

Below: The view towards Bolt Tail from Bigbury-on-Sea in South Devon

# Coastal CHARISMA

Picking up where the English Riviera leaves off, the South Devon AONB has all the charm without the fanfare. A trip here will exceed expectations, says Jenny Rowe

The South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) hugs England's south coast. It runs east to west from the edge of Brixham (the most southerly of the trio of towns that makes up the so-called English Riviera) to Jennycliff Beach, cut just short of Plymouth by the Sound. As the English Riviera and Cornish west coast swallow the lion's share of tourists seeking south-coast seaside solace during the summer season, this little cape of South Devon's stunning sea views is left relatively unadulterated. While here, you can picnic in a quiet cove, stride along a wind-battered peninsula towards the hypnotic, deep blue horizon before exploring a historic harbour town – all in a typical Devonshire's day's work. The South Devon AONB has a wider appeal than the Riviera, thanks to its extensive and various roll call of attractions that operate all-year round.

Literary aficionados flock here for connections with the best-selling novelist of all time, Agatha Christie. Two of the late crime writer's 66 detective novels (1939's *And Then There Were None* and 1941's *Evil Under the Sun*) have island settings inspired by the time she spent at Bigbury-on-Sea in the Burgh Island Hotel, which can only be reached on foot at low tide. Guests can now stay at the hotel's Beach House, which was first built for the writer in the 1930s and later converted. That said, the lauded author spent most of her time at Greenway, a holiday home for her family near Dittisham, which is a stone's throw inland from Dartmouth and now open to the public via the National Trust.



Maritime historians may know Dartmouth for being the home of the Britannia Royal Naval College. In fact, the AONB as a whole has an impressive military legacy, scattered across the landscape in the form of coastal forts, castles, lighthouses, airstrips and more, spanning from the Iron Age to the Cold War. You need only spend a couple of hours on the South West Coast Path, England's longest waymarked long-distance footpath, to see a handful of examples. The national trail offers surprises around every corner, and some very steep climbs as it navigates valleys and rocky inlets.

To enjoy Devon's bracing salty sea air to the full, combine a morning's hike with an afternoon on the beach. You could plan your route to pass through Blackpool Sands, a sheltered shingle beach (contrary to its name); Bantam Beach, with views of Burgh Island at the Avon Estuary; or Hope Cove Beach, which is made up of two separate sandy beaches near Salcombe.

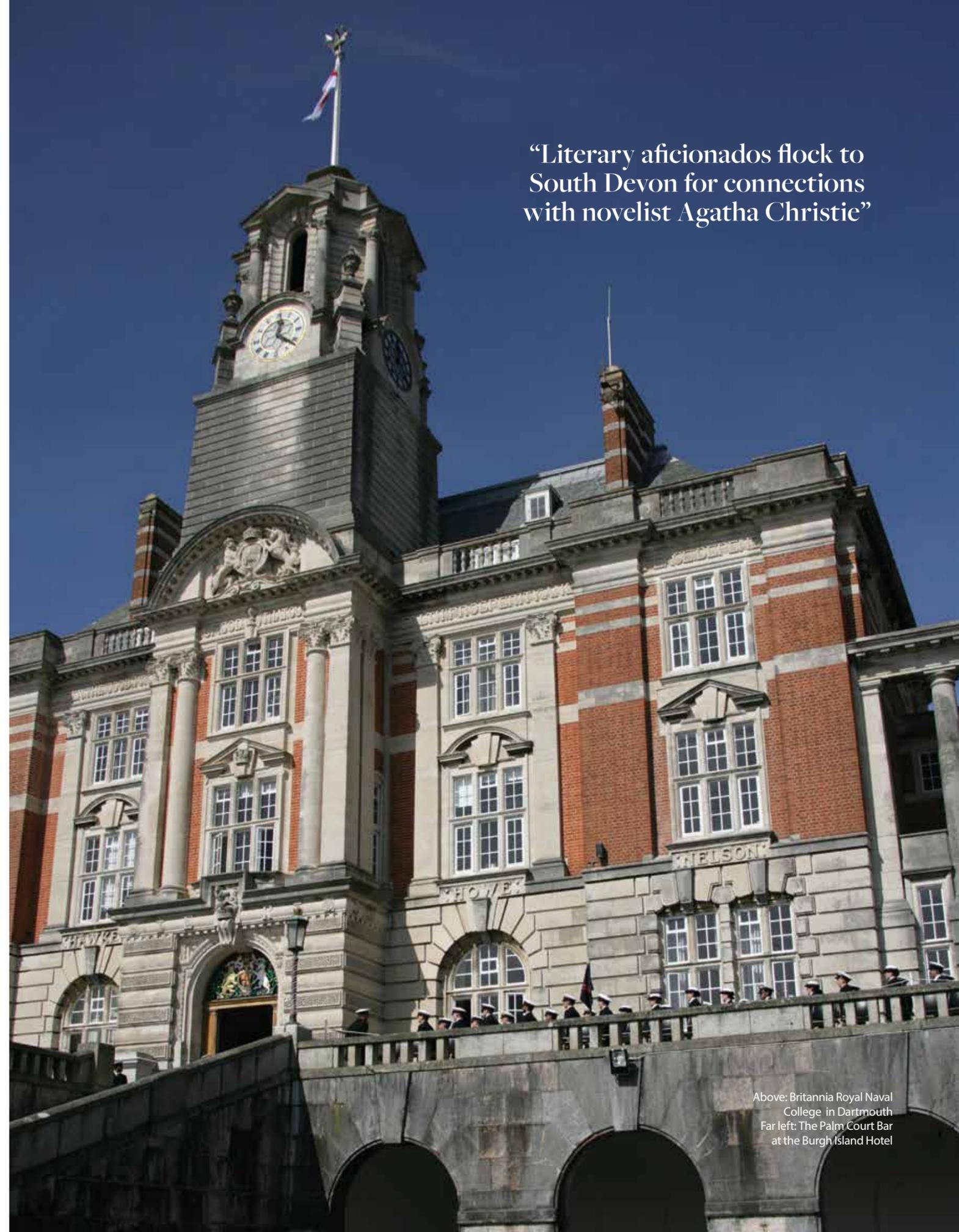
A recent fundraising campaign led by the National Trust has seen Wembury Point and the island of the Great Mewstone, on the edge of Plymouth Sound, returned to nature, with restored grassland for wildlife and improved pathways. During the Second World War, the headland had been requisitioned for the defence of Plymouth and later served as the Royal Navy's chief gunnery training school, HMS Cambridge.

