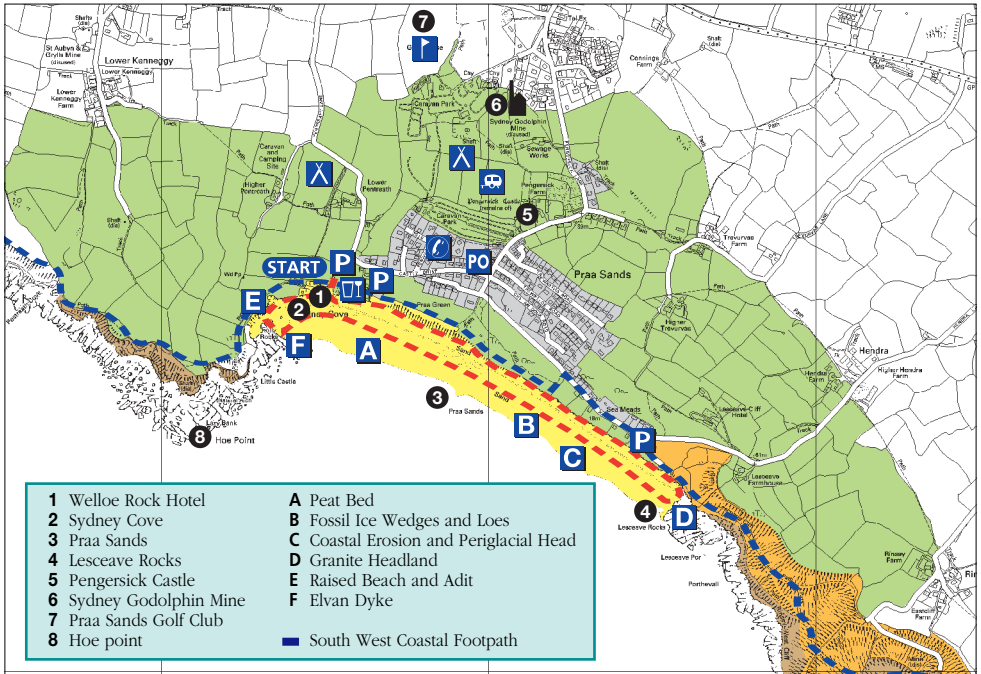


Praa Sands



A stroll along this mile of sandy beach is exciting at any time of the year. It's a great place for sunbathing and swimming on a hot summer's day. Or in winter get well wrapped up, face the elements and blow away a few cobwebs. When the swell is good, you'll see surfers out on the waves – so bring your gear! There is a range of cafes, beach shops and a pub, as well as a choice of accommodation. Praa Sands is within the Cornwall Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and is a Regionally Important Geological Site.



Time: Allow up to 1 hour.

Length: 2 miles.

Location: Praa Sands is well signed from the A394 Penzance-Helston Road. From the crossroads turn down to Praa Sands.

Parking: There are three car parks at Praa Sands. Roadside parking is not permitted.

Refreshments: Praa Sands offers a range of shops and a pub (though the choice is limited in winter).

Praa Sands



Peat bed.



Praa Sands c1930 – few building here date from before this time.



Head and WW2 pill box on beach.



Granite showing large white feldspar crystals.

Point A: Peat bed

Near the café is a black platform of 1,300 year-old fossil soil sticking out from the base of the dunes. Pollen analysis shows records the existence of Alders growing nearby – evidence of the submerged forest that once grew in Mount's Bay.

Point B: Fossil Ice wedges and loess

During the last Ice Age, the climate at Praa Sands was similar to Siberia today. In winter it was so cold that the soil surface cracked and then filled with loose materials. Today these are visible as pale vertical structures in the cliff known as ice wedges.

Around the ice wedges is an 18-inch layer of earthy material known as loess. This was created 17,000 years ago, carried by winds over what is now the Irish Sea, picking up fine particles from the surface of glacial ice lying and then deposited them elsewhere.

Point C: Coastal erosion and Periglacial Head

If you were here in the 1970s, the wartime pillbox at the back of the beach would have still been on the top of the cliffs. Coastal defence works attempt to stop further erosion, but the winter gales can be very destructive and this is no easy task.

The cliffs behind the pillbox are made from an earthy sediment known as Periglacial Head. In the last Ice Age, Mounts Bay was dry land and the ground was frozen all year. In summer, the surface thawed out a little and this allowed pieces of frost-shattered rock to slide down onto lower ground, gradually building up in layers.

Point D: Granite headland

The cliffs at the eastern end of the beach are made from a 280 million year-old rock called granite. Once a molten mass inside the earth's crust, it contains large white crystals of feldspar which are amazingly well preserved considering this mineral rots in the presence of water to form china clay.

Lesceave Rocks is a good place to find seaweeds, sea anemones, crabs and stranded fish in the numerous rock pools.

