

DORCHESTER WALKING FESTIVAL 2023 REPORT



A Journey through Landscape and Heritage

9 Days of Guided Walks & Activities

13th to 21st May 2023

[discoverdorchester.co.uk/
dorchester-walking-festival](https://discoverdorchester.co.uk/dorchester-walking-festival)



Written by Miranda Woodgate, Event Co-ordinator

"Dorchester Town Council is proud to be a Headline Sponsor of the Dorchester Walking Festival. It is a fantastic inclusive event that can be enjoyed by all. It is also a great way for us to bring visitors to the town and boost our local economy. Dorchester is a brilliant place to walk in and around, we have so much incredible history and beautiful green spaces. A Walking Festival is a superb way to celebrate and enjoy our magnificent town."

Cllr Janet Hewitt, Mayor of Dorchester

Section	Contents	Page
1	Overview	2
2	Background	3
3	Aims	3
4	Local Support	3
5	Funding	4
6	Themes	4
7	Guided Walks	5
8	Self-guided Walks	6
9	QR Codes	6
10	Launch Event	7
11	Marketing	7
12	Statistics	8
13	Feedback	8
14	Conclusion	10
15	Recommendations	10

Overview

The Dorchester Walking Festival 2023 was a 9-day event that took place during National Walking Month, from Saturday, 13th May 2023 to Sunday, 21st May.

There were 50 guided walks, 20 walks were free to reduce financial barriers to taking part, 23 guides led the walks – 12 paid and 11 as unpaid volunteers. Around 1,000 walkers took part, 750+ on the bookable walks and around 200 turning up for other walks, such as *Beating the Bounds*. Some joined more than one walk. The programme included long hikes and short walks with activities for all abilities and interests.

Dorchester and the surrounding area contains many interesting and picturesque places to visit. These can be reached via town streets, footpaths, country lanes, grassy tracks and steeper pathways, some with breathtaking views, so it made sense to include self-guided walks around the area for walkers to enjoy at their leisure to widen the appeal for outside visitors. Lengths of these vary from 2-mile trails around the town to more intrepid hikes, such as the 26-mile Cerne Valley walk and the 212-mile Hardy Way, to be done over many days. Promotion of these walks was intended to attract those who prefer to walk on their own or at their own pace, to encourage visitors to linger for longer and to showcase Dorchester as an ideal base for walkers.

Background

The main aim was to create a new walking festival for the town that would have mass appeal and be as inclusive as possible. As well as putting Dorchester on the map as a walking destination, the event was to raise awareness of Dorchester as a hub for tourism, highlighting its long and impressive heritage and other attributes of the town. The programme was to include something for everyone, families and individuals alike, to maximise uptake.

Objectives:

- To bring new tourists into Dorchester
- To increase footfall into cafes, bars and restaurants
- To increase knowledge of Dorchester's walking routes
- To increase pride in Dorchester and its heritage

Local Support

Local hospitality businesses, tour guides, walking groups, heritage and other organisations and individuals were invited to attend a special meeting in early November to discuss and decide whether to run a walking festival. The meeting was well attended with 23 attending and a further 22 that couldn't attend but requested to be kept informed. A presentation was given providing details of other UK walking events and how one could work for Dorchester. Discussion took place, with those present agreeing the event should take place during National Walking Month between 13th and 21st May and be called Dorchester Walking Festival (DWF). Several businesses came forward with special festival offers:

- Brewhouse & Kitchen
- Café Octagon
- Greenwood Grange
- Pic-Nick
- PiPs Poundbury
- Shire Hall Café
- The Engine Room
- The Horse with the Red Umbrella
- The Keep Military Museum
- The King's Arms
- The Old Tea House
- The Sun Inn
- The Trumpet Major

Local guides and walking organisations, such as Joy Wallis, Derek Pride, Dorchester Strollers, Brian Bates, Miles King, Dorchester Civic Society, Mark Chutter, Alastair Simpson, Jurassic Jaunts, Dorchester Walking & Social Group, Casterbridge Ramblers, Simon Conibear, Claire Myers and Steve Wallis, all came forward to support and lead walks.

Funding

The event was funded mainly through sponsorship. This paid for marketing collateral and subsidised walks for families and those less mobile. Profits from the paid walks went to the tour guides leading them. Local walking groups offered to lead the walks as volunteers.

Headline sponsors were Kingston Maurward College and Dorchester Town Council, Silver sponsors were 1610, Grassby Funeral Service The King's Arms, The Smuggler's Inn and Lulworth Cove Inn with Bronze Sponsorship taken up by Greenwood Grange.