In fact, if you're looking for a base to explore the South Devon AONB, you'd do well to consider nearby Plymouth's Langdon Court Hotel, the former home of Henry VIII's widow, Catherine Parr.

Another trusty section of the South West Coast Path stretches from East Prawle to Beesands, halfway along which you will encounter Start Point lighthouse. It is perched on one of the English Coast's most exposed peninsulas, which runs sharply almost a mile out into the sea. Time your walk well and you can finish at Britannia at the Beach, a beach-shack-style café that serves catch-of-the-day seafood and afternoon tea.

The South Devon AONB in general is renowned for its seafood and many come to try Brixham's famous brown crab – among the largest in the world. Brixham is a working harbour with a strong fishing tradition dating back to the 14th century. It is also one of the birthplaces of trawling and by the 19th century it boasted 270 sail-operated, decked trawlers and 1,600 working seamen, making it the largest fishery in England. Visit Rockfish to try the local delicacies. There's another restaurant of the same name in Dartmouth and both do takeaway, so you can head down to the seafront, hot battered fish in hand, to let your legs dangle over the harbour walls and watch the fishing boats float in from the sea. [www.southdevonaonb.org.uk](http://www.southdevonaonb.org.uk)

VICTORIA GIBBS/BURGH ISLAND HOTEL/UK CITY IMAGES/ALAMY/ILLUSTRATION: ELLY JAHNZ



“Literary aficionados flock to South Devon for connections with novelist Agatha Christie”

Above: Britannia Royal Naval College in Dartmouth  
Far left: The Palm Court Bar at the Burgh Island Hotel

# 5 things to do in the South Devon AONB

## 1 Dartmouth Castle

Dartmouth Castle has guarded the Dart Estuary and the port town of Dartmouth for 600 years. Originally built to fulfil a far more serious purpose, today, thanks to English Heritage, it offers stunning views of the estuary and the chance to go inside and explore a fascinating complex of defences, first begun in 1388. A century later the imposing and well-preserved gun tower was added to the fortification, making it most likely the very first in Britain purpose-built to mount 'ship-sinking' heavy cannon.

If your visit coincides with the annual Dartmouth Royal Regatta (27-29 August 2020), you will see Dartmouth at its most vibrant. The event attracts 18,000 visitors each day to enjoy a fun flotilla of pomp, ceremony and boating brilliance.

[www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk)



## 2 Salcombe

It's hard to avoid falling in love with Salcombe. The quaint coastal town's winding, shop-filled streets slip quietly down to the shore, depositing guests in front of its harbour and the sparkling waters of the sprawling Kingsbridge Estuary.

Salcombe is beloved by sailing enthusiasts, but it's also popular with artists, with many galleries and studios centred around the 'arts quarter' on Island Street.

The town is very much a holiday haven: its population of 2,000 swells ten times over in summer. Luckily, there is enough beach to go around, with North Sands, South Sands, East Portlemouth and Mill Bay all within easy reach. Just beyond them all, don't miss Overbeck's, a hidden paradise of 20th-century subtropical gardens where you'll find plant life from all over the world.

[www.salcombeinformation.co.uk](http://www.salcombeinformation.co.uk)

## Greenway

We know that Agatha Christie liked writing in her Burgh Island nest, but she spent all her family time at Greenway, where the Mallowans (this was her married name, by which she was known locally) would hole up away from the public eye once her latest book was complete.

Described by the author as “the ideal house, a dream house”, Greenway is now looked after by the National Trust and visitors are able to step right inside and delve into the private life of the “Queen of Crime”.

[www.nationaltrust.org.uk/greenway](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/greenway)



## Golden Hind

Sir Francis Drake is the epitome of South Devon’s maritime heritage. Born in Tavistock, the politician and explorer became the first Englishman to circumnavigate the globe more than 400 years ago.

Brixham is now home to a full-size replica of Drake’s most famous ship, *Golden Hind*, where visitors can explore all five decks of the Tudor galleon. Hailed as a national hero when he was appointed Vice Admiral of the fleet to defend England from the Spanish Armada, Queen Elizabeth I granted Drake a family crest. He personally designed the imagery, which features God’s hand pulling his ship around the globe. [www.goldenhind.co.uk](http://www.goldenhind.co.uk)



## Slapton Sands

Slapton Sands is a narrow shingle barrier beach that separates the sea from Slapton Ley National Nature Reserve, a lagoon home to some of the UK’s rarest flora and fauna.

During the Second World War, the beach was used for a D-Day landing rehearsal, selected because it resembled parts of the French coast. However, under the cover of darkness, real German E-boats slipped unnoticed among the Allies’ landing craft. As a result, more than 700 servicemen lost their lives and the catastrophe was covered up for decades. Today a stone monument commemorates those killed in the ill-fated “Exercise Tiger”. n

[www.historic-uk.com](http://www.historic-uk.com)