



Stour Valley Way

THE COMPLETE GUIDE



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Overview

Stour Valley Way: Dorset's River-to-Sea Walk

The Stour Valley Way is a 103 km (64-mile) waymarked, point-to-point walk in southern [England](#), following the River Stour from the Stourhead/Stourton area in Wiltshire to Hengistbury Head on the Dorset coast. Most walkers take 5–6 days. It is a moderate lowland route: much of it is riverside, farmland and wetland walking, but the Dorset hillfort sections add real climbs and better views. It suits hikers wanting a historic river-valley trail with towns, inns and public transport options.

Route Overview

The main route runs between Stourton/Stourhead and Hengistbury Head near Christchurch, and can be walked in either direction. It passes or links the Stour valley towns and landmarks of Gillingham, Marnhull, Sturminster Newton, Fiddleford Mill, Child Okeford, Hambledon Hill, Hod Hill, Blandford Forum, Kingston Lacy, Wimborne Minster, Throop Mill, Christchurch and the coast. It is waymarked with the teal-and-orange kingfisher logo and also appears on Ordnance Survey maps. Regular public transport links many towns for staged walks. Two optional link sections allow circular variants, but the through-route is point-to-point. For comparison planning, see the [Amber Valley Route guide](#), [Ashby Canal Trail guide](#) or [Beacons Way guide](#).

History of the Stour Valley Way

The route was devised to follow almost the whole 64-mile course of the River Stour. Green Fields Books published guidebooks for the New Stour Valley Path in 1997 and the Original Stour Valley Path in 2003; the latter is associated with Edward Griffiths, who revised and renamed a variant as the Stour Valley Path. Dorset Council later established and waymarked its own kingfisher-signed version. The valley is rich in visible heritage, including Iron Age hillforts, Georgian Blandford Forum and Saxon-founded Wimborne Minster.

Notable highlights

Stourhead: National Trust estate near the River Stour's source area in Wiltshire, known for its landscaped gardens and lake. It gives the inland start or finish a clear landmark.

Hambledon Hill: One of Britain's best-preserved Iron Age hillforts and the highest point on the route at about 190 m. It is the major climb and viewpoint above the Blackmore Vale and the Stour.

Hod Hill: A chalk Iron Age hillfort where the Romans later built an auxiliary fort. The overlapping earthworks make this one of the most distinctive archaeological sections of the walk.

Sturminster Newton and Fiddleford Mill: A Blackmore Vale market town with a medieval six-arched bridge, close to the well-preserved medieval Fiddleford Mill on the Stour.

Blandford Forum: A Georgian market town largely rebuilt after the 1731 fire. Its uniform 18th-century townscape makes it one of the most notable urban stops on the river.

Hengistbury Head and Christchurch: The coastal finish beside Christchurch Harbour, where the Stour reaches the sea. The low headland, nature reserve and nearby Christchurch Priory make it a strong end

point.

Challenges to expect

Expect mostly lowland walking, but not a flat towpath: Hambledon Hill, Hod Hill and other Dorset earthworks add climbs, with about 1,284 m of total ascent overall. Riverside and field paths can be muddy or waterlogged after heavy rain, and winter can bring flood risk on low-lying Stour sections. Surfaces include grass, dirt, gravel, lanes and some roadside stretches, with stiles. Navigation is helped by kingfisher waymarks and OS mapping.

Key Data

Country	United Kingdom, England
Distance	103 km
Duration	5-6 days
Difficulty	Moderate
Trail type	Point to point
Elevation gain/loss	1284 m
Highest point	190 m
Terrain & landscape	River Valley, Lowland, Wetland, Farmland, Woodland, Coastal, Hills
Trail surface	Dirt, Grass, Gravel, Paved
Accommodation	Hotels, Inns, Guesthouses, Campsites
Average daytime temp.	16°C
Chance of rainfall	Medium
Estimated cost	\$\$
Optimal season	Spring, Summer, Autumn
Accessibility	Family Friendly, Pet Friendly
Facilities	Restrooms, Water Sources, Campsites, Picnic Areas
Permits & fees	No permits or fees

Introduction

The Stour Valley Way is a 64-mile source-to-sea walk following the River Stour from Stourton and the Stourhead estate in Wiltshire to Hengistbury Head beside Christchurch Harbour. It is a pastoral Dorset route rather than a mountain challenge: river paths, water-meadows, farmland, woodland and old market towns, with enough heritage and wildlife to keep every stage interesting.

Most days are gentle underfoot, moving between quiet villages, field paths, riverside tracks and occasional lanes. The teal-and-orange kingfisher waymark appears on fingerposts, waymarkers and lamp-post stickers, while the river gradually changes character from its upper reaches to the wider, slower lower Stour.

The lowland rhythm is broken by two proper climbs: Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill, both major Iron Age hillforts above the Blackmore Vale. The route also links some of the valley's strongest set-pieces, including Stourhead, Sturminster Newton and Fiddleford Mill, Blandford Forum, Kingston Lacy, Wimborne Minster, Throop Mill and the satisfying coastal finish at Hengistbury Head.

This is a good choice for fit beginners, families and experienced walkers who prefer village-to-village walking, river country and cultural interest over exposed ridges. It still needs practical planning: Stourton is less straightforward by public transport than Christchurch, accommodation should be booked ahead in smaller valley settlements, and low-lying sections can be muddy or flood-prone after heavy rain.

This guide covers stages, daily planning, accommodation, food, transport, terrain and the common mistakes to avoid.

Stage-by-Stage Guide

Stage 1: Stourton (Stourhead) to East Stour — approx. 14 km / 9 miles

The opening stage is the gentlest day of the standard five-day itinerary, leaving Stourton beside the National Trust's Stourhead estate and following the upper River Stour towards Gillingham and East Stour. It is mostly lowland walking across fields, riverside paths and quiet lanes, with no major climbs.

Stourhead is worth allowing time for if starting early. The long-distance route can be joined without entering the paid garden, but the estate paths and wider landscape sit close to the start, and Park Hill Camp Iron Age hillfort lies on the estate. Admission charges apply for the formal garden; current prices should be checked before travelling.

After Stourton, the route briefly crosses into Somerset west of Zeals near the Monarch's Way intersection, then enters Dorset north of Bourton. It passes through or near Bourton, Silton and Milton on Stour before reaching Gillingham, the key service point of the day.

Gillingham is the practical hub on this stage. It has a railway station on the South Western Railway London Waterloo line, as well as supermarkets, pubs and shops, making it the best place for resupply or for joining/leaving the route by public transport.

Beyond Gillingham, the path continues south via West Stour to East Stour. East Stour is a small village with limited services; The Crown Inn provides pub facilities and B&B accommodation, but availability should be checked before relying on it.

Underfoot, expect field edges, grass, riverside paths and quiet roads. In dry weather this is a straightforward stage, but after rain the field sections can be muddy and slower than the distance suggests.

Navigation is generally manageable, but the early part of the route around the Wiltshire/Dorset border has some places where waymarking can be less continuous. Carry an OS map or GPX track rather than relying only on fingerposts and the teal-and-orange kingfisher waymarks.

Food and water planning is simple if Gillingham is used sensibly. There are shops and pubs in town, but East Stour itself is small, so walkers staying there should arrive with any extra supplies needed for the evening or the next morning.

Public transport is strongest at Gillingham. Stourton/Stourhead is less convenient without a car, taxi or pre-arranged transfer from nearby rail and bus towns, so the start logistics need planning before the first walking day.

Stage 2: East Stour to Sturminster Newton — approx. 16 km / 10 miles

This stage continues through the Blackmore Vale, with a steady mix of river valley, water-meadow, farmland and quiet lane walking. It remains mostly flat to gently rolling, so the main challenge is underfoot condition rather than ascent.

The route passes through or near Stour Provost, Fifehead Magdalen and Marnhull before dropping towards Sturminster Newton. Marnhull is one of the more useful intermediate villages, with pubs including The Crown Inn, and is a sensible place to think about food, water or a break.

The walking here has a very different feel from the hillier sections later on. The Stour is still a modest lowland river, and the path threads between fields, small villages and wet meadows. Black poplar grows along the river banks, and herons, egrets and kingfishers are regularly associated with the Stour corridor.

Mud is the main warning on this day. Low-lying riverside sections and field paths can become sticky after prolonged rain, and the Stour floodplain can remain wet even after the weather improves. Watch rainfall in the days before walking, not just the forecast for the morning.

Sturminster Newton is one of the best overnight stops on the whole route. It has independent shops, a supermarket, pubs, cafés and a post office, as well as B&Bs, guesthouses and hotel accommodation including The Swan Hotel.