"We are delighted to be involved with the Dorchester Walking Festival and are looking forward to celebrating our beautiful estate with the residents of Dorchester and the wider community. Kingston Maurward has a long history dating back to the mediaeval era, links with Thomas Hardy, and of course its rich heritage as a college, and we'd like people to explore this. We welcome visitors of all ages and abilities to join us at this year's Dorchester Walking Festival."
Esther Baker, Kingston Maurward



Themes

The guided walks and activities were put into 5 categories:

- Activity
- Health
- Heritage
- Hike
- Nature



Guided Walks

The 50 walks were as follows:

A Casterbridge Ramble • A Folk Music Walk • A Grand Tour of Fordington • A Herb Detective Walk • A Seaside Excursion • A Trip Down Memory Lane • An Imaginary Walk through 17th Century Dorchester • Beating the Bounds • Brewing Heritage Tour & Beer Tasting • Buggy Walk & Toddle Nature Trail • Crime & Punishment • Dawn Chorus Walk • Discover Brewery Square • Dorchester, A Military Town • Dorchester Ghost Walk • Dorchester Water Meadows • Dorset Hillfort Pleasure Walk • Exploring Coastal Paths with Iconic Views • Family Scavenger Hunt • Hike to Hardy's Monument • Moreton Walk • Mysterious Dorchester & Sacred Centres • Nature Walks: Maiden Castle Maumbury Rings & Weymouth Avenue Poundbury Hillfort & The Great Field The Poundbury Nature Project • North Dorchester Frome Valley Walk • Poundbury – An Architectural Tour • Pregnancy, Parents & Baby Sling Walk • Ratty's Trail – A Riverside Walk • Roman Aqueduct Talk & Tour • Stargazing Safari & Bat Walk • Stones & Circles Archaeological Dowsing Walk • Stretch & Stride Pilates Workout • The History & Mystery of Maiden Castle • The Poundbury Nature Project • Thomas Hardy's Footsteps • Totally Locally Retail Trail • Victorian Architecture • Walk & Talk with the Head Gardener • Walk Well Workshop • Walking for Health • Walking with Trees • West Stafford Walk • Woodland Wellbeing Walk

The walks were displayed on the Discover Dorchester website with links to the Eventbrite booking site. Booking was essential to manage numbers and for guides to check names against a register at the start of each walk. The only walks that didn't require booking were the Family Scavenger Hunt, Dorchester Ghost Walk and Beating the Bounds.

Many of the walks were fully booked, with some of the more popular ones triggering a waiting list. Some mid-week walks had to be cancelled through low attendance – Dorset Hillforts Pleasure Walk, Totally Locally Retail Trail, Pregnancy, Parents & Baby Sling and it was decided the Stargazing Safari & Bat Walk was not cost effective to run.





The walking festival included the following 25 self-guided walks available to download from the Discover Dorchester website:

A Walk Around Thomas Hardy Country • Barrow Circle Walk • Budmouth Walk • Cerne Valley Walk • Discover Historical Dorchester • Dorchester Hidden Histories • Dorchester to Weymouth Trail • Dorchester Town Trail • Eastern Dorchester & Fordington • Fordington – A Short Walk • Kingston Maurward to Hardy's Cottage • Kingston Maurward to Max Gate • Maiden Castle & Clandon Barrow • Maiden Newton to Dorchester • Mellstock Poems Walk • Ratty's Trail • Return of the Native – Egdon Heath • Stones & Circles Walk • The Hardy Way • The Poppy Trail • The Treves Trail • The Trumpet Major & The Melancholy Hussar • Thomas Hardy Walk • Thornecombe Wood Walkabout • Walk to Hardy's Cottage

QR Codes

The Programme included a QR code link to the Discover Dorchester website to download self-guided walks and links to nearby cafes as suggested starting points. Some of the cafes agreed to display posters with QR codes to download a suggested self-guided walk best started from that location.



Launch Event on Friday, 12th May



The festival was officially launched at a special reception, hosted by sponsors Kingston Maurward at the new Stinsford Centre on the afternoon before the walking festival started.

Guests included the Mayor of Dorchester, sponsors, guides, local businesses and Tourism Partnership members. Brief talks were given on Thomas Hardy and his connections with Kingston Maurward, and Margaret Marande spoke about the 212-mile Hardy Way that she mapped out after retiring.

"We are delighted to be involved with the Dorchester Walking Festival and are looking forward to celebrating our beautiful estate with the residents of Dorchester and the wider community. Kingston Maurward has a long history dating back to the mediaeval era, links with Thomas Hardy, and of course its rich heritage as a college, and we'd like people to explore this. We welcome visitors of all ages and abilities to join us at this year's

Dorchester Walking Festival."
Esther Baker, Kingston Maurward

Marketing & Promotion

Articles were published in Dorset Echo, West Dorset Magazine, Dorset Magazine, Dorset Life, Top Sante, Dorchester Nub News, Visit Dorset and details of the event were added to Dorset Hospitality websites such as the King's Arms, Greenwood Grange and on national walking group websites and Event sites. Facebook promoted posts were created for the walking festival and Beating the Bounds and posts were also created and shared with various groups and organisations via social media. There were 4,000 28-page programmes printed and distributed at tourist information points across Dorset and neighbouring counties and relevant outlets across Dorchester. Posters were also put up in the Rotunda, Borough Gardens and on local notice boards.

