally satisfying phrase in itself) and an appreciative turn around a rock garden, it felt like it was time to wander back to the Undercroft Tearoom for some lunch. It seemed a minor shame that at no time during our visit did we actually manage to partake of any tea in the Undercroft Tearoom, but perhaps another time.

We did partake of bacon, brie and chutney panini without the bacon, though, which is a necessary pescetarian (or fish-eating vegetarian) option, washed down with elderflower and strawberry pressé. It was interesting to note that despite the place being almost filled with lunch-seeking people, the room was so spacious with its generous seating and its vaulted ceiling, that we didn't feel at all hemmed in. There were still plenty of people entering when we left.

The sky was persistently cloudy as we went in the house, where Alan was politely asked if he could wear his camera bag at his back rather than at his side, so as not to swing around and cause some priceless damage. It was either that, or the flower arrangers were being very precious about their arrangements, although I have to say that their arrangements were most impressive. I prefer flowers in gardens, but these were ... yes, impressive.

We started our tour around the open rooms of the house in the great hall and then proceeded to view other rooms, including some bedrooms and a tapestry passage. There were plenty of information sheets and guides on hand to answer any questions. I can't in all honesty say I like tapestries much, as they seem to invoke a sense of suffocation, oldness and tedium in me, but I understand the Forde Abbey tapestries are very impressive. I try to like tapestries, but the best I can ever do is appreciate them – rather like I try to appreciate black and white photography, despite everything in me screaming silently for colour.

I particularly liked the 160 feet/48 metres long monks' dormitory that had been built in the 13th century and had once been much wider. In keeping with the monks' vow of poverty, the cells would only have contained a narrow bed, a desk for study and a candle in the window. It's strange, but as I become older, I really love the idea of minimalism, although a pot plant wouldn't go amiss and maybe a small bookcase with a few pretty things on top of it...

The cloisters once formed part of a quadrangle to the abbey church, used for walking and meditation. That rather appeals to me too, although they must have been decidedly draughty in winter. This part included the remains of the lavatorium, which seems a very useful idea, but it was actually just where the monks washed their hands before entering the refectory.

The chapel was formerly the chapter house where the monks would meet to discuss the business of the day and its 12th-century vaulting was superb. Our energy was waning a little, however, so we took ourselves to sit for a while on a bench in the garden, before leaving Forde Abbey to continue its peaceful existence without us. It had been a memorable visit.

The rest of the day was restful, which completely makes sense. The weather forecast wasn't wonderful, but at least I was having slightly more success in mastering the troublesome tap. There were no water-based expostulations from Alan this evening, so I presume he was mastering it too.

Monday 19th September

As the forecast had suggested, it was a rather grey and overcast morning, so we decided to visit Dorchester, 20 miles or so away. The drive was fine at first along a rural Dorset road, where it occurred to me that Dorset is exceedingly bumpy. The fields roll up, down and around at drunken angles. I amused myself by looking out for a flat field or two, but never spotted one.

Finding a car park proved a little tricky, until Alan used the age-old reliable method of asking a passer-by, so that we were soon walking into a small shopping arcade, with a most convenient and spacious Costa Coffee. From there, we set out to find the only example of a Roman town house in its entirety in Britain. Good old Dorset, aka Durnovaria in Roman times.



The Roman Town House

The walk took us past a Thomas Hardy statue I recognised from our Dorchester visit three decades ago, when we walked past the famous literary guy sitting on a tree stump with a book on his lap, staring moodily into the distance. I have no idea if it was one of his own books, but he looked bored, as our two children probably were trailing along with us at the time.

The 4th-century Roman town house wasn't far away in the grounds of the County Hall. I was a little taken aback that it wasn't a pay and enter walk around place with information boards, room reconstructions complete with life-size models and exhibits of Roman artefacts, as well as a bright little tearoom and gift shop.

Maybe I've been to a few too many tourist attractions, but I really think Dorchester should be proud of this gem and show it off, rather than hide it away as a bit of an afterthought. At any rate, Tony Robinson of the once glorious *Time Team* obviously thought it was a bit special, having described it as a milestone in the history of archaeology, since many modern techniques for urban archaeology now in use were first used on this site in 1937. Enough said!

