

SUDBROOK A PORTSKEWETT

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SUDBROOK & PORTSKEWETT

Essential Information:

For local visitor information and details of accommodation call Chepstow Tourist Information Centre on 01291 623772 or see:

www.visitwyevalley.com

www.walescoastpath.gov.uk

www.walksinchepstow.co.uk

www.caldicotcastle.co.uk

Local transport

The number 63 bus runs from the village to Caldicot, Severn Tunnel Junction Station and Newport. For details of public transport visit: www.traveline-cymru.info

Parking

There is car parking at Black Rock Picnic Site and limited street-side car parking in Portskewett and at Sudbrook near to the Sudbrook Historical Exhibition. There is plenty of parking at the alternative start point at Caldicot Castle.

Provisions for a picnic can be purchased at the Spar shop opposite Portskewett village green and meals can be obtained at the Portskewett Inn. Call to check opening times: 01291 430505

The Countryside Code: Respect - Protect - Enjoy

- Be Safe - plan ahead and follow any signs
- Leave gates and property as you find them
- Protect plants and animals, and take your litter home
- Keep dogs under close control
- Consider other people

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Credits:

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With thanks to Peter Strong, Andrew Leitch and the members of Sudbrook History Society.

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Hunger marchers at the Severn Tunnel in 1936



Inside the Mission Hall



The Pumping Station

Sudbrook History Exhibition

...at the Sudbrook Non Political Club

Run by volunteers from Caldicot and District Local History Society, you will find a wealth of local information here, including an exhibition of old photographs and a video about the area. Visitors can use the resources to find out more about the Severn Railway Tunnel project, the village of Sudbrook, the lave net fishermen of Black Rock, and much, much more.

Tea, coffee and toilets are available at the Sudbrook Non Political Club. Check opening times on the website: www.caldicohistory.org.uk/sudbrook or call **01291 425638**



A walk through history around the villages of Sudbrook and Portskewett



On the trail of a changing coastline

Where the Severn Estuary starts to narrow near Sudbrook only three and a half miles of water separates Wales from England. Neolithic man, Iron Age tribes, Romans and Medieval villagers all chose to live near this vantage point overlooking the Severn. The river was a vital trading route and its influence was felt far inland via streams and pills - the local name for a creek or a small tidal harbour. Boats even travelled towards the Roman town of Caerwent along the river Neddern, which in the past flowed into the Severn at Sudbrook.

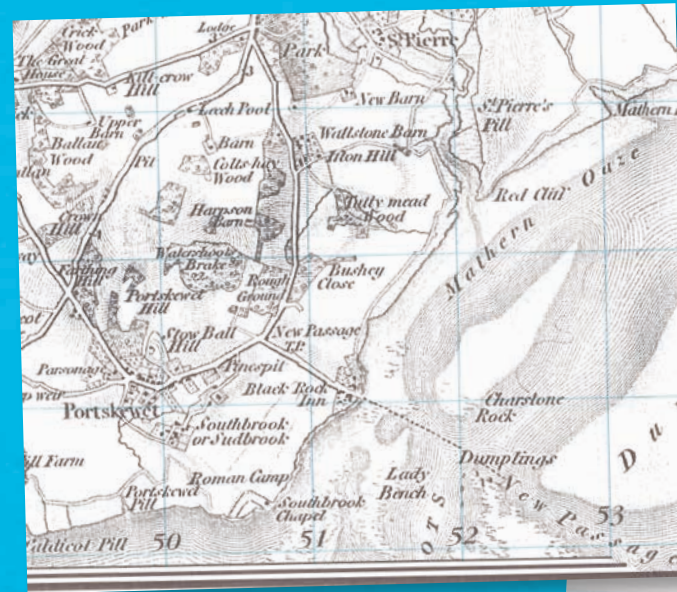


St Pierre Pill

A Customs House located beside St Pierre Pill shows just how important trade along the Severn was, although today the Customs House stands alone in fields, half a mile away from water. The Pill, cut off from the Severn by a railway line, has silted up. The Customs House is the white building in the centre of this picture, with Mathern Church to the right.