Statistics

Discover Dorchester Website (April to July)

Dorchester Walking Festival	3,569 views	2,129 users	1.69 views per user	1.06 mins average engagement	12,067 (Event count)
------------------------------------	-------------	-------------	---------------------	------------------------------	----------------------

Discover Dorchester Facebook Promoted Posts (March/May)

Dorchester Walking Festival	24,065 post reach	838 post engagement	704 link clicks	15 Post shares	79 Reactions
Beating The Bounds	5,170 post reach	153 post engagement	95 link clicks	78 Responses	40 Reactions

Feedback Forms were sent out to all walkers that booked online, as well as to guides, hospitality businesses that contributed or provided a special festival offer and other local businesses.

Walkers - 132 responses were received.

Summary

- 75% enjoyed the walk very much
- 14% were satisfied with the walk
- 61% said the walk made them feel more positive about Dorchester
- 55% said they visited a local café or restaurant before or after the walk
- 22% said they visited a local shop before or after the walk
- 47% lived in Dorchester, 25% surrounding villages, 22% Dorset, 6% outside Dorset
- 76% said the walk made them want to explore the area more on foot
- 92% want to make DWF an annual event/8% said maybe – No-one said No

Comments

"The enormous variety of walks both in length and content together with the expertise of our guides"

"Good to feel part of something."

"Great to find out hidden information and routes around Dorchester"

"We learnt some very interesting facts and feel explanations were very clear. Made us both feel we want to learn more."

"Learnt more about the town. There seemed to be a good range of walks available."

"A chance to find out more about Dorchester with informative guides in a group."

"I've lived here over 20 years and do a lot of walking locally, but today's walk took me down paths and over fields I have not walked before."

Guides – 17 responses were received

Summary

- 94% were satisfied with communications
- 94% enjoyed taking the walk
- 15 guides said they would definitely like to lead future walks
- 100% said the event was well organised
- 15 guides want to make DWF an annual event / 2 said maybe – No-one said No

Comments

“I loved facilitating this walk and the cream tea at the Old Tea House was fabulous!”

“Being a walk leader at this event was very positive as there was a lot of support available.”

“I loved the enthusiasm of the people who came on the walks”

“Huge variety and wish I could have done more of the other walks myself”

“The wide variety of walks. Meeting new people. Just getting people out walking and enjoying the Dorchester area.”

“Really enjoyed it...lots of fun and people seemed very keen.”

Hospitality/Festival Offers – 5 responses were received

Summary

- 60% had customers take up their festival offer
- 1 business reported a higher turnover, 2 said maybe, 2 said No
- 1 business reported more footfall, 1 said maybe, 2 said No, 1 didn't know
- 100% want to make DWF an annual event

Comments

“Well organised with a few more people about”

“Financially not as effective as hoped but still very happy to be involved”

“The thought given to different abilities, it felt like there was something for everyone.”

“Supporting a local event and welcoming new customers to our venue”

“Seeing people get together to be able to meet new people”

Businesses – 14 responses were received

Summary

- 13 were aware of the event
- 2 businesses reported a higher turnover, 4 said maybe, 5 said no, 3 didn't know
- 4 reported more footfall, 1 said maybe, 6 said no, 3 didn't know
- 57% want to make DWF an annual event, 43% said maybe, no-one said No

Comments

"Encourages locals to shop local and helps to improve our offering to tourists"

"Involve local businesses more"

"Great idea for walks but nothing in Charminster!"

"Community events are important - people are always looking for great things to do and get involved with."

Conclusion

Dorchester's first walking festival was a resounding success. The aims and objectives were all met. However, most of the walkers came from inside Dorset. The popularity of the event is a good indicator that visitor numbers and spend will improve each year as the event gains traction and becomes more widely known. There was a great deal of enthusiasm for the event from the public that will help DWF become established as a welcome addition to the town's calendar.

Feedback from everyone involved has been very positive, with commenters concurring that the Dorchester Walking Festival should become an annual event. Future promotion should focus on encouraging walkers and tourists from outside the county to take part to maximise visitor spend. Visit Britain notes that walking is Britain's most popular activity, with walking and eating out the most popular activities for people taking days out in England. Interest in walking holidays is increasing in most European countries and UNWTO sees walking tourism as "one of the most popular ways to experience a destination". Dorchester has an opportunity to benefit from this trend and should ensure that DWF becomes an established brand and national event.

Recommendations

- Planning and promotion of DWF2024, if approved, should start as soon as possible.
 - To facilitate planning for guides, venues and walkers to save the date
 - To allow sufficient notice for visitors to plan a stay around the festival
 - More time for promotion and to collaborate with businesses and partners
 - To maximise sponsorship
- Wireless microphone headsets should be purchased for guides to ensure they can be heard by larger groups and to cope with traffic noise.