The approach into town is one of the signature sections of the Stour Valley Way. Sturminster Newton Mill stands beside the river, with the town reached by a medieval six-arched bridge over the Stour. The mill opens on selected summer days, so opening times should be checked if planning a visit rather than simply passing the building.

Sturminster Newton has bus connections to places including Blandford Forum, Gillingham and Shaftesbury, but no railway station. This makes it a useful stage break, though train access requires linking by bus, taxi or other local transport.

Navigation is not difficult in concept, but the river-meadow landscape can make paths less obvious where field lines, gates and wet ground interact. Keep checking the kingfisher waymarks at field exits and lane crossings, especially if livestock has gathered near gates or if vegetation is high.

Stage 3: Sturminster Newton to Charlton Marshall (Blandford Forum area) — approx. 23 km / 14.5 miles

This is the longest and hardest stage of the standard split, and the day that changes the character of the walk most sharply. It starts with gentle riverside walking, then climbs over the major chalk hillforts of Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill before finishing through villages and estate-edge countryside towards Blandford Forum and Charlton Marshall.

Leaving Sturminster Newton, the path reaches Fiddleford Mill about 2 miles east of town. The medieval mill, neighbouring Fiddleford Manor and the riverside setting make this one of the best early stops of the day. Fiddleford has a free car park and toilets, making it useful for support, section walks or a planned break.

The route continues through tiny Hammoon, where there are no facilities, and then towards Child Okeford. Child Okeford is an important pause point before the hillforts; The Baker Arms provides food, and any accommodation availability should be checked before planning to stop there.

The climb to Hambledon Hill is the first serious ascent on the Stour Valley Way. Hambledon Hill is one of Britain's finest Iron Age hillforts and also a Neolithic causewayed enclosure, with open chalk grassland and wide views across the Blackmore Vale. The summit area is exposed, so wind, rain and sun all feel stronger here than in the valley.

Take particular care on the chalk path rising from Shroton, which can be steep and slippery in wet weather. Chalk becomes polished and awkward after rain, so footwear with reliable grip matters more

on this stage than on the flatter valley days.

After Hambledon Hill, the route descends and crosses to Hod Hill, another major Iron Age hillfort later reused by the Romans. The views remain excellent, but the walking demands more concentration than the map distance alone implies. The descent from Hod Hill towards Stourpaine follows grass paths and fence lines, with steep sections in places.

Stourpaine is a useful village stop after the hillforts. The White Horse Inn provides pub facilities and accommodation, and the village sits on the A350, giving it clearer road access than many smaller settlements on the route.

The route then continues via Durweston and the Bryanston area before reaching Blandford Forum and, for this split, Charlton Marshall just to the south. Through Bryanston, pay attention to waymarks where the path uses permissive access near the large estate and school grounds.

Blandford Forum is the main service centre for the end of the day. It has supermarkets, independent shops, pubs, cafés, restaurants and a broad range of accommodation, including hotels. The Georgian townscape around the Market Place is the main built highlight, but for walkers its real value is the depth of food, resupply and overnight options.

Charlton Marshall itself is smaller than Blandford Forum, so many walkers treat the Blandford area as the practical overnight base. If accommodation is booked in Charlton Marshall or elsewhere south of Blandford, check evening food arrangements carefully before leaving the town centre.

Blandford Forum has bus links to destinations including Poole, Yeovil, Shaftesbury, Weymouth, Dorchester and Salisbury, but it has no railway station. Public transport options should be checked against the day of travel, especially for Sundays and bank holidays.

This stage is where navigation errors are most costly. The hillfort sections, descents, estate-edge paths and village links require more attention than the earlier river walking, so keep OS mapping or a GPX track to hand even where waymarks are present.

Stage 4: Charlton Marshall to Wimborne Minster — approx. 23 km / 14.5 miles

This stage returns to predominantly river-valley walking, following the Stour downstream through the middle valley from the Blandford area towards Wimborne Minster. It is long but generally easier underfoot and less strenuous than the previous day, with mostly flat ground and occasional gentle rises through parkland.

From Charlton Marshall, the route passes through or near Spetisbury, Shapwick, Sturminster Marshall, Pamphill, Kingston Lacy, Canford Magna and into Wimborne Minster. The villages are more frequent than on some upland long-distance routes, but services still need planning because not every settlement has a shop or reliable daytime food stop.

Spetisbury Rings is a worthwhile short detour for walkers with energy and time. It is a smaller Iron Age hillfort, giving a good viewpoint over this part of the valley without the sustained effort of Hambledon Hill.

Shapwick is a useful break point, with The Anchor Inn noted as a popular stop. Later, the route reaches the Pamphill and Kingston Lacy area, where the walking passes through or near National Trust parkland

and the Stour crossing at Eye Bridge. Pamphill Dairy and the Vine Inn add useful food and drink options, though opening times should be checked before depending on them.

Some of this stage uses the North Dorset Trailway, the former Somerset and Dorset Railway line. These sections usually give firm, easier walking and quicker progress than muddy field paths, which helps on a 23 km day.

Near Canford Magna and the approach to Wimborne, the riverside route includes memorable built features, including a Victorian railway bridge from the former Dorset Central Railway and a narrow single-person suspension bridge over the Stour. Take care if carrying a large pack or walking in a group; the bridge is not a place to rush.

Mud remains a genuine issue after wet weather, particularly on low-lying riverside and field sections. Expect stiles and livestock fields on this stage, and give cattle and sheep plenty of space, especially around gates and water troughs.

Wimborne Minster is an excellent overnight town, with independent shops, pubs, cafés, restaurants, a market and a wide choice of walker-friendly services. Accommodation includes B&Bs, pubs and other town options, but booking ahead is sensible during the main walking season.

The minster church and compact town centre make Wimborne a rewarding finish to the day, but it is also a practical resupply point before the more suburban final stage. Stock up here if planning an early start, although the next day has more frequent food and shop options than the middle stages.

Wimborne Minster has good bus links to Bournemouth, Poole and Blandford Forum. It has no railway station; the nearest main rail access is at Poole, around 8 miles away, so onward transport needs a bus or taxi connection.

Navigation is generally helped by established paths and valley corridors, but parkland edges, estate tracks and riverside alternatives can cause uncertainty. Follow the kingfisher waymarks carefully through Kingston Lacy, Pamphill and the Canford Magna approach.

Stage 5: Wimborne Minster to Christchurch / Hengistbury Head — approx. 23 km / 14 miles

The final stage follows the Stour from rural and parkland edges into a more suburban landscape, then out to the estuarine and heathland finish at Hengistbury Head. It is mostly flat, but the changing environment means more road edges, built-up sections and navigation checks than the earlier valley days.

From Wimborne, the route continues downstream towards Longham Lakes near Ferndown. The lakes are an important wildlife area, with surfaced paths around much of the water and regular birdlife including ducks, other waterfowl and kingfishers. Swimming is not allowed, as the lakes form part of the water supply backup system.

The route then passes through the West Parley and Dudsbury area, where the walking becomes more urban. Dudsbury Iron Age hillfort sits above the Stour near West Parley, adding a final earthwork link to the hillfort theme of the route.

Expect some sections close to busy roads around West Parley and Holdenhurst. These stretches are not technically difficult, but they feel very different from the quieter upper valley, so allow for slower, more

stop-start walking where crossings, pavements and waymarks need attention.

Throop is one of the best final-day highlights. The route passes Throop Mill, a thatched watermill cottage beside a mill stream and weir, with good birdwatching along the surrounding water-meadows. This area can flood and become very muddy in winter or after very heavy rain; some riverside paths may become difficult or impassable during flood conditions.

From Holdenhurst the route continues towards Tuckton and Christchurch. Tuckton Bridge marks the approach to the harbour landscape, and Christchurch provides the main services before the finish, with pubs, cafés, restaurants and shops. Christchurch Priory is a notable landmark close to the Stour and Avon confluence.

The Stour meets the Avon and enters Christchurch Harbour at The Run before the route finishes at Hengistbury Head. The final section is heathland and coastal nature reserve walking, open and breezy compared with the sheltered valley. On clear days there are broad views across Christchurch Bay, towards Poole Harbour and the Isle of Wight.

Food and water are easiest on this stage. Wimborne, the West Parley area, Throop and Christchurch all provide opportunities, so there are no long service gaps if the route is walked in normal daytime hours. Even so, carry enough water for the exposed final section at Hengistbury Head in warm weather.

Accommodation is most practical in Christchurch, with wider options nearby in the Bournemouth area. Hengistbury Head itself is a nature reserve rather than a town-centre overnight base, so do not assume end-point accommodation immediately at the finish.