We walked around the part of the house that was protected by a plate glass and steel structure with a tiled pitch roof, poking our camera lenses in through gaps in the glass to take compromised photos of the tantalising mosaic flooring inside. Other parts of the house could be seen as flint stone walls, along with an underground heating system and a well. A Roman sarcophagus lay almost abandoned near the entrance/exit, where some child burials had been found. It was a fascinating site, I was just slightly disappointed at its isolation.



Tantalising Roman remains

It was lunchtime and our feet seemed to take us back to the convenient and spacious Costa Coffee, mainly because we couldn't be bothered to look for anywhere else. A cheese toastie and some spring water laced with lemon and lime juice refreshed us well, after which we hightailed it to Dorchester County Museum, since Alan had paid for four hours' parking.

Inside there were exhibits and artefacts of ancient Dorset and the Jurassic coast, as well as a rather eclectic selection of Victorian objects and a section dedicated to Dorset writers. It was all thoughtfully and clearly presented, without inducing an information overload headache. Most memorable were some stone Celtic heads, a jadeite axe and 11th-century coins. The best find, though, was an information board identifying the long barrow we'd stumbled across on our first day as the Grey Mare and her Colts. Why there wasn't an information board at the site itself is beyond me, but it was satisfying to have solved the mystery – and to have discovered the rather creative name was an added bonus.

We therefore left the museum quite happily and returned to the car feeling spurred on to go and find a nearby stone circle. It was a different stone circle from the one we'd failed to find on our first day, but a stone circle nevertheless.

This time it involved driving to a Little Chef car park at Winterbourne Abbas and tramping across the edge of a farmer's field that was the other side of a hedge that ran parallel to the main road we'd driven along. The grass wasn't *too* long and other people had created a slight path/trail to a clearing protected by iron railings and an inner gate that wouldn't shut properly. There was a continuous roar of traffic from the other side of the hedge, but no matter – we'd found it.



The Nine Stones and the fungi

There were indeed nine stones in a circle, because we counted them, although one was almost obscured within grass-covered earth and another had been partly grown on by a beech tree. The tree itself had been very severely cut and most probably was dead, but at its base was growing a splendid display of fungi. I have no idea what sort of fungi, but they were splendid.

Information about the Bronze Age circle seems rather scarce, except the fact that two of the stones are considerably larger than the other seven and may reflect sexual symbolism. Who can say? The site is considered sacred by local Druids, although there were no Druids present while we were there, or indeed anybody at all. There was only the intrusive noise of the traffic, which seemed a modern irritation to such an ancient place. I had the strange notion that the stones weren't at all happy with the traffic pollution. Clearly, I was a Druid in a previous life – but more likely, the traffic was just annoying me!

We left the Nine Stones to slumber on in their lonely, noise-polluted glade and drove back underneath a considerably overcast sky to our accommodation. Tea was a simple affair, followed by a restful evening, after what had turned out to be a productive day of historical visits. The tap was a little frisky, but I didn't let it dampen my spirits, or indeed the front of my clothes.

Tuesday 20th September

Sleep deserted me for reasons unknown during the first part of the night, but I thankfully felt awake/alive enough in the morning for our long-awaited visit to Charmouth beach, which had been the scene of many a fossil hunt in bygone years with our two children – in the dear departed days when we would think nothing of a day trip that involved four hours of driving in total.

The weather was supposed to be dry with sunny intervals, but the sunny intervals were playing hard to get as we arrived at the large open car park next to the River Char, flowing merrily on its way to the sea. It was here that we realised we hadn't checked the tide times, which is pretty much crucial for a fossil hunt along Charmouth's beach of pebbles and gritty sand mixed with the clay that's continuously washed on to the beach from the cliffs behind.

A quick look at the sea once we'd walked across the wooden bridge spanning the river told us it was high tide. We weren't sure if it was incoming or otherwise, until Alan asked a passing person, who said with some authority that it was on its way out. There wasn't much of the slightly shelving beach showing and the waves were thundering onto the shingle with most of them running up quite high, so our best course of action was to walk back to the café for a cappuccino.