Since Roman times the marshland along the Severn has been drained. This marshland was created as sea levels rose about 8000 years ago. An inscribed stone found nearby at Goldcliff records the efforts of Roman soldiers

to build a sea wall. As the climate changed in the 14th and 15th centuries the Severn widened and, with nearby cliffs eroding, the medieval village of Sudbrook was abandoned. Villagers moved inland to higher ground.



Where is Sudbrook? Only the Roman Camp and medieval chapel appear on this 1830 map.



Lave net fishermen at Black Rock. Footprints in the mud some 6,000 years old have been discovered along the Severn.



People have chosen to cross the river here for thousands of years though the ferry was confusingly called the *New Passage*.

In the 18th century a turnpike road was built to Black Rock, bringing more travellers, traders, drovers and tourists to the ferry. When the railway arrived a pier was built out into the estuary, so that travellers could alight from their train directly beside the ferry. Crossing was often hazardous and the idea of an alternative route under the river was proposed in the 19th century. The place chosen for the railway tunnel to start was Sudbrook, where a new village was built to



house the men working on the tunnel. At the end of the 20th century this was also the preferred route for the Second Severn Crossing which now dominates the landscape.



This is the New Passage House on the English bank, looking towards Blackrock and Sudbrook. In 1534 Henry VIII banned crossings of the river at night because, 'Many crimes, robberies and murders are done in the counties of Gloucester and Somerset in the area near the Severn River ... and after such murders and crimes are done the said robbers, criminals and murderers, with the goods cross the river by night into South Wales'.



View of the Great Western Railway Steam Ferry Pier at Black Rock. (From The Graphic, Nov 6th, 1880)

Trails through Time - Sudbrook and Portskewett

Start: BLACK ROCK picnic site and car park

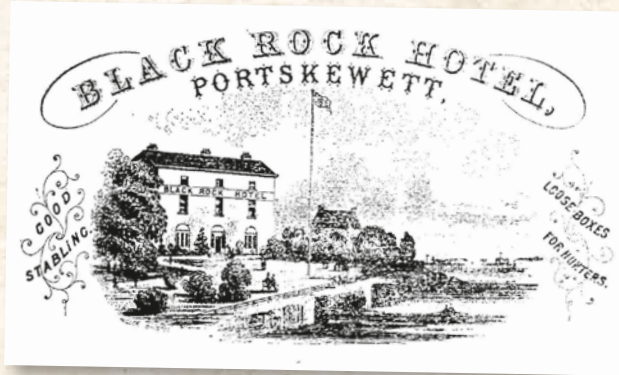
Grid Ref: 513881

Distance: 4 miles

An easy level walk on the coastal path, along quiet lanes, roadside footpaths and across fields.

1 Ancient river crossing at Black Rock

Make your way from the Black Rock car park through the picnic site towards the Severn. At the viewing point looking out over the Severn, stand with your back to the river and imagine the scene here 150 years ago when the Black Rock Hotel occupied this site.



The Hotel was demolished in the 1960s, but you can still see the slipway and Ferry Master's House which are on the right in this picture. You will pass them at the end of the walk.

Why was such a grand hotel built here? Black Rock was the landing place for the New Passage Ferry. If you look straight across the estuary you may be able to spot the white New Passage House where travellers disembarked on the English side. By the 19th century not only was the Black Rock a busy hotel serving ferry passengers, it had become a

popular destination in its own right with pleasure gardens, croquet, quoits and regular band concerts.

Roman coins found in the mud here were probably thrown into the water as an offering to the gods for a safe crossing. This one is now in the collections of Newport Museum and Art Gallery.



Many people of note used the ferry, including Thomas Telford, who in 1824 described the New Passage as 'one of the most forbidding places at which an important ferry was ever established.'