Christchurch has a railway station on the South Western Railway London Waterloo line, making it the strongest public transport finish for the route. Bournemouth is also only a few miles west and can be useful for onward travel or additional accommodation.

No ferry is needed to complete the Stour Valley Way. Walkers who want to continue beyond the finish can extend towards Mudeford Spit, where seasonal ferry services operate from Mudeford Quay, but that is an optional add-on rather than part of the main route.

Navigation is usually straightforward where the river corridor, lakes and urban paths define the line, but waymarks can be easy to miss on lamp-posts and path junctions in built-up areas. Keep checking the kingfisher logo through West Parley, Holdenhurst, Tuckton and the Christchurch approach rather than assuming the most obvious pavement is the route.

Recommended Itinerary

Distances on the Stour Valley Way vary slightly between maps, guidebooks and walking-holiday itineraries, so treat the figures below as planning distances rather than exact measurements. Check current mapping, accommodation locations and any operator itinerary before booking fixed overnight stops.

Standard itinerary: 5 walking days

This is the most efficient split for fit walkers and is close to the way self-guided packages commonly organise the route. The first two days are deliberately shorter, followed by three longer days of around 23 km.

Day	From	To	Approx. distance	Why this stage makes sense	Services/accommodation notes
1	Stourton / Stourhead	East Stour	14 km / 9 miles	A gentle opening stage through the Stourhead estate and upper Stour farmland, giving a manageable first day after reaching the inland start. Bourton lies en route, but services are limited.	East Stour is a small hamlet with very limited accommodation and facilities, so pre-booking is essential. Many independent walkers use Gillingham instead for the first night, as it has the railway station and more services, then arrange a taxi or adjusted start.
2	East Stour	Sturminster Newton	16 km / 10 miles	A moderate valley day through villages including Milton on Stour, Silton, West Stour, Stour Provost, Fifehead Magdalen and Marnhull. It keeps the approach to Sturminster Newton comfortable before the harder hillfort stage.	Marnhull has The Crown for a pub stop. Sturminster Newton is a strong overnight halt, with pubs, cafés, shops, a Co-op and accommodation; Fiddleford Mill is just east of town on the Stour.
3	Sturminster Newton	Charlton Marshall / Blandford Forum area	23 km / 14.5 miles	This is the key upland day of the route, passing Fiddleford Mill, Hammoon and Child Okeford before the climbs over Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill. Start early: the distance is longer and the hillfort ascents are the most demanding walking on the trail, especially in wet conditions.	Stourpaine has the White Horse Inn and a small Post Office. Blandford Forum is the main resupply point, with shops, pubs, cafés, restaurants, Tesco and Waitrose; Charlton Marshall is quieter, with The Charlton Inn.

Day	From	To	Approx. distance	Why this stage makes sense	Services/accommodation notes
4	Charlton Marshall / Blandford Forum area	Wimborne Minster	23 km / 14.5 miles	A long but logical middle-Stour stage through Spetisbury, Shapwick, Sturminster Marshall and the Pamphill / Kingston Lacy area. It links two good service towns while keeping the final day to a manageable length.	Possible stops include the Anchor Inn at Shapwick, pubs in Sturminster Marshall, and Pamphill Dairy or the Vine Inn near Kingston Lacy. Wimborne Minster has a good choice of hotels, B&Bs, guesthouses, restaurants, pubs and supermarkets.
5	Wimborne Minster	Christchurch / Hengistbury Head	23 km / 14 miles	The final stage follows the lower Stour through a more riverside and wetland landscape, with Longham Lakes, West Parley, Dudsbury, Throop Mill, Holdenhurst, Tuckton and Christchurch before the coastal finish at Hengistbury Head.	Longham and the lower Stour have useful stopping points but should not be relied on without checking opening hours. Christchurch has full services and a wide range of accommodation; from Hengistbury Head, allow time to get back to Christchurch if staying or travelling onward.

Slower itinerary: 6 walking days

This is the better option for walkers who prefer shorter days, families, less experienced long-distance walkers, or anyone wanting more time in Wimborne Minster and Christchurch. It keeps the first four days the same as the standard itinerary, then splits the long final stage at Longham.

Day	From	To	Approx. distance	Why this stage makes sense	Services/accommodation notes
1	Stourton / Stourhead	East Stour	14 km / 9 miles	A short and gentle start through the Stourhead estate and upper Stour countryside.	East Stour has very limited services; pre-book accommodation or consider using Gillingham as a practical first-night base.
2	East Stour	Sturminster Newton	16 km / 10 miles	Keeps the early route relaxed and ends in one of the best service towns in the Blackmore Vale.	Marnhull provides a possible pub stop. Sturminster Newton has shops, pubs, cafés, a Co-op and accommodation.

Day	From	To	Approx. distance	Why this stage makes sense	Services/accommodation notes
3	Sturminster Newton	Charlton Marshall / Blandford Forum area	23 km / 14.5 miles	The longest and hardest day remains unavoidable unless arranging a custom stop, because it includes Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill. An early start is still sensible.	Use Stourpaine and Blandford Forum carefully for food and resupply. Charlton Marshall is quiet; Blandford Forum gives more accommodation and eating options.
4	Charlton Marshall / Blandford Forum area	Wimborne Minster	23 km / 14.5 miles	A full day through the middle Stour valley, with Kingston Lacy and Pamphill making useful interest and refreshment stops.	Wimborne Minster is a strong overnight hub with plenty of food and accommodation choices.
5	Wimborne Minster	Longham	11 km / 7 miles	A deliberately short day, useful after the two longer middle stages and good for walkers who want time in Wimborne before setting off.	Longham sits near Longham Lakes, but accommodation and services are limited. Pre-booking is essential and exact stopping arrangements should be checked before travelling.
6	Longham	Christchurch / Hengistbury Head	18 km / 11 miles	Leaves a more relaxed final walk through the lower Stour wetlands, Throop Mill, Tuckton and Christchurch before finishing at Hengistbury Head.	Christchurch has full town services and good accommodation for the final night. Check seasonal opening for Hengistbury Head facilities if planning to linger at the finish.

Faster variant: 4 walking days

A faster crossing is practical only for strong walkers who are comfortable with one very long opening day and several consecutive 23 km days. It is most useful if East Stour accommodation is unavailable and Sturminster Newton is used as the first overnight stop.

Day	From	To	Approx. distance	Why this stage makes sense	Services/accommodation notes
1	Stourton / Stourhead	Sturminster Newton	30 km / 19 miles	Combines the standard first two stages, avoiding the limited overnight options at East Stour. This is a long first day, so it suits walkers already trail-fit and starting early.	Bourton and East Stour have limited services, while Marnhull offers a better chance of a pub stop. Sturminster Newton is the first major overnight town, with shops, pubs, cafés and accommodation.

Day	From	To	Approx. distance	Why this stage makes sense	Services/accommodation notes
2	Sturminster Newton	Charlton Marshall / Blandford Forum area	23 km / 14.5 miles	A demanding second day because it includes the main climbs over Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill. In poor weather, allow extra time for slippery chalk and grass paths.	Stourpaine and Blandford Forum are important for food, water and resupply. Overnight either in quiet Charlton Marshall or in Blandford Forum for a wider choice.
3	Charlton Marshall / Blandford Forum area	Wimborne Minster	23 km / 14.5 miles	Keeps to the standard middle-Stour stage and maintains a clear overnight stop in a full-service town.	Useful stops include Shapwick, Sturminster Marshall, Pamphill and Kingston Lacy. Wimborne Minster has good accommodation and food options.
4	Wimborne Minster	Christchurch / Hengistbury Head	23 km / 14 miles	A full final day through Longham Lakes, Throop Mill, Tuckton and Christchurch to the coast. Start early if catching an evening train from Christchurch.	Christchurch is the practical end-of-walk service base. From Hengistbury Head, allow time either to walk back towards Christchurch or use local transport where available.

Planning the Route

How many days to allow

Most independent walkers should plan the Stour Valley Way over **5 or 6 walking days**. Five days is the standard self-guided split, but it gives several long lowland days and leaves little margin for mud, flooding, transport delays or time at the hillforts.

A **6-day schedule** is the more forgiving choice. It lowers the daily mileage, makes accommodation logistics easier around Wimborne and Christchurch, and is better suited to walkers who want time for Stourhead, Hambledon Hill, Hod Hill, Kingston Lacy, Wimborne Minster and the lower Stour nature reserves.

Fast walkers can complete the route in **3–4 days**, but this turns a moderate riverside trail into a mileage exercise. The limiting factor is usually not the terrain; it is the spacing of overnight stops and the need to finish each day somewhere with accommodation or onward transport.