We then looked in the nearby shop that was stacked to the rafters with fossils, rocks and minerals, deliberating for quite some time about what to buy. It was an excellent shop, which catered for both children and adults at very reasonable prices. We may have left that veritable treasure trove with a few packages. However, it was time to hit the fossil trail and we returned over the bridge to East Beach, where more of the shore was now exposed and a handful of people were already walking along, heads down with fossil-hungry eyes.



The dark grey Jurassic cliffs of Charmouth

It certainly brought back happy memories as we strolled along with our own eyes downwards, stooping every now and then to pick up something that may or may not have been a fossil and more often than not dropping it back onto the beach again. We weren't very successful in real terms, but collected several interesting pieces that were worn parts of fossils. I did find one ammonite, which was small but perfectly formed and it ended up being my find of the day.

Although the sea was more or less calm, the waves had a habit of throwing themselves onto the beach with some force, so we had to dodge the far-reaching ones from time to time. The cliffs behind us seemed darker than I remembered and when the sun was in (most of the time), it was a bit like looking up at a coal face, so presumably there has been a lot of erosion in recent years.

The cliffs are layer upon layer of soft mud, silt and clay, classed as sedimentary rocks made up of billions of tiny sediment particles, turned to stone by millions of years of pressure from the above layers. At Charmouth, these formed at the bottom of a calm sea about 195 million years ago, in the Early Jurassic period.

Meanwhile, it had become the lunchtime period and so we retraced our steps back to the car, where we consumed the packed lunch we'd brought. Many more people were heading towards East Beach, which gave us the idea of moseying along West Beach for the afternoon. It was quite pebbly and some of the pebbles were very large, which made moseying a little tricky. As the tide receded more, though, sections of the beach revealed gritty sand.

We took our time enjoying the fossil-fuelled moments. I especially enjoyed one such moment when Alan showed me a shell he thought must have a creature inside, as it was quite heavy. As it happened, it was quite heavy because it was a fossilised shell. It was Alan's find of the day and a very fine find at that! After a while, though, it seemed time to mosey on back to the accommodation, in order to drink tea, eat and relax. This was followed by a peaceful evening of puzzling and television, unfortunately culminating in more dodgy tap antics.

Wednesday 21st September

It was feeling more autumnal this morning, which is no real surprise since Autumn Equinox is almost upon us. The sky was cloudy, although a dry day had been forecast, so we took a drive for about 20 minutes to West Bay. I had a hankering to see where the most excellent drama *Broadchurch* had been filmed, particularly the dramatic cliff towering over the beach where the body had been found and the troubles had begun in earnest for the tormented inhabitants.



The famous East Cliff of West Bay - or Broadchurch?

On arrival, West Bay seemed a typical small seaside place with a harbour and fishing industry, but with far fewer visitors than I'd imagined. There was a big open car park in front of a large bank of shingle that marked the edge of the beach. To the left, the impressive cliff loomed up into layers of white-grey cloud, with a warning notice about cliff erosion at its base. There had been a rock fall of between 300-400 tons of the distinctive yellow sandstone just over a month ago.

After we'd availed ourselves of a cappuccino at the not too distant clean and bright Harbour Café, the air seemed to be warmer and the clouds lifting a little as we walked for a short distance over the tiny beach pebbles to a pier – for a better view of *the* cliff, naturally. Unfortunately, the clouds were failing to disperse the way they needed to for the sunlight to shine on East Cliff and highlight its glorious goldenness. In fact, the glowering mood of the cliff face was far more in keeping with the dark goings-on in Broadchurch.

There were actually two separate piers either side of the harbour entrance, West Pier being the one we'd first walked along – that is, West Pier on which we viewed East Cliff of West Bay. Confusing, especially as the harbour at West Bay is known as Bridport Harbour, with Bridport being a market town one mile north of West Bay. Or Broadchurch, to be fanciful. It seemed only sensible to try East Pier out for size, which we did, followed by a walk along the promenade above East Beach, which consisted of very fine shingle (allegedly with sand at the water's edge, but the tide was in and the waves were fiercely frolicsome).

There was a steep path upward on the first cliff we came across, on which a surprising number of people were spotted. Alan suddenly recognised a fine-looking house on the cliff top as the home of the Broadchurch lawyer, which according to the internet was at Second Cliff Walk, West Cliff. What? We were not likewise afflicted by Broadchurch fever and merely continued along the promenade until it ended abruptly with a warning to go no further due to cliff erosion. It seemed about time to walk back to the harbour area for some lunch.