It's no surprise that the dangerous crossing from Black Rock was unpopular. By the 1870s with increasing coal freight from South Wales, the Great Western Railway embarked on a feat of engineering excellence constructing the Severn Railway Tunnel. 'Passengers still cross the Severn here, but they go beneath it, instead of over it', reported the press in 1886 when the opening

of the tunnel 'rendered obsolete the ferry which, until recent days, plied between the two shores'.

From the viewing point turn right and follow the Coastal Path signs keeping the river to your left.

A new village was built at Sudbrook to house the men working on the tunnel. The walk follows the road which was made in the 1870s to link Sudbrook with Black Rock. This became a well-trodden route; Sudbrook was a teetotal village and the Black Rock Hotel was the nearest place the workmen could get a beer!



This whale was washed up on the shore near Sudbrook in the early 20th century.

6,000 - 4,800 BC Footprints left in the mud along the Severn

4000 - 2000 BC Burials in chambered tomb at Heston Brake

2 Shipbuilding at Sudbrook

On the left as you enter the village you pass the site of one of the two brickyards which made bricks to line the tunnel. Once the tunnel was completed this brickyard was converted to ship building. 104 ships were launched and many were sent to South America. The Frensham at 739 tons was the largest and the last ship built here in 1922.

'During the year previous no less than ten steamers were built and despatched to the River Plate...all manufactured at the Sudbrook Yard'

reported the Western Mail in 1891 These men were employed in the ship yard c. 1920.



Keep straight on into the village.

3 Sudbrook

If you look at a map of this area in the early 1870s there was only one house - Southbrook Farm. Ten years later a new village had been built. A project on the scale of the Severn Railway Tunnel required a huge labour force and over 3000 workers needed somewhere to live. Between 1873 and 1886 Thomas Walker, the main contractor on the tunnel, provided a mission hall, school, hospitals, a coffee house and reading room as well as housing for the workforce.

The first house on the right - No 1 The Villas - was the Estate Manager's house. The Villas were constructed for foremen and skilled employees. The terraces further on were for workers lower down the pecking order. They were built using stone removed from the tunnel. As the tunnel got deeper and the rock changed so the building stone in the houses changed. Numbers 10 and 13 became orphanages, founded by Thomas Walker's daughter in 1890.



The Villas, 1886.

4 Sudbrook Board School

Look out on the right for the old Sudbrook Board School and school house built in 1881. In 1901 it had spaces for 240 children.

On your left the Pumping Station dominates the village.

5 The Pumping Station

In October 1879 workmen digging the tunnel unexpectedly struck a massive underground spring. As the Western Mail reported, 'The men who were underground at the time (fortunately only about 14 or 15) succeeded in reaching the surface in safety, though

Thomas Walker, main contractor.

'I know of no contractor who has displayed so much care and solicitude for the comfort and welfare of the workpeople employed by him' wrote John Hawkshaw, the Tunnel's Chief Engineer, following Walker's death in 1889.



the water so closely pursued them that it reached above their knees and soon filled the whole of the workings'. It took two years and a particularly courageous diver to drain the tunnel completely. Alexander Lambert, wearing a heavy brass helmet and

2000 BC Iron Age fort built at Trinity Cliff

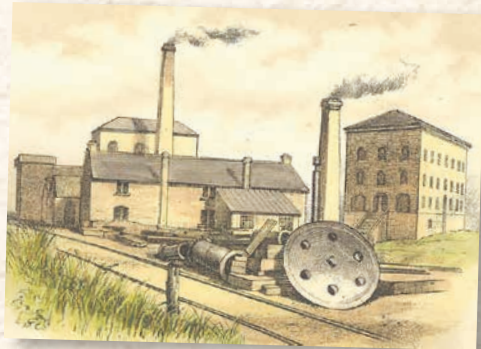
AD 40 Earliest Roman coin found at Black Rock

AD 200 Ships could sail up the Neddern towards Caerwent



Can you imagine how Alexander Lambert felt as he prepared to descend into the total darkness of the flooded tunnel? His efforts captured the public imagination and this picture appeared in *The Graphic* on Nov. 6th, 1880.

carrying a knapsack of compressed oxygen gas on his back, made several trips in complete darkness through the drowned workings to seal off the spring.