Plan	Best for	Practical notes
5 walking days	Fit walkers, self-guided packages, walkers happy with longer days	Several days are around the low-20 km mark, with one or two feeling longer in wet or muddy conditions.
6 walking days	Most leisure walkers, first-time long-distance walkers, mixed groups	Easier pacing and better scope to use town accommodation without rushing.
3–4 walking days	Strong, fast walkers travelling light	Possible, but accommodation and transport become more awkward and days are long.
Section walking	Local walkers or anyone using public transport	Works well from Gillingham, Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster and Christchurch, with bus limitations in the rural middle section.

Choosing daily stages

Daily stages are strongly shaped by the towns and larger villages along the valley. The route passes many small settlements, but not all have reliable accommodation, shops or evening food, so the practical overnight stops matter more than an even split of kilometres.

A common 5-day structure is:

Day	Stage	Planning notes
1	Stourton / Stourhead to East Stour	East Stour is a small village with limited services. Some walkers instead use Gillingham as the practical first overnight stop because it has a railway station, shops, pubs and accommodation.
2	East Stour to Sturminster Newton	A natural market-town stop with better services than the surrounding villages.

Day	Stage	Planning notes
3	Sturminster Newton to the Blandford Forum / Charlton Marshall area	This is the key hillfort stage, taking in the north Dorset climbs around Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill before the Blandford area.
4	Blandford Forum / Charlton Marshall area to Wimborne Minster	A longer middle-valley day, with accommodation and food options improving again at Wimborne Minster.
5	Wimborne Minster to Christchurch / Hengistbury Head	A long final day if walked in one push, especially if continuing beyond Christchurch to Hengistbury Head.

A 6-day itinerary usually splits the final approach by using the Wimborne–Longham–Christchurch sequence, rather than making Wimborne to the coast one long day. This is a sensible option in hot weather, after heavy rain, or for walkers who want more time in the lower Stour wetlands and around Christchurch Harbour.

Start and finish logistics

The inland start at **Stourton / Stourhead** needs planning. There is no direct public-transport access to the start, so walkers normally arrive by car, taxi, or by using nearby rail towns such as **Gillingham** or **Bruton** and arranging a taxi onward to Stourhead. This should be checked before travelling.

A practical alternative is to start from **Gillingham**, which is close to the route and has a railway station on the South Western Railway London Waterloo–Exeter line. This changes the opening day but can make the whole trip much easier for walkers relying on public transport.

The finish is much simpler. **Christchurch** has a railway station on the South Western Railway London Waterloo–Weymouth line, with onward connections towards Bournemouth, Poole and Weymouth. From the trail end at **Hengistbury Head**, allow time to return to Christchurch or onward transport rather than assuming the final walking point and the rail station are the same place.

Accommodation strategy

Accommodation should be booked before starting, especially in spring, summer and on bank holiday weekends. Dorset is busy holiday country, and the smaller north Dorset villages do not have the depth of accommodation found in Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster or Christchurch.

Expect a mix of **B&Bs, guesthouses, inns and small hotels** rather than a continuous chain of hostels or campsites. Campsites exist in places, but camping infrastructure is limited enough that it should not be treated as the default plan without checking each night in advance.

The most reliable overnight bases are **Gillingham, Sturminster Newton, Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster and Christchurch**. In the more rural sections, an accommodation offset or short taxi transfer may be needed if the nearest suitable bed is off-route.

Self-guided operators package the route with booked accommodation and luggage transfer, commonly over 5 or 6 walking days. These services generally operate in the main walking season rather than through winter, so winter walkers should not rely on luggage-transfer support being available.

Food and water planning

Do not assume every village has a shop, café or pub open when needed. Several stages pass through small settlements where services are limited, seasonal or closed on certain days, particularly on Sundays and in the afternoon.

Carry lunch, snacks and enough water for the full day between the larger towns. This matters most on the rural stretches between Stourhead, Gillingham, Sturminster Newton and Blandford Forum, and again where a stage has been lengthened to reach a particular overnight stop.

Even where pubs exist, opening hours can be irregular in rural Dorset. Evening meals should be checked when booking accommodation, especially if staying in or near East Stour, Charlton Marshall, Longham or other smaller places rather than in the main towns.

Navigation and maps

The Stour Valley Way is waymarked with the **teal-and-orange kingfisher logo** on waymarkers, fingerposts and lamp-post stickers. Newer blue-ring “Explore the River” waymarks may also appear in places, but the route should not be walked on waymarks alone.

Carry OS mapping or a reliable offline map. The route is covered by OS Explorer sheets **OL22, 117, 118, 129 and 142**, and by OS Landranger sheets **183, 194 and 195**. GPX files are available from Walking Englishman and the LDWA members area.

Waymarking gaps and small route variations are possible, especially around field edges, lanes, village exits and wet riverside sections. A compass and the ability to follow OS mapping remain useful, even though this is not a remote upland trail.

Flooding, mud and seasonal timing

The main seasonal issue is not snow or exposure; it is **flooding and mud** on low-lying riverside sections of the Stour. After heavy rain, water levels can rise with a delay, so a dry morning does not guarantee that the valley paths will be clear.

In wet weather, check Environment Agency flood alerts before each day's walk. This is particularly important on the lower Stour and around known flood-prone sections such as **Eye Mead near Wimborne**, where waymarked alternative loops exist to avoid problem ground.

The most practical season is **March to October**, matching the period used by self-guided walking operators. April to June and September to October are often the best planning windows for walkers who want decent conditions without peak summer pressure on accommodation.

Winter walking is possible, but it needs a more flexible plan. Expect more mud, a greater chance of impassable riverside paths, fewer daylight hours and no assumption of luggage-transfer support.

Section hiking and shortening the route

The route is well suited to section hiking because it links a chain of towns and transport points. The most practical access points are **Gillingham** by rail, **Blandford Forum** by bus, **Wimborne Minster** by bus and **Christchurch** by rail.

Good shorter sections include **Stourhead to Gillingham**, the hillfort stage around **Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill**, the **Kingston Lacy / Pamphill to Wimborne Minster** stretch, and the final **Wimborne to Christchurch** approach through the lower Stour and Throop Mill area.

Bus services make some point-to-point day walks possible, but rural services around **Sturminster Newton** are limited and should not be treated as a guaranteed escape option. Timetables should be checked before travelling, especially at weekends and outside the summer season.

What matters most when planning

The Stour Valley Way is not technically difficult, so planning should focus on logistics rather than mountain hazards. The main priorities are accommodation, transport to the inland start, flood awareness, food between towns and reliable navigation.

Before committing to dates, check that overnight stops are available in the right places and that the first and last transport links work. After heavy rain, build in enough flexibility to use flood-bypass routes or adjust a stage rather than forcing a low-lying riverside path.

Towns, Villages and Overnight Stops

The Stour Valley Way is easiest to organise around the larger valley towns, with smaller villages used for lunch stops, pub breaks or shorter custom itineraries. Accommodation is uneven: Gillingham, Sturminster Newton, Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster and Christchurch have the strongest service base, while East Stour and some rural villages need advance booking.

Place	Best use for walkers	Transport note
Stourton / Stourhead	Start, pre-walk overnight, food before setting off	No station; usually reached by car or taxi from nearby rail towns
Bourton	Early resupply, pub stop	No railway station
Gillingham	Rail access, Day 0/1 overnight, resupply	South Western Railway station
East Stour	Standard first night on a 5-day split	Very limited services
Marnhull	Intermediate pub/overnight option	No railway station
Sturminster Newton	Strong Day 2 overnight	Bus links; no railway station
Child Okeford	Lunch/rest stop before Hambledon Hill	No railway station
Blandford Forum area	Strong Day 3 overnight	Bus hub; no railway station
Kingston Lacy / Pamphill	Day 4 food stop, estate facilities	Pass-through only for most walkers
Wimborne Minster	Strong Day 4 overnight	Buses only; nearest rail at Poole
Christchurch / Hengistbury Head	Finish, final overnight, rail departure	South Western Railway station at Christchurch

Stourton and Stourhead

Stourton is the inland start at the National Trust's Stourhead estate, near the upper River Stour. It is a hamlet rather than a full-service village, so most facilities are those of the estate itself.

Stourhead has a large shop, restaurant/café, farm shop and deli, ice cream parlour and the Spread Eagle Inn. The Spread Eagle Inn is the most useful local option for walkers wanting to stay at the start, serving food and offering rooms on the estate.

The Stour Valley Way is signposted near Beech Cottage on the estate. Opening times for Stourhead facilities should be checked before relying on them for breakfast, lunch or provisions.