West Cliff above East Beach?

We returned to the Harbour Café for a small portion of breaded plaice, chips and peas, but it looked big enough to me. I was beginning to expect an alternate reality in West Bay, what with East Cliff at West Beach, West Cliff at East Beach and West Bay's harbour known as Bridport Harbour. Still, the fish was good...

The harbour area was very much alive with people as we strolled past several kiosks selling sea food, fish and chips, ice cream and other delights. It all looked so tempting that Alan bought a takeaway portion of Dorset Apple Cake for later. At this point we decided we liked West Bay and would be happy to visit again.

After a quick foray into a supermarket en route, our afternoon visit was to Lyme Regis of The Cobb and fossil fame. We'd made a fairly brief visit perhaps 15 years ago and had walked along the Cobb, so were interested to return for a further exploration. Alan had researched parking options and found a car park easily enough, despite the very narrow and hilly roads.

We walked down a steep hill towards the sea front, quickly realising that the place was crowded in what had become a sunny afternoon. There were lots of eating places near the beach (Town Beach, I believe), tourist shops and kiosks selling ice cream, sea food and heaven knows what else.

People were walking along in both directions, or all directions to be precise, since there were dogs on long leads that needed avoiding, as well as groups of the blithely ignorant tourist population intent only on their own enjoyment. I have no idea why I seem to appear invisible to so many people in the street, in doorways and in supermarkets, to name but a few.

I can remember walking along The Cobb in leisurely calm on our last long ago visit, followed by a gentle stroll around the streets, so the whole current experience was a bit of a shock. To top it all, marauding seagulls were out en masse, although I'd better not get started about seagulls, marauding or otherwise. It felt as if Lyme Regis has become a victim of its own success and we just weren't in the mood to battle with the crowds.

It was mid-afternoon and we felt disheartened and tired, so thought we might as well refresh ourselves with a cup of tea before slogging up the hill to the car park. The seagulls were offputting at several places along the sea front and when we eventually stopped at one café, we were told they were only serving food. Totally disgruntled, we decided to go back to the accommodation for some of our own tea in peace and seagull-free quiet.

In the evening, Alan knocked a mug off the worktop, which shattered into many pieces as it hit the floor. This resulted in him spending a certain amount of time on his hands and knees, swearing mildly as he searched for all the sharp and broken pieces. The tap was truculent too ... but it had been a pleasant morning!

Thursday 22nd September

We were both very restless, which in a bed with two sides against a wall, a third side against a cupboard and a narrow space on its fourth side, is not an entirely helpful situation. However, it was a bright, sunny morning, so we purposefully put our tiredness in the background and prepared to make the most of our last day (in Dorset, not on Planet Earth).

To be precise, we prepared to make the most of our last day in East Devon, as we drove from west Dorset for around 20 minutes to Seaton in Devon. The sky had remained obligingly blue and the approach to Seaton alongside the river was surprisingly picturesque. I don't know why I was surprised, because I come from Devon ... but it was beautifully picturesque.

The long-stay car park was easy to find and there was even a Costa Coffee nearby. Not only that, but the Seaton Tramway ticket office we were seeking was close by the nearby Costa Coffee, so it was an all-win situation.

Before we knew it, we'd made our way up some narrow winding stairs on a narrow-gauge heritage tram and were sitting *al fresco* on some wooden seats, looking out upon the estuary of the River Axe as we bumped along through two nature reserves. There was a bit of a cool breeze up aloft, but the tranquil view was well worth it, as we attempted to take photos in the least lurching moments.

Along the track we spotted plenty of wildlife, including some wading birds in the marshes and also, when we passed close by them, hedgerows semi-abundant with blackberries, sloes and rosehips. I say semi-abundant, as I was frequently distracted by the cross-seat conversation going on behind me.



River Axe estuary from the tram ride

Several times we met trams coming from the opposite direction, whereupon a passing loop was necessary. This was mildly exciting, as each time the drivers greeted each other with good humour. It seems to me there currently needs to be much more good humour in society and I don't mean the aggressive, sharp humour that cuts through the once normal human trait of benevolence and compassion. Crossing a road, the driver had to activate a level crossing and I'm not sure the affected car drivers viewed the tram with any benevolence!