This Pumping Station was built to house six Cornish beam engines used to keep the tunnel dry. Twenty million gallons of water continue to flow into the tunnel daily. In the past this water was used by the nearby paper mill, a brewery in Magor and the Ordnance Factory at Caerwent.



6 The Mission Hall

This stood on the right just after the Pumping Station: 'it contains a good organ and will seat about 1,000 persons' the National Gazetteer of 1901 stated.

Keep straight on with the old railway line on your left.

Every day coal was brought to the Pumping Station along this line to keep the steam engines working.

After 100 yards turn left, crossing the railway line and turning left again passing the Post Office and Walker Flats on the right.

7 Coffee House and Reading Rooms

Thomas Walker was a deeply religious man. As he was against the use of alcohol he provided a Coffee House and Reading Rooms for his workmen, in the large building to the left of Walker Flats. The Coffee House was a meeting place for the Severn Tunnel Excavators Total Abstinence Society who took pledges not to drink. After the tunnel was completed the Coffee House became Marshall's grocery store. A covenant forbidding the sale of alcohol still remains on this house's deeds.

Keep right and walk past the Club on your left.

8 Pay Office

The teetotal Walker family would probably not have approved of the Club! It stands on the site of the former Pay Office. At one point there were seven timekeepers employed during the day and five at night. Seven pay clerks made up the pay books and paid up to 3,000 men on Saturdays.

Find out more about the village's history by visiting the Sudbrook Historical Exhibition housed inside the Club.



Great Western Railway cottages

9 Great Western Railway Cottages

Continue along the path past the row of cottages on your right built by the Great Western Railway Company, following the Coast Path signs until reaching the benches overlooking the river.

1065 Harold (later King) reputedly builds a hunting lodge at Portskewett

1100s Medieval village grows up around Trinity Chapel

Who built the tunnel?

Groups of men called 'walking gangers' built the tunnel. There were 50 on the Monmouthshire side and 17 on the Gloucestershire side. Each ganger managed 5 miners and 21 labourers, as well as the 'runners out' who pushed the skips of tunnelled stone. The men had to wear waterproof clothing - flannels - which were supplied by Walker. He erected large cabins at each pit top where they could take their meals and where a man was employed to dry the wet clothing.

This was dangerous work and the graves of casualties can be found in local churchyards. One man died during a storm on 17th October 1883 when a six foot tidal wave swept down the pit shaft where 84 men were working. Thomas Walker wrote that above ground the tidal wave 'entered all the houses, most of which were only one storey, and rose above the beds on which the children were asleep. The children were saved by being placed on high tables, or even shelves'.

The tunnel project generated much interest. Two ladies who wanted to see the workings came prepared for wet 'as far as regards water falling from the roof, being equipped in miners' donkey-jackets and sou'wester hats; but they little thought they would have to wade through two feet of water for some distance! Which they did pluckily, rather than turn back' recalled Joseph Talbot, a principal foreman who often showed visitors around.

Following the tidal wave a small boat was lowered down the pit shaft to rescue the men.

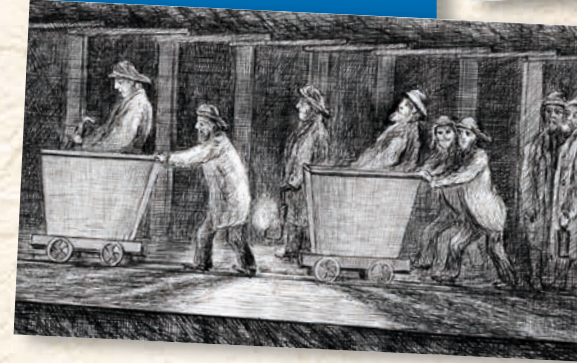


1858 'not a single house within half a mile of Trinity Chapel'

Bringing stone out of the tunnel.



Thomas Walker and John Hawkshaw inspecting the works, 1886.