Point E: Raised beach

At the western end of the beach is Sydney Cove. In the cliffs here is a man-made drainage tunnel (adit) created to dewater a now disused mine. Within the adit roof are pebbles rounded by the action of the sea. This is evidence that just before the last glaciation around 100,000 years ago the sea level was higher than it is now.

Point F. Elvan dyke

Amongst the rocks at the bottom of the cliffs is a red-brown ridge of rock sticking out into the sea. This feature is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) because of its geological importance. It was formed 270 million years ago when molten rock forced its way up through a vertical crack from deep in the Earth's crust. Take a closer look and you'll see that the white feldspar crystals are all lined up in the same direction.



Red-brown elvan showing feldspar crystals all lined up in the same direction.



This Iron Age Axe was found on Praa Sands beach. Today it is on display in Helston Folk Museum.

The Australian plane crash

On the 2nd June 1943 a RAAF Sunderland plane crashed 300 yards off shore at Praa Sands. As the men struggled out of the sea, they were met by two men, soon followed by women carrying steaming cups and jugs of tea.

The plane had been on a sortie over the Bay of Biscay. Despite the engines catching fire and injuries to the crew, they had kept the plane airborne by throwing everything moveable overboard to lighten the plane.

This particular crash was famous because the crew of eleven men destroyed three, possibly four, out of eight German fighters in 45 minutes of terrifying action. Secretly guns had been fitted to protect the underneath of the plane, this proved a crucial part in their survival. The RAF Chief of Air Staff described the incident as "one of the finest instances in the war of the triumph of coolness, skill and determination against overwhelming odds..."



The RAAF Sunderland on the beach.



The crew of the RAAF Sunderland.



Two men were drowned off Praa Sands in 1905 when the French Brig Noiselle went aground carrying a load of pig iron.



In 1956, wooden barrels of cement were washed ashore at Praa Sands, presumed to have come from the wreck of the Yewcroft, which went down off Cudden Point. Once wet the cement hardened and was useless, but the wood was easily removed and re-used. The hardened cement insides can still be seen around Praa Sands and Newtown.

Smuggling

Up until the late 1700s, smugglers openly landed their cargoes on beaches or in harbours. But after the end of the war with France in 1815, runs were more secretive as coastguards became efficient, driven by the reward of prize-money for capturing smuggled cargoes.

In the dark of night, smugglers dropped their contraband overboard, anchored a certain distance below the surface. Later the goods were collected and brought ashore. Land parties included flashers who signalled that the coast was clear – sometimes using the pan of an old flintlock pistol to give the flash, but favouring a special lantern that could direct light. Batmen were armed with sticks (cudgels) to stop interference with the operation. Once ashore contraband goods were taken to a safe place on the backs of ponies or men. The going rate for each man was 1 shilling a night, plus a 5 shilling bonus if the run was successful.

Goods were landed at Praa Sands. At the west-end of the beach is a tunnel that once lead to the house at Pengersick said to be the birthplace of the smuggler John Carter, the self-styled King of Prussia.

The portuguese Windfall

In 1526, Sir William Godolphan teamed up with Thomas St Aubyn of Clowance and John Milliton of Pengersick. They hired 40 men and seized silver, jewellery, cloth, copper and musical instruments from the wreck of the St Anthony at Gunwalloe on the Lizard. The ship belonged to King John III of Portugal who was unable to recover his goods. Instead, the £18,880 windfall greatly boosted the fortunes of the three families.



Pengersick Castle.

Pengersick Castle

A little inland is Pengersick Castle. Built for refuge and defence, its four-storey tower dates back to c.1550 and was part of an extensive fortified Tudor mansion. The top floors were domestic and the ground floor was defensive. Above the main doorway is the drop-slot through which burning oil and other substances were poured on unwelcome guests.

The families that lived here were among the most celebrated in Cornwall and beyond. Important marriages connected them with other dynasties including the Killigrews and Godolphins. Around 1535, William Milliton married Honor Godolphin and the marriage celebrations included the refurbishment of Pengersick House. After their only son was lost at sea, the property was divided between his 7 sisters. None of them had enough of the property to preserve it as a home and the estate fell into disuse. Over the following hundred years a significant part of the estate came under the control of the Godolphins.

Pengersick has a reputation for black magic, sorcery and wickedness – perhaps the rumours spread by wreckers and smugglers to discourage visitors. The ghost of a black-robed monk has been seen – could this be the Hailes Abbey monk denied his tithes in 1330 from Henry Pengersick? The bedroom in the tower is said to be Britain's most haunted room and is still regularly visited by ghost hunters.

The history of the site goes back before the Tudor mansion. A Mediaeval Apothocarian Garden is believed to have existed here and this is being recreated using contemporary plants listed by Aelfric in 995 AD.

Opening times (01736) 762579.

Britain's most haunted bedroom!