There is no railway station at Stourton. Gillingham is the nearest station, about 7 miles away, and many walkers arrange a taxi or drive to the estate; bus services are infrequent and should be checked before travelling.

Bourton

Bourton is reached early on the first day, just south of the Wiltshire–Dorset border. It is a useful first practical stop after leaving Stourhead, especially if estate facilities were closed or bypassed.

The village has a store with Post Office, a petrol station and The White Lion Inn. The pub serves food and real ales and is well placed for a lunch stop or very short first day if accommodation is arranged locally.

Bourton is not a main overnight base for the route, but it is a sensible place to top up snacks and water before continuing towards Gillingham and East Stour. There is no railway station.

Gillingham

Gillingham is the key access town for the northern end of the Stour Valley Way. It sits around 10 km from Stourhead on the first day's walking and is the best place on the route for arriving by train before starting the walk.

The town has a South Western Railway station on the West of England line, with services between London Waterloo, Salisbury and Exeter. This makes it the practical Day 0 base for walkers without cars, and a useful fallback if the rural start at Stourton is awkward to reach.

Gillingham is a proper service town, with shops, pubs, B&Bs and guesthouses. It has a broader choice than East Stour, so it can work as an alternative early overnight stop if the itinerary is adjusted.

If staying in Gillingham instead of East Stour, plan the next day carefully: the standard 5-day split continues to East Stour before Sturminster Newton. Any transfer, bus or taxi arrangement back to the trail should be organised before booking.

East Stour

East Stour is the usual first overnight on the common 5-day itinerary, about 14 km from Stourton. It is a small village rather than a service centre, so it suits walkers who have accommodation and evening food arranged in advance.

The main named option is The Crown Inn, which offers two self-catering two-bed apartments and pub facilities. Beyond this, village services are very limited.

This is one of the places on the Stour Valley Way where booking ahead matters most. Do not assume a late-arrival room, shop or wide choice of evening meals will be available.

There is no railway station at East Stour. If the accommodation here is full, the practical alternative is usually to revise the stage plan around Gillingham, Marnhull or Sturminster Newton.

Marnhull

Marnhull lies above the Stour in the Blackmore Vale and is a useful intermediate stop between East Stour and Sturminster Newton. It is not one of the standard 5-day overnight stops, but it can help create an easier split.

The Crown at Marnhull is a 16th-century thatched coaching inn with en-suite rooms, food and ales. The Blackmore Vale Inn is another village pub, and the village has small shops for everyday purchases.

For walkers who prefer shorter days or want to avoid relying on very small East Stour, Marnhull can be a practical alternative if accommodation is available. It has no railway station; Gillingham is the nearest rail access point, with bus links in the wider area.

Sturminster Newton

Sturminster Newton is the strongest overnight base in the northern half of the route and the standard second night on the 5-day split. It is a proper Blackmore Vale market town, with more services than the surrounding villages.

The town has pubs, cafés, shops, food stores and visitor accommodation, including guest accommodation and a Travelodge listed in town. Useful food stops include bakeries, delis, tea rooms and traditional pubs such as the Bull Tavern and Swan Inn.

Walkers should treat Sturminster Newton as a key resupply point. It is a good place to restock snacks, replace basic supplies and plan food for the next rural section over Child Okeford, Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill.

There is no railway station. Bus links include services towards Blandford Forum, Yeovil and Gillingham via nearby villages, but timetables should be checked before travelling.

Fiddleford Mill lies east of the town on the route towards Hammoon. It is a separate English Heritage site, so allow time if visiting rather than simply walking through.

Child Okeford

Child Okeford sits below Hambledon Hill and is one of the most useful village stops on the third day. It is especially well placed before or after the route's main hillfort climbing.

The Baker's Arms is particularly practical for walkers because it combines pub, food, village shop, deli counter and Post Office facilities. The Saxon Inn provides another traditional pub option in the village.

This is a good place for lunch, a drink or a final check of water and snacks before climbing Hambledon Hill. It is not a main overnight town, and there is no railway station.

Blandford Forum, Blandford St Mary and Charlton Marshall

The Blandford area is the main overnight base for the third night on the standard itinerary. The route passes through Blandford St Mary on the south bank and Blandford Forum on the north bank, with Charlton Marshall close enough to be part of the same practical accommodation area for many itineraries.

Blandford Forum has one of the best service ranges on the route: pubs, cafés, restaurants, independent shops, accommodation and bus links. The Crown Hotel and Greyhound Inn are named pub and food options, and Hall and Woodhouse Brewery has a shop for Badger Beer.

Accommodation ranges from inns and guesthouses to B&Bs in and around the town. This is a sensible place to book a comfortable night, eat properly and prepare for the long stage towards Wimborne Minster.

Blandford Forum has no railway station. It is, however, a bus hub for north Dorset, with links towards Sturminster Newton and Gillingham, and towards Poole, Bournemouth and Wimborne; current timetables should be checked before building a section walk around them.

Kingston Lacy and Pamphill

Kingston Lacy and Pamphill are important Day 4 stopping points between Blandford and Wimborne Minster. Most walkers pass through rather than stay overnight.

Kingston Lacy is a National Trust estate with visitor facilities including the Stables Café, shop and second-hand bookshop. Nearby Pamphill Dairy farm shop is useful for food, local produce and a proper break during the day.

This is one of the better mid-stage refreshment opportunities on the middle Stour section, but it should not be treated as an accommodation base. Opening times and access to National Trust facilities should be checked before relying on them.

Wimborne Minster

Wimborne Minster is the standard fourth overnight and one of the best all-round service towns on the Stour Valley Way. It has a compact centre, plenty of food options and a good range of places to stay in the town and surrounding villages.

Accommodation includes pubs, hotels, farms and camping in the wider area. Food options range from cafés and pubs to restaurants, with The Olive Branch and The Taphouse among the named town-centre choices.

Wimborne is a good place to arrive with time to spare. The town has independent shops, useful high-street services and the landmark minster church close to the centre.

There is no railway station; Wimborne lost its station to passengers in 1964. Public transport is by bus, with routes to Poole and Bournemouth, and the nearest rail access is Poole, around 8 miles away. Check Morebus timetables before arranging a departure or section-walk handover here.

Christchurch and Hengistbury Head

Christchurch is the practical finish town, while Hengistbury Head is the ceremonial and geographic end of the route by Christchurch Harbour. Most walkers continue to the Head, then return to Christchurch for accommodation, food and transport.

Christchurch has the strongest finish-line service base: hotels, pubs, cafés, restaurants, tea rooms and budget options. The Kings Arms is well placed near the priory and river, while Christchurch Harbour Hotel & Spa is a higher-end harbour-side option.

Christchurch railway station is on the South Western Railway network, with direct services to London Waterloo on the Waterloo–Weymouth line. This makes it the easiest place to finish and travel home without a car.

Hengistbury Head has a visitor centre but limited services compared with the town. If arriving late in the day, plan food, onward transport and any return from the headland in advance; seasonal buses and passenger ferry options should be checked before travelling.

Getting to the Start

The Stour Valley Way starts at Stourton, Wiltshire, at the National Trust's Stourhead estate. The kingfisher waymarkers begin around the estate car park and visitor reception, using postcode BA12 6QD for practical navigation.

Stourton is rural: there is no railway station, no taxi rank, no supermarket and no public transport hub in the village itself. Pre-book onward transport, accommodation and any taxi transfer before arrival.

By train

There is no station at Stourton. The most convenient rail approach for most walkers is **Gillingham, Dorset**, followed by a pre-booked taxi or Wiltshire Connect transfer to Stourhead.

Station	Useful for	Onward to Stourhead
Gillingham, Dorset	Direct South Western Railway services from London Waterloo; also useful from Salisbury, Basingstoke and Exeter Central	About 10 miles north-east of Stourhead; taxi about 15 minutes
Warminster	Great Western Railway access via Westbury; useful from Bath Spa, Bristol Temple Meads, Southampton Central and Salisbury	About 12 miles north; taxi about 25 minutes
Bruton	South Western Railway on the Castle Cary line; useful from London Waterloo, Bath Spa and Frome	About 12 miles north-west; taxi about 20 minutes

Gillingham is usually the simplest option because it has direct trains from London Waterloo and is close enough to reach Stourhead by a short taxi transfer. Walking from Gillingham to Stourhead is around 10–12 miles, so it is not a sensible warm-up before starting the long-distance route.

Approximate rail journey times include London Waterloo to Gillingham from about 1 hour 55 minutes, Salisbury to Gillingham about 30 minutes, and Exeter Central to Gillingham about 80 minutes. Advance fares from London are often around £10–£30 single, but fares and train times change frequently. This should be checked before travelling.