Construction of the tunnel, showing the system of timbering. (From The Graphic, Nov 6th, 1880)



An electric lighting system was installed in 1882 and a telephone link was also established under the river to the Gloucestershire side. This picture of the scene at the pumping shaft in Five Mile Four Chain Pit appeared in The Graphic on Nov. 6th, 1880.



1863 Bristol and South Wales Union Railway links to Black Rock ferry

The remains of Trinity Chapel can be seen behind you, surrounded by metal railings.

10 Trinity Chapel

Hundreds of years before Thomas Walker established the Mission Hall for his workforce, people were worshipping at Trinity Chapel. Sudbrook was a parish in its own right in the medieval period and the area around the church was probably the site of the original village. As nearby cliffs eroded the village was abandoned. By the 1690s much of the churchyard had fallen into the river and bones from the graveyard were often found on the shore. When the Monmouthshire Antiquarians visited Trinity Cliff in 1858 there

was 'not a single habitation within half a mile'.



SUDBROOK CHURCH.

1873 Old Row, Sudbrook - the first houses built for men constructing the Severn Tunnel



'On the very brink of this cliff is an old ruin called Sudbrook Chapel, very picturesque to see, and which will probably not be seen much longer, for the sandstone of the cliff is here very soft, and the water year by year washes it away' reported Wirt Sykes in 1878.

Continuing along the coastal path with the river on your left, you now enter a flat area surrounded by the ramparts of an Iron Age fort.

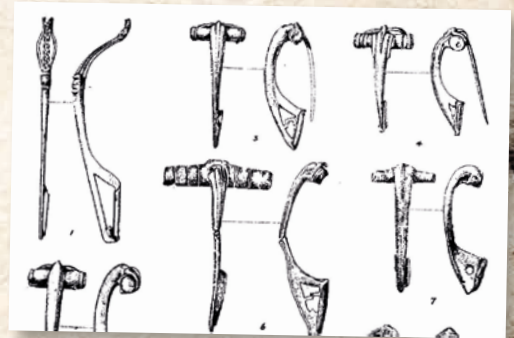
11 Iron Age Fort

This fort was built by the Silures, an Iron Age tribe who lived here in the second century BC. Unusually, this fort was used by the Romans throughout their period of occupation. The fort guarded the mouth of the river Neddern, which in the past flowed into the Severn here. It was a much larger river and at certain times of the year, ships could sail up towards Caerwent. The enclosed area was originally much bigger. Coastal erosion has reduced its size. In the 1880s Thomas Walker, who was a keen antiquarian, placed masses of rubble from the Severn Tunnel along the shoreline to protect the fort and chapel. You can still see lots of the stone below you on the shore. In the early 20th century this was a popular place for chapel and Sunday school outings and many day trippers sat and carved their initials into the rocks.

The fort was excavated in the 1930s by Nash Williams, Keeper of Archaeology at the National Museum Wales. He published his finds, which included late Iron Age, Romano British and Medieval pottery, in Archaeologia Cambensis in 1939, from which these images are taken.

Keeping to the left continue through the flat area until reaching the ramparts.

1880 - 84 Houses, mission hall school, hospitals and reading room built in Sudbrook for Severn Tunnel workforce.

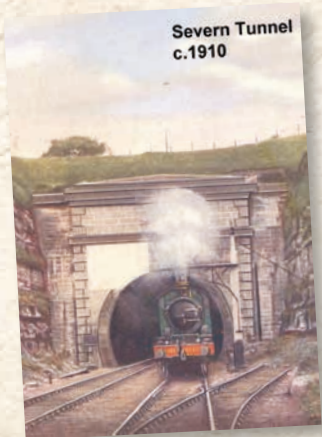


12 Ramparts and strategic lookout

This vantage point commanding views along the Severn was an observation post during World War Two. Can you see the concrete remains on top of the ramparts? There are also the concrete footings of a World War Two anti-aircraft gun emplacement nearer to the shore.