We were on our way to Colyton, described in the leaflet we'd been given as: "Devon's Most Rebellious Town." This was not because it had a population of punk baby boomers, but because of its part in the Monmouth Rebellion of 1685. Go Colyton! It also boasted a 9th-century Saxon cross in its church, as well as a circular street pattern, a heritage centre and a garden centre. It seemed to be a thriving place for a medieval town beside the River Coly, despite having suffered badly in the plague of 1646 with the death of over 450 inhabitants – and I'm slightly ashamed to confess I'd never heard of it before.

We alighted at a well-cared for railway station dating from 1868, which offered an abundantly stocked gift shop and the Tramstop Café. However, we opted to walk for five minutes to the church containing the Saxon cross. The good thing about locating churches is that their towers are normally very easy to spot and this one was no exception. It was an unusual octagonal lantern tower and looked quite handsome, as church towers go, against the very blue sky.



Still stands the clock at ... 11:25?

After loitering photographically outside for a while, we ventured inside, where a few other people were already wandering around. As well as being particularly peaceful, there were some impressive tombs, stained-glass windows and generally splendid ecclesiastical architecture. It was impossible to take it all in during our brief visit, but the Saxon cross was quite prominent (although spoiled for photography by some church furniture right up next to it).

Since it was midday, we felt it was time to leave the delightful church and walk to The Garden Shop, the equally delightful (but in a different way) local garden centre. We were only vaguely lost for a few minutes and soon came upon a small, but very well-stocked plant area and shop. A café inside sold drinks and light lunches, so we enjoyed a cappuccino and a toasted teacake, ensconced comfortably at a table amid the interesting items on sale.

We had time for a short but productive look around the shop before heading back to Colyton Station for the return tram, as Alan had paid for four hours' parking at Seaton. We didn't rush, however, but ambled our way back most pleasantly under the kind of sky I like best, blue with puffy white clouds. There was then a 15-minute or so wait at the station for the tram.

It seemed a good idea to take ourselves up the winding stairs to the top deck again, where we enjoyed spotting rabbits, cows, sheep and a curious pheasant. It was warmer than the outward ride and I felt somewhat sorry when it was all over. Unwilling for the visit to end, Alan paid for more parking and we explored Seaton a little, including the new Seaton Jurassic visitor attraction (but only inside the shop, thinking it would be a good place to bring grandchildren).

It wasn't a long walk to the sea front, where we took advantage of the now lovely weather to promenade along the promenade. One direction took us towards some beach huts ending at a café and then we went back along in the other direction, eventually ending at a sailing club. The pebble beach at Seaton is a mile long and sits right at the edge of the Jurassic coast. Its pebbles, as on other beaches along the Jurassic coast, are protected from removal under the 1949 Coastal Protection Act. I really must return a few from Chesil Bank...



The inspiring coastal surroundings at Seaton

If we hadn't had a Solero Exotic waiting in the freezer compartment back at the accommodation, we may even have turned completely touristy and strolled along the promenade eating an ice cream from one of its kiosks.

However, we instead contented ourselves with simply enjoying the relaxed atmosphere and the inspiring coastal surroundings. There was an extended view of the Jurassic Coast cliffs towards Dorset and a blue sweep of bay with white wave tops breaking on the shingle beach. A couple of people were swimming, but I wasn't tempted to paddle on this occasion.

I'm a little sad to say I much preferred Seaton to Lyme Regis, as I love the literary connection with the latter, but life is dynamic and everything changes over time. I somehow don't suppose the French lieutenant's woman would have been quite as inclined to a romantic dalliance in Seaton (or even the French lieutenant himself), although we'll never know for sure.

After an hour's promenading, it was time to call it a holiday and return to the accommodation for packing and a Solero Exotic. Our last day had been really enjoyable and the whole week's holiday had been healing for the stressed-out soul. I'm quite certain we'd be happy to return to Dorset and East Devon in the future, although most definitely in accommodation that offers at least twice the amount of bedroom space and the complete absence of a psychotic tap!