There is a taxi rank at Gillingham station. Local taxi options include Ace Taxis on 01747 821 111 and A&O on 07882 712 431; from Warminster, DJ's Taxis can be reached on 01985 215 151; from Bruton, Bruton Taxi can be reached on 0845 003 5205. Taxi availability in rural Wiltshire is limited at busy times, so book ahead rather than relying on turning up.

By bus

Bus access to Stourton is limited and needs planning. The most practical public-transport option is usually **Wiltshire Connect**, the on-demand service covering journeys from the Gillingham, Frome, Mere and Warminster areas to Stourhead.

Wiltshire Connect operates Monday to Friday 06:00–20:00 and Saturday 08:00–19:30, with adult fares around £2–£3. It can be booked up to 7 days ahead via the Wiltshire Connect app or by phone on 01225 712900. There is no Sunday service, so avoid a Sunday start if relying on this link.

Other bus options are very limited. Bus 25 has occasional services in the Salisbury–Tisbury area with some stops near Stourhead, and Bus 80 runs between Frome and Mere on a weekly basis. These services are not flexible enough to rely on without checking the current timetable carefully. This should be checked before travelling.

By car

Stourhead is signposted from the B3092 between Mere and Frome. The A303 passes about 5 miles to the south, making the start reasonably straightforward for drivers coming from London, the south-east and the west.

Approximate driving times are:

From	Typical route and time
London	Via the A303; about 2 hours 30 minutes, roughly 115 miles
Bristol	Via A36 to Warminster, then B3092; about 1 hour, roughly 40 miles
Salisbury	Via A30 and B3092; about 45 minutes, roughly 28 miles
Christchurch / Bournemouth area	Via A31, A350 and B3092; about 1 hour 10 minutes, roughly 55 miles

The National Trust car park at Stourhead uses postcode BA12 6QD. Parking is pay-and-display, with non-members charged around £4.50 per day and National Trust members parking free. There are also 16 EV charging points available via RAW Charging app or contactless payment.

Long-stay parking is the main issue for a point-to-point walk. No specific multi-day walker tariff is available at Stourhead, so leaving a vehicle for several days should be arranged with the estate before travelling. Many walkers avoid this problem by parking in Gillingham, taking a taxi to Stourhead, then returning by rail after finishing at Christchurch.

Drivers walking south to Hengistbury Head also need a clear end-of-walk plan. Options include a car shuttle, taxi and rail combination, or using a self-guided operator with accommodation and luggage transfer.

From the nearest airport

Bristol Airport is the nearest useful airport for Stourhead, about 26 miles away and roughly 45 minutes by car. There is no direct public transport link to the start, so a hire car or taxi is the simplest onward option.

Southampton Airport is also practical for rail-based arrivals. Trains from Southampton Airport Parkway can connect to Gillingham in about 75–90 minutes, followed by a taxi or Wiltshire Connect transfer to Stourhead.

London Heathrow is farther away, about 85 miles from Stourhead. Public transport normally involves travelling towards Salisbury and then onward by taxi or other local connection, while a hire car may be simpler for groups. Airport transfer times and train connections should be checked before travelling.

Where to stay before starting

The most convenient night-before base is **Stourton** itself. The Spread Eagle Inn sits within the Stourhead estate and is directly placed for starting the walk the next morning, with a bar, restaurant, Wi-Fi and breakfast included for some room types. Stourhead Gardens B&B is also in Stourton, close to the garden entrance.

Accommodation in Stourton is limited, so book well ahead for weekends, holidays and the main walking season. If the village is full, use one of the nearby towns and arrange a morning taxi or Wiltshire Connect transfer to the start.

Good alternatives include **Mere**, about 3 miles south on the A303 corridor, with small-town B&B and pub options; **Gillingham**, about 10 miles north-east, with several B&Bs, pubs and a Tesco, plus the best rail access; and **Warminster**, about 12 miles north, with a wider spread of hotels, B&Bs and pubs.

For carless walkers, the smoothest plan is usually train to Gillingham, pre-booked transfer to Stourhead, overnight in or near Stourton, then start walking the next morning.

Getting Home from the Finish

The practical finish point is Hengistbury Head, which is about 4 km from Christchurch town centre and railway station. The headland has a visitor centre, café, beach and car park, but it does not have a railway station or direct long-distance bus service, and late-day public transport is limited.

Most walkers should plan the finish as two steps: first get from Hengistbury Head to Christchurch, then travel onward by train, bus or taxi. If finishing late in the afternoon, pre-booking a taxi or staying in Christchurch is the safest option.

By train

Christchurch railway station is the main departure point for the end of the Stour Valley Way. It is on the South Western Railway route between London Waterloo and Weymouth.

Direct trains run from Christchurch to London Waterloo, with typical journey times of about 2 hours. Bournemouth is about 10 minutes by train and is useful as a larger interchange; Southampton Central is under 30 minutes and Poole is about 20 minutes.

South Western Railway is the operator at Christchurch. Check live times with South Western Railway or National Rail before committing to a finish-day connection, especially on Sundays, bank holidays or during engineering works.

To reach Christchurch station from Hengistbury Head, use one of these options:

Option	Practical notes
Walk	About 3–4 km to Christchurch town centre, either using the Wick Ferry crossing or the longer route via Tuckton Bridge. Allow roughly 40 minutes for a direct walk, plus waiting time if using the ferry.
Wick Ferry	Seasonal passenger ferry across the River Stour between Wick and Christchurch Quay. It normally runs from around April to the end of October, with reduced operation outside that period, but weather and operating conditions matter. Check the current timetable and fare before relying on it.
Taxi	The quickest fallback, particularly after a long final day. The distance from Hengistbury Head to Christchurch town centre is short, but pre-booking is sensible if finishing late.
Beach Breezer 70	Summer-only open-top morebus service serving Hengistbury Head and Christchurch. It is useful in season but does not run year-round. Check morebus before travelling.

If the Wick Ferry is not running, continue via Tuckton Bridge rather than waiting at the river. This is the key contingency to build into a finish-day plan.

By bus

The most useful regular bus connections are from Christchurch town centre rather than from Hengistbury Head itself. morebus routes 1, 1A, 1B and 1C run year-round between Christchurch, Boscombe and Bournemouth, with daytime services roughly every 15–20 minutes and less frequent evening services.

Bournemouth is the better bus and rail interchange if onward options from Christchurch do not line up well. It has a much wider spread of services, and the train from Christchurch to Bournemouth is short.

The Beach Breezer 70 can be useful in summer because it serves Hengistbury Head directly and links towards Christchurch, Bournemouth, Poole and Mudeford. It is a seasonal service, usually running from late May to mid-September, so it should not be used as the only plan outside the summer timetable.

By car/taxi

If a support driver is collecting you, Hengistbury Head car park is the simplest pick-up point. It is a paid BCP Council car park, so check current parking arrangements and closing restrictions before arranging a late collection.

For walkers who left a car at the start near Stourton or Stourhead, the finish is a long way from the vehicle. The usual solutions are a prearranged lift, a two-car shuttle, or public transport/taxi combinations via Christchurch and the inland rail and bus towns.

A local taxi is the easiest way to get from Hengistbury Head to Christchurch station or town centre at the end of the walk. Operators serving the area include Smooth Cabs, Richard's Taxis, Christchurch Cabs and PRC Streamline; booking ahead is strongly recommended for late-afternoon or evening finishes.

From the nearest airport

Bournemouth Airport is the nearest airport to Christchurch, but it is not a major international hub. It is roughly 7–13 km from Christchurch town centre depending on the route used.

A taxi from Christchurch station to Bournemouth Airport usually takes about 10–15 minutes. morebus route 737 also links Christchurch with the airport, but the journey can take around 1 hour 43 minutes including waits, so it is best treated as a planned connection rather than a spontaneous transfer.

For broader flight options, use Christchurch or Bournemouth station for rail connections towards London Waterloo or Southampton. Heathrow, Gatwick and Southampton are generally more useful for many long-distance arrivals and departures than Bournemouth Airport, depending on flight choice.

Where to stay at the finish

Staying in Christchurch after finishing is often the most relaxed option, especially if the final stage ends late or if onward trains would mean a tight connection. It also avoids relying on limited evening transport from Hengistbury Head.

Christchurch has a good spread of finish-night accommodation, including The Kings Arms Hotel in the centre, Premier Inn Christchurch West near the station, Premier Inn Christchurch East towards Highcliffe and Avon Beach, and the Harbour Hotel & Spa Christchurch near the harbour. There are also B&Bs and guesthouses in and around the town.