Walk through the ramparts and immediately turn right where the path forks, leaving the coast path (unless you want to follow the optional route to Caldicot Castle - see map).

Heading back towards the village, turn left at the playground following the lane back to the railway crossing. Turn left and cross the road to continue on the pavement with the houses of Sea View terrace on your right.



Severn Tunnel
c.1910

13 Severn Railway Tunnel

As you cross the old railway line don't panic if you feel the ground wobble beneath your feet. It will only be a train racing through the Severn Tunnel, 200 feet below you! It is the longest main line railway tunnel in Britain - 7 km.

The Tunnel opened for goods traffic on September 1st 1886, revolutionising the transport of coal from South Wales. As Thomas Walker wrote: 'The coal was worked and raised to the surface in the morning, loaded into wagons, weighed, invoiced, and running via the Severn Tunnel, Bristol, and Salisbury, deposited alongside the ship, at Southampton, ready for tipping into the hold, the same evening.'

For passengers between Cardiff and Bristol, who previously had to take two trains and a ferry the tunnel halved the journey time. The first passenger train ran on December 1st 1886.



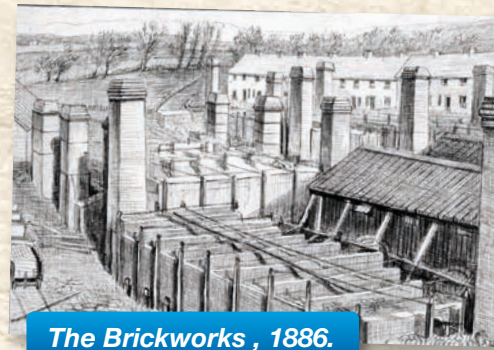
Looking along the railway line from the Pumping Station, with the Mission Hall on the right c. 1886.

14 Sea View

Can you spot the houses on the right which were built with shuttered concrete, probably the first time this technique was used in Britain? You can see the horizontal layers of concrete quite clearly on some of these houses. As more and more men came to work on the tunnel, so additional houses were needed. This row was originally called Concrete Row. Further along look out for the plaque showing which year the houses were built.

15 5 miles 4 chains brickyard

Sudbrook's second brickworks was on the left, located close to the top of the 5 mile 4 chain pit so that, 'within half an hour from the time the shale was got in the tunnel it was made into bricks, and the bricks placed on the floor of the drying shed to be dried for the kiln.'



The Brickworks, 1886.



76,400,000 bricks were used to build the tunnel. 28,000,000 came from the two Sudbrook brickworks.

16 The Fever Hospital

When smallpox broke out in Chepstow in 1883 Thomas Walker was quick to build a hospital for infectious diseases to contain any outbreak amongst the tunnel workers. The Fever Hospital was set back from the village to your left. In the 20th century this was the site of a paper mill.



The Fever Hospital

1886 First passenger train runs through Severn Tunnel

1880s Many ships built at Sudbrook exported to Argentina

Follow the road as it leaves the village and keep walking until reaching traffic lights.

17 Southbrook Farm

On the right stands Southbrook Farm which gave the village of Sudbrook its name. This was one of the few remaining houses in the area after the medieval settlement at Sudbrook was abandoned.

Cross the bridge and immediately turn left through a gate into the field marked Harold's Park.

18 Harold's Park - Time Team dig

A local legend drew *Time Team* here in 2007 to investigate whether these fields were the site of a royal hunting lodge. Some old maps show this area as *Harold's Field*. Early records state that Earl Harold of Wessex conquered this area and was building a hunting lodge in Portskewett in 1065. His lodge was attacked and destroyed by the King of Gwent, Caradoc ap Gruffydd. Harold never had the opportunity to take his revenge. In January 1066 he became King Harold II of England and later that year was killed at the Battle of Hastings.

When *Time Team* excavated they found a medieval manor with a fortified tower, built on the site of an earlier building which may have been a Welsh palace. One small piece of pottery, dating from Saxon times,

added weight to the connection with King Harold. *Time Team* also discovered that a tidal creek used to flow from this spot down to the Severn. Up to four metres deep it would have been possible to sail boats this far inland to moor here. Over the centuries the creek silted up.

