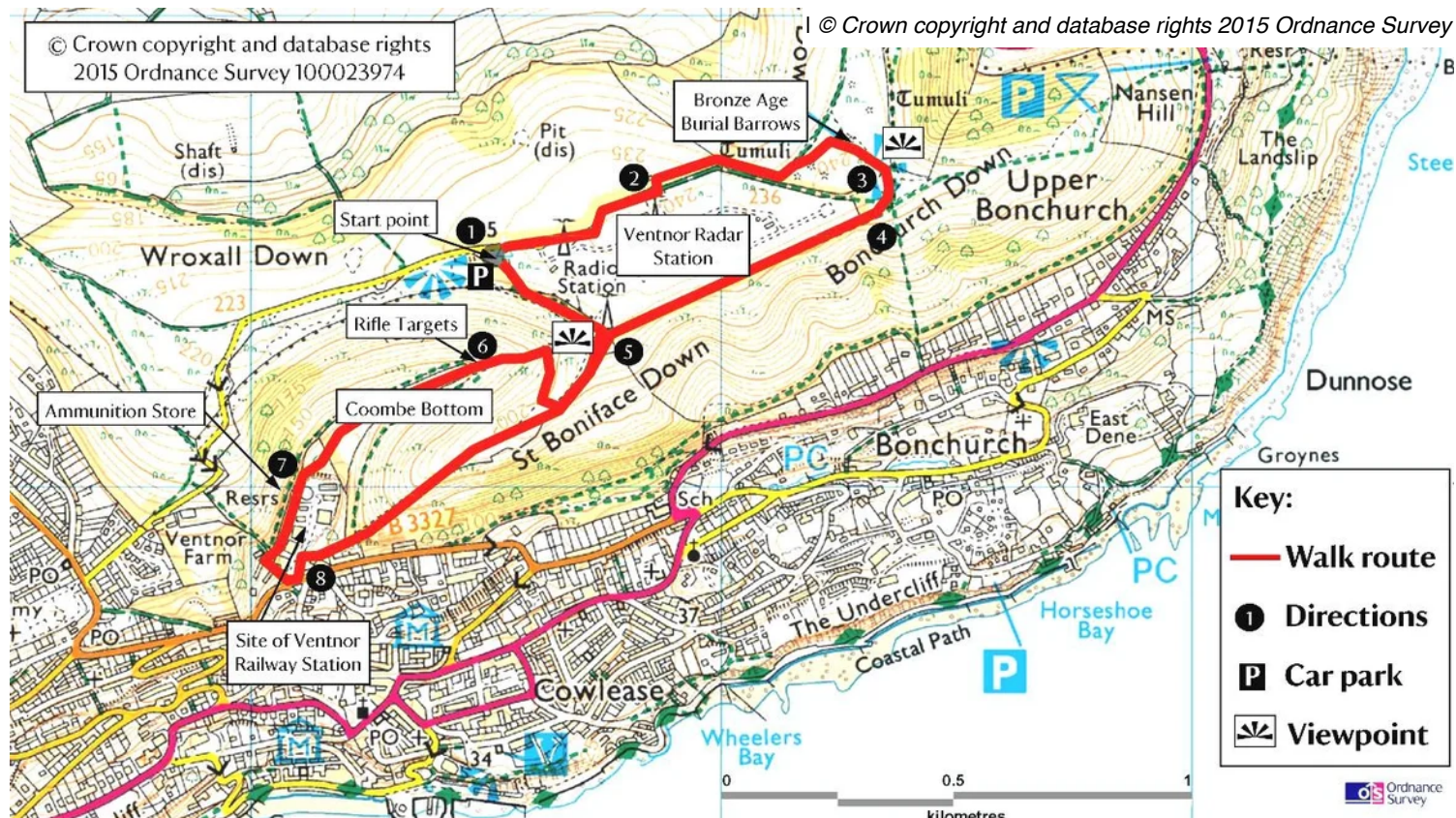




Ventnor Downs: pre-history to Cold War walk

Walking trail

Witness the history of the landscape on this short but challenging walk on the south side of the Isle of Wight.

Ventnor Down National Trust car park, off Down Lane, Ventnor, Isle of Wight. Nearest postcode is PO38 1YL, what3words: ///grapes.drummers.pavement.

Start: Ventnor Down car park, grid ref: SZ565784, what3words: ///grapes.drummers.pavement.

- 1 The car park has a plaque commemorating the Channel Airways Dakota that crashed here in fog in 1962. Turn right out of the car park and follow the road to the entrance gates for the National Air Traffic Services (NATS), which was the location of RAF Ventnor. Notice a number of Second World War brick structures to your left.