Book ahead for weekends, school holidays and summer dates. Christchurch is a popular Dorset town, and availability near the station and harbour can tighten quickly in good walking weather.

Which Direction Should You Walk?

The Stour Valley Way can be walked in either direction, but the standard and most practical direction is **Stourton / Stourhead to Hengistbury Head**. That gives the route its natural source-to-sea line, following the River Stour downstream from the Wiltshire end to Christchurch Harbour and the coast.

This is also the direction used by typical self-guided walking itineraries and by the route's usual guidebook and waymarking structure. Reverse walking is possible, but it is the less common choice and needs more careful transport planning at the finish.

Standard direction: Stourhead to Hengistbury Head

Walking from **Stourhead to Hengistbury Head** gives the most satisfying progression. The route starts at the National Trust's Stourhead estate, passes through the upper Stour valley around Bourton and Gillingham, then opens into the Blackmore Vale before reaching the hillforts of **Hambledon Hill** and **Hod Hill**.

After the main climbs, the route continues through the middle Stour valley via places such as Blandford Forum, Kingston Lacy and Wimborne Minster. The final stages then become increasingly lowland and wetland in character, with Throop Mill, the Stour Valley nature reserves, Christchurch and finally Hengistbury Head.

The biggest practical advantage is transport. **Stourhead is the harder end to reach**, so it usually makes sense to deal with that at the start, when a taxi, lift or pre-booked demand-responsive bus can be arranged. The finish near **Christchurch** is better connected, with a railway station and onward services towards Bournemouth, Southampton and London Waterloo.

This direction also gives the strongest finish. Reaching Hengistbury Head and Christchurch Harbour after several days of inland river walking feels like a proper end point, whereas finishing at Stourhead is attractive but quieter and more dependent on onward transport arrangements.

Reverse direction: Hengistbury Head to Stourhead

Walking from **Hengistbury Head to Stourhead** is entirely possible, and the trail is waymarked for use in either direction. It can suit walkers based near Christchurch or Bournemouth, or those who want to begin with the coastal section and finish with time at Stourhead.

The main drawback is the finish. Ending at Stourhead means finishing at the less convenient transport end, with onward travel likely to involve a taxi, a lift, the Wiltshire Connect on-demand bus, or a longer link to nearby rail access. This should be checked before travelling, especially at weekends or outside the main walking season.

The reverse direction also changes the feel of the route. The coast comes first, and the walk then heads inland, so the classic source-to-sea momentum is lost. Stourhead is a fine final destination, but it does not have the same sense of arrival as walking out to Christchurch Harbour and the sea.

Do the climbs favour either direction?

Not significantly. The route's main climbs are **Hambledon Hill** and **Hod Hill**, and they sit roughly in the middle of the walk whichever way it is tackled.

In the standard direction, these climbs come after a gentler opening through the upper valley, which many walkers will find a good warm-up before the hillfort section. In reverse, the early walking from the coast is relatively low and gentle, with the hillforts still arriving mid-route rather than immediately.

The direction therefore does not greatly change the physical difficulty. It affects the flow, logistics and finish more than the climbing effort.

Wind and weather

The route runs broadly north-west to south-east from Stourhead to Hengistbury Head. With south-westerly winds common in this part of England, the standard direction is marginally more comfortable, with the prevailing wind more often from the side or rear quarter than directly ahead.

This is only a small factor on a lowland route, but it can matter on more open farmland and on the exposed hillfort sections around Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill. In poor weather, mud and flooding on low-lying Stour sections will be more important than wind direction.

Accommodation and itinerary flow

The common accommodation pattern also favours the standard direction. Self-guided itineraries usually run from the Stourhead end towards East Stour, Sturminster Newton, the Blandford Forum area, Wimborne Minster and Christchurch.

That sequence fits the stronger supply of inns, guesthouses, hotels and B&Bs in the Dorset valley towns. Reverse walking may still be arranged independently, but accommodation and luggage-transfer logistics are usually simpler when following the standard south-eastward flow.

Recommendation

For most walkers, the best direction is **Stourhead to Hengistbury Head**. It is the traditional source-to-sea line, works better with accommodation and luggage-transfer patterns, puts the easier transport at the finish, and gives the most satisfying end to the walk at Christchurch Harbour and the coast.

Walk it in reverse only if there is a specific reason to do so, such as being based near Christchurch, arranging transport more easily from the coast, or deliberately planning a Stourhead finish. Otherwise, start at Stourhead and walk downstream to Hengistbury Head.

Accommodation Along the Route

The Stour Valley Way works well as an inn-to-inn walk, but only if overnight stops are planned around the accommodation hubs. The strongest choices are in Gillingham, Sturminster Newton, Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster and Christchurch; the smaller villages between them can be very limited.

Do not assume that every village on the map has a walker-friendly B&B or pub room. East Stour, the West Stour / Stour Provost area, Child Okeford and Longham are the places most likely to create booking problems for independent walkers.

Accommodation by place

Place	Accommodation level	Best for	Notes
Stourton / Stourhead	Limited	Pre-walk night only if available	Very small trailhead hamlet. The Spread Eagle at Stourhead is the key local inn option on the National Trust estate, but current room availability should be checked before travelling. Many walkers stay in Gillingham, Mere, Bruton or the wider area and travel to the start.
Gillingham	Good	Night before the walk, or an early first stop	First major accommodation hub and useful rail town. Options include The Ship Inn & Hotel, plus guesthouses, B&Bs and short-let accommodation. If staying at The Ship Inn, book dinner ahead as the restaurant can fill.
East Stour / West Stour / Stour Provost	Limited	Day 1 stop on a 5-day split	Accommodation is sparse. This is one of the main reasons to book early or use a self-guided operator with local accommodation contacts. Independent walkers should not leave this stop until late.
Marnhull area	Limited	Alternative northern-valley stop	Rural accommodation may be possible, but choice is not comparable with Gillingham or Sturminster Newton. Check availability before fixing a stage plan.
Sturminster Newton	Good	Strong northern-half overnight hub	Proper market town with pubs, shops and several B&B/inn options. The Swan Inn has five en-suite rooms, is dog-friendly and serves breakfast and evening meals; book early because the room count is small.
Child Okeford / Hambledon Hill area	Limited	Possible short-stage stop before the hillforts	Very limited accommodation. The Baker Arms in Child Okeford has an associated cottage for overnight accommodation; this should be booked well ahead. Otherwise most walkers continue through towards Blandford Forum or Charlton Marshall.
Blandford Forum	Good	Main central-section overnight hub	One of the best places to aim for in the middle of the route. Options include the Crown Hotel, Portman Lodge and The Anvil Inn, along with other town accommodation. Good choice for walkers wanting shops, meals and services.

Place	Accommodation level	Best for	Notes
Charlton Marshall	Limited to moderate	Convenient route-side stop after Blandford	The Charlton Inn has six en-suite rooms and sits directly on the route, making it a practical overnight stop on the standard split. Book early, especially in summer.
Spetisbury area	Limited	Alternative between Blandford and Wimborne	The Old Mill Spetisbury offers a B&B option on the River Stour. Useful if splitting the Blandford–Wimborne section differently.
Wimborne Minster	Good	Major overnight stop before the final day	One of the strongest accommodation towns on the route. Options include the Kings Head Hotel, The Lion Hotel, Wimborne Lodge, 1777 - At The Albion, B&Bs such as Gordon House and The Lily Pad, and Wilksworth Caravan Park near Wimborne for campers/caravanners.
Longham	Limited	Alternative stop before Christchurch	Used by some self-guided itineraries, but independent options are fewer than in Wimborne or Christchurch. Check availability before building a stage around it.
Christchurch	Good to very good	Finish-night stay	Best choice at the end of the walk, with budget, mid-range and higher-end accommodation. Options include Premier Inn Christchurch East, Premier Inn Christchurch/Highcliffe, Harbour Hotel & Spa and Captain's Club Hotel & Spa, plus B&Bs and self-catering.
Hengistbury Head	Limited	Finish point rather than overnight base	The walk ends at the coast, but most accommodation planning should focus on Christchurch and the surrounding coastal town area rather than the headland itself.

Best overnight stops for most walkers

For a straightforward 5-day inn-to-inn walk, the usual accommodation pattern is based around East Stour, Sturminster Newton, Charlton Marshall or Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster or Longham, and Christchurch. This matches where accommodation is realistically available rather than simply dividing the mileage evenly.

A slightly easier 6-day version gives more flexibility, but it still needs careful booking through the rural middle sections. Adding a night does not automatically solve the accommodation problem if the extra stop falls in a village with little or no lodging.