The uneven ground as you walk through the field probably indicates the location of the Medieval village of Portskewett. Changing sea levels and coastal erosion may have forced the villagers to move some time after the 12th century as the village declined in importance.

Walk through the field around the church and head for a gate which leads onto the village green and up to the road, beside the remains of an old mill stone. Slightly to your left about 50 yards away is a grey 16th century house known as Portskewett Manor.

19 Portskewett Manor

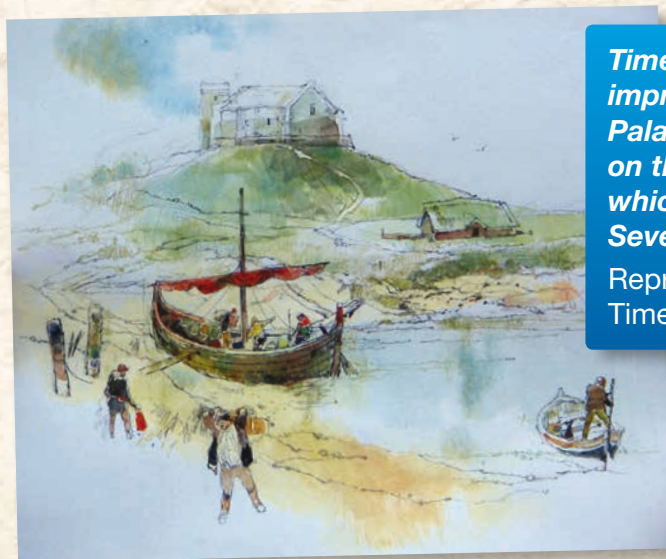
This is the oldest house in Portskewett dating from the 16th century. It has a number of features in common with farmhouses in Gloucestershire, highlighting Portskewett's strong links with the other side of the Severn. Leaded designs set into the plaster on the north wall are said to commemorate visits by King Charles I to the house.

From the village green turn right and continue along the footpath passing the shop on your left and St. Mary's Church on the right.

20 St Mary's Church

Dating from the late 11th century, the church has been restored and altered on a number of occasions. Can you spot the carved cross on the blocked up back doorway which could be over 1,000 years old? And the small windows in the upper part of the tower, which were added in the 16th century?

In the churchyard are the graves of men who came from the tin mines of Cornwall to work on the Severn Tunnel, as well as a monument erected by the workmates of a man killed during its construction. Samuel Parsley, the Captain of H.M. Mail Boat New Passage for thirty years, who died in 1840 is also buried here.



Time Team's artistic impression of Harold's Palace, looking down on the tidal creek which flowed out to the Severn at Sudbrook.

Reproduced courtesy of Time Team.

1958 Sudbrook paper mill opens (closes 2006)



1960s Black Rock Hotel demolished

Cross the road at the T junction and continue along the pavement until reaching a bench on the other side of the road to your left.

21 National School

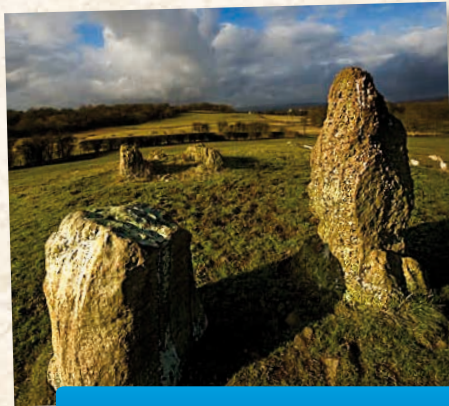
On the right stands the old National School, built by the Anglican National Society who wanted a church school in every parish. In the days before state education these were the only schools available to poor children.