RAF Ventnor

The radar station at RAF Ventnor was established in 1937 to warn of German aircraft and flying bombs approaching across the Channel - Ventnor was heavily bombed in 1940. The station played an important part in Operation Overlord and the Battle of Britain. During the Cold War there was a hidden underground nuclear operations room. This has been filled in, but its entrance was where a square manhole cover can still be seen to the left of the entrance gates.

1 hour 30 mins - 2 hours

2.6 miles (4.2 km)

OS Maps: Landranger 196, Explorer OL29

Dog friendly



*Coombe Bottom at Ventnor bathed in winter sun | National Trust
/ Chuck Eccleston ARPS*

- 2 Continue along the road by the NATS fence for 10yds (10m), and then turn off close to a water trough on the left. Turn right to follow the grassy path parallel to the road. When the path divides, take the left fork. After 65yds (60m) take the faint path through the bracken on the right which heads past a solitary tree and crosses a track before passing through gorse-covered Bronze Age burial mounds. Continue on this path, which bears right to reach an area of open land. You are now at the highest point on the Isle of Wight with public access.

Bronze Age burial barrows

In this area you are entering a Bronze Age cemetery which may have contained 21 round barrows dating back to around 2000BC, some of which are still visible. About 90 yards (85m) north of the car park, beside the main track, you will see some quite large and distinctive barrows. Cemeteries and barrows were built in full view on the edge of settlements because people had great reverence for their ancestors. Barrows also served as territorial markers.

- 3 Go straight across the open land (which was once a parking area) to reach a signpost after 90yds (85m). Turn 90° right to reach a kissing gate after a further 80yds (75m) by the corner of the NATS fence. Go through the gate.
- 4 Follow the path immediately to the left of the NATS fence until you reach a tall mast and another kissing gate. Go through the kissing gate.
- 5 From here proceed 40yds (40m) downhill and go through another kissing gate where there is a viewpoint bench. Carry on downhill for about 190yds (175m) and follow the track to the right which zig-zags down into the bottom of the coombe. As you reach the bottom you will see the brick stacks and remains of the rifle range and pistol butts.

Down the coombe

A coombe is a steep dry valley, or a hollow on the side of a hill - and Coombe Bottom is a perfect example. The relatively flat bottom was once used as arable land, then grassland grazed by dairy cattle. The Island's rifle range was located in Coombe Bottom and it was also used for leisure shooting – see next section.

- 6 Proceed down into and along the coombe, keeping to the right. About 110yds (100m) before the trees at the far end the path divides, and here take the path to the right and shortly left as it keeps very close to a wire fence on the left.

Isle of Wight Rifles

The Isle of Wight Rifles were established in 1859 with part-time volunteers, but by WW2 they were conscripts and formed part of the Hampshire regiments. They fought at Gallipoli in 1915. In 1917 the regiment was virtually destroyed when 800 men died at the Battle of Gaza. Coombe Bottom was used as a training rifle range. The rifle targets were placed on a raised bank facing west. There were also pistol butts with the targets, parts of which remain, on a brick wall.

- 7 To the right you will see the remains of the ammunition store looking like a cave. Continue along this path next to the wire fence and proceed through the kissing gate and down steps to the road. Then pass through a gate and turn left and left again into the Industrial Estate.

Ammunition Store

The ammunition store used by the Isle of Wight Rifles for training was further down Coombe Bottom and can still be seen, although it now has no door.

- 8 About 30yds (30m) on the left there is a blue plaque outside the Coastguard Rescue Station marking the site of Ventnor railway station. With your back to the plaque you are looking at the Terminus Hotel on the corner to the right. In front is the Ventnor Gas and Water Company building of 1883. Just behind the Terminus Hotel building there is a steep flight of stone steps on path V1. Take this up to a kissing gate at the base of the hill, and then continue up the steep slope of St. Boniface Down, eventually through another kissing gate, until you reach the mast. Turn left and follow the path to the immediate left of the wire fence to return to the car park by the Dakota plaque.

Ventnor Railway Station

The railway was built inside a sandstone quarry which provided building material for Ventnor. Trains came through a tunnel under the downs, the entrance to which can still be seen. Some caves now used for storage can still be seen. In addition to holidaymakers, the railway brought many tuberculosis sufferers to the Royal National Hospital for treatment and convalescence. The hospital opened in 1869. In 1964 it closed and was later demolished to make way for Ventnor Botanic Garden.

End: Ventnor Down car park, grid ref: SZ565784,
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