Cross the road and follow the track up behind the bench. Go through a kissing gate into a field. (If it's a clear day you can see the outline of the standing stones of Heston Brake (22) at about 1 o'clock.) Follow the fence across the field and through another kissing gate. Go straight across the next field heading for another kissing gate. Go through this gate and keep straight on through another kissing gate. Follow the fence line and go through another kissing gate.

22 Heston Brake

The standing stones of Heston Brake, visible to the right, command extensive views across the estuary. This spot would have been strategically important and highly valued. Some 4,000 years ago it was chosen as the place where the bones of leading members of the local community were buried. When this Neolithic long barrow was excavated in 1888 a human skull, teeth and bones were found.

Head to the right of the bungalow, through the gate onto the lane, and turn right. At the main road turn right again along a short stretch of road until you reach Portskewett. At the T junction you can catch a final glimpse of Heston Brake to your right. Turn left along Black Rock Road.



Heston Brake
(David Morgan Photography)

23 Pike House

Standing on the corner, Pike House is a reminder that you are now following the old turnpike road to the ferry at Black Rock. The turnpike was operated by the New Passage Turnpike Trust and this house was built on the site of the original 1759 toll house. The New Passage Turnpike ran from Black Rock through Crick and Devauden to link with the road to Abergavenny. The first toll keeper was Moses Rosser, who was paid five shillings a week, but he was sacked in 1764 for defrauding his employers. The Turnpike was abolished in 1872.

Keep straight on, crossing the railway and passing the row of cottages on the right.

24 Railway Cottages

The 1840s and 1850s saw an influx of railway workers who came to construct the South Wales Railway. These cottages were built to house them.

Cross a bridge over the old railway line. Keep on until you spot a sign on the left for the coastal path, just before a barn conversion. These buildings were originally stabling for the ferry and the Black Rock Hotel.

Turn left up this track and after a few paces stand in the middle of the stone bridge looking towards the Severn.

25 Bristol and South Wales Union Railway branch line

This bridge crosses the branch line to Black Rock, which was built in 1865 to provide a direct link to the ferry. On a clear day you can see the Passage House on the English side, where the ferry landed.

Continue over the bridge and go through the kissing gate. Walk straight across the field heading for another kissing gate. Go through the gate and walk along the stone wall section and turn right at the end of it heading for the river bank. Keep right walking alongside the cliffs and bear right through the gate and along the path in front of the Ferry Master's House until you come to the slipway.

1966 Severn Bridge opened

1996 Second Severn Crossing opened

26 Ferry Slipway and Pier

Where the slipway leads down to the Severn can you find some old mooring rings? At low tide you can see remains of a wooden pier constructed to make it easier for railway passengers to board the steam ferries. Stormy weather made travel across the Severn unpredictable if not dangerous as the Bristol Mercury reported in 1870:

'The train ran down onto the pier, but very speedily was backed to terra firma, the Severn Sea making clean breaches over the pier... The passengers got out and enjoyed the sight of Old Neptune's sport ... taking refuge under the lee of the Black Rock

Hotel wall ... Great waves weighing tons came in with prodigious force, leaping 25 or 30 feet high, and falling on the pier and its approaches with tremendous crashes ... Meanwhile the steamer Christopher Thomas made several attempts to come alongside the pontoon for the passengers but was driven off. About two hours after ebb tide she succeeded and about 20 passengers scrambled on board; the remainder, fearing to venture, had departed - some via Gloucester, some back to Newport and Cardiff, while some comfortably ensconced themselves in the Black Rock Hotel'. Crossing the Severn today on one of the bridges is definitely less hazardous!



The pier at Black Rock

Bear right passing the Ferryman's House on your right as you return to the car park.

Old mooring rings at the Black Rock slipway.

27 The Ferry Master's House

Just before turning left into the car park look back to the Severn. This view was drawn by Thomas Birbeck for his book Caldicot Old Houses and Families. His picture shows the Ferry Master's House on the left and the Black Rock Hotel on the right. It's a shame that you can no longer enjoy a well-earned drink here after your walk!



Looking down to the slipway before the Black Rock Hotel (on the right) was demolished in the 1960s.