The most reliable independent overnight hubs are:

- **Gillingham** — best rail-access base near the start.
- **Sturminster Newton** — the key northern market-town stop.
- **Blandford Forum / Charlton Marshall** — the most practical central stop area.
- **Wimborne Minster** — strong choice before the final approach to Christchurch.
- **Christchurch** — easiest and most comfortable place to finish.

Where booking is most important

Book well ahead for East Stour and Charlton Marshall, as both are commonly used in Stour Valley Way itineraries but have limited independent accommodation. The Swan Inn in Sturminster Newton and The Charlton Inn in Charlton Marshall also have small room numbers, so they can fill quickly.

In summer, on bank holiday weekends and during local events, even the larger towns should not be treated as turn-up-and-find-a-room stops. Blandford Forum and Wimborne Minster have better choice than the villages, but they are not large city accommodation markets.

A sensible approach is to secure all overnight stops before arranging transport. Dinner tables should be booked at the same time as rooms where staying in pubs or inns, especially in Gillingham, Sturminster Newton and the smaller village stops.

Self-guided packages and luggage transfer

The Stour Valley Way is well suited to self-guided packages because the awkward accommodation gaps are mainly in the smaller villages. Let's Go Walking offers Stour Valley Way holidays using guesthouses, inns and small hotels with en-suite or private bathrooms, with luggage transferred to the next stop by around 4pm.

Their itineraries use stops such as East Stour, Sturminster Newton, Charlton Marshall, Wimborne or Longham, and Christchurch. Published prices vary by itinerary and room type, with 7-night and 8-night options available; current prices, single supplements and deposit terms should be checked before booking.

For independent walkers, luggage transfer may be available through a walking-holiday operator only as part of a package. Taxi transfers can also solve awkward gaps, particularly at the start around Stourton/Stourhead or where the preferred overnight stop is off-route, but local availability and fares should be checked before travelling.

Camping, self-catering and dog-friendly stays

This is primarily a pub, inn, B&B and small-hotel route rather than a campsite-to-campsite trail. Campers have some options, such as Wilksworth Caravan Park near Wimborne Minster, but camping does not remove the need for careful planning across the rural northern and central sections.

Self-catering cottages and short-let properties are available in several areas, especially around Gillingham, Sturminster Newton, Blandford and Wimborne. They can work well for rest days or groups, but are less convenient for a point-to-point walk unless luggage transfer, food shopping and check-in times are arranged in advance.

Dog-friendly accommodation exists, including The Swan Inn in Sturminster Newton and Willow Lodge near Gillingham. Always check current dog policies, extra charges and whether dogs are allowed in dining areas before booking.

Camping and Wild Camping

The Stour Valley Way can be walked with camping gear, but it is not a natural wild-camping route. It is a lowland river-valley walk through private farmland, water-meadows, villages, National Trust land and protected landscapes, with most walkers using pubs, B&Bs, guesthouses or hotels instead.

Camping works best if you plan around established campsites, especially from the Sturminster Newton–Hammoon area onwards. The first part of the route has poor campsite coverage, and the flood plain beside the River Stour is unsuitable for pitching after heavy rain or in winter.

Wild camping legality

Wild camping in England is not permitted without the landowner's explicit permission. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 gives access rights to some open country and registered common land, but it does not include a right to camp overnight.

This matters on the Stour Valley Way because the route is largely on private farmland, riverside paths, water-meadows and estate land. National Trust areas such as Stourhead, Kingston Lacy and Hambledon Hill do not allow unauthorised wild camping, and camping without permission is also not appropriate in protected landscape areas.

In rural Dorset and Wiltshire, a polite request to a farmer or landowner may sometimes produce permission to pitch a small tent for one night. That permission should be arranged before relying on it, and it is never guaranteed. Do not assume that a quiet field edge, river bank or hillfort slope is available simply because it looks empty.

Open fires are a poor fit for this route. They require landowner permission, can damage pasture and are a serious risk in dry months; a small stove is the sensible choice for any permitted camp.

Campsites on or near the route

Campsite coverage is uneven. The strongest options are around Hammoon/Child Okeford, Blandford Forum and Wimborne Minster; the opening season, tent availability and booking rules should be checked before travelling.

Area	Campsite	Usefulness for Stour Valley Way walkers	Notes
Hammoon, between Sturminster Newton and Child Okeford	Hambledon Hill View Campsite / Storm Farm Campsite	One of the most useful camping stops for the middle route, close to the Stour Valley Way and the North Dorset Trailway	Small rural site with tent pitches, small touring pitches, flushing toilet and hot shower; no electric hook-ups. Pubs, a garage and general stores are within about 2 miles. Contact: campsite@stormfarm.co.uk / 07527 274754.
Near Blandford Forum	Little Hundreds Campsite	Useful for the long Sturminster Newton to Blandford Forum area	Tents-only site with views down towards the River Stour. Current facilities, prices and booking arrangements should be checked before travelling.

Area	Campsite	Usefulness for Stour Valley Way walkers	Notes
Shapwick / Kingston Lacy Estate	Priory Farm Camp Site	Potentially useful between Blandford Forum and Wimborne Minster	A Caravan and Motorhome Club certificated location on the edge of Shapwick, with the Stour Valley Way passing through the farm. It is a members-only small-site arrangement, and its current operation should be checked directly before travelling.
Wimborne Minster / Eye Bridge	Farrs Meadow	Very useful for the Day 4 end or Day 5 start around Wimborne Minster	Small car-free campsite about 15 minutes' walk from Wimborne Minster, close to the River Stour at Eye Bridge. Expect an eco-style site with compost loos and simple facilities. Popular in summer, so book ahead.
Corfe Mullen, near Wimborne Minster	Springfield Touring Park	Useful alternative for Wimborne Minster, about 2 miles south-west of the town	Family-run touring park with tent pitches, showers, toilets, laundry, small shop and other site facilities. More of a touring park feel than a backpacker campsite. Dogs are accepted.

Where camping is easiest by section

The opening stretch from **Stourton/Stourhead to East Stour** is the awkward part for campers. There is no reliable campsite at Stourhead, and camping on the National Trust estate is not permitted. If walking this section with a tent, plan for accommodation, a lift, a taxi link, or a pre-arranged landowner-permission camp.

Between **East Stour, Sturminster Newton and Hammoon**, camping becomes more realistic because Hambledon Hill View Campsite is close to the line of the route. Sturminster Newton itself is better treated as a resupply and accommodation town rather than a campsite stop.

The **Sturminster Newton to Blandford Forum** stage has a long rural feel, with limited services between the main towns. Little Hundreds near Blandford Forum can make this section workable for campers, but availability and current arrangements should be checked before building an itinerary around it.

The best camping coverage is from **Blandford Forum through Shapwick and Wimborne Minster**. Priory Farm may help in the Kingston Lacy/Shapwick area if operating, while Farrs Meadow and Springfield Touring Park make Wimborne Minster the most practical camping hub on the route.

For the final approach to **Christchurch and Hengistbury Head**, the route becomes more urban and coastal. Camping is not the obvious option here; most walkers finish the route or use accommodation in Christchurch or nearby towns.

Water and resupply for campers

Do not treat the River Stour as a reliable drinking-water source. It flows through an agricultural valley with livestock and possible run-off, so any emergency use would need thorough treatment or filtration.

Established campsites provide tap water, which is the simplest and safest option. Carry enough between stops, particularly on the more rural sections north of Blandford Forum.

Useful resupply points include **Gillingham** for Tesco and Co-op, **Sturminster Newton** for a small supermarket, bakery and pubs, **Blandford Forum** for a full supermarket and high street, and **Wimborne Minster** for another full supermarket and high street. The gaps from **Stourton to Gillingham** and from **Sturminster Newton to Blandford Forum** need the most attention when carrying camping food.

Seasonal camping considerations

Most rural campsites in this part of Dorset and Wiltshire operate roughly from Easter or spring through to October. Winter camping should not be assumed, and site opening dates should be checked before travelling.

The Stour's low-lying water-meadows can flood after heavy rain and are a poor place to camp even with permission. Avoid pitching near the river bank, on obvious flood plain, or anywhere that could be cut off by rising water.

May and June are generally the strongest months for a camping itinerary: campsites are open, days are long and the ground is usually more manageable. July and August bring peak demand at popular sites around Wimborne Minster, especially Farris Meadow and Springfield Touring Park, so booking ahead is important.

Low-impact camping rules

If landowner-permission camping is arranged, keep it discreet and brief. Pitch late, leave early and use a small tent well away from houses, livestock, crops, tracks and river banks.

Use a stove rather than a fire. Carry out all litter, food waste and hygiene products, and leave no sign of the pitch.

Human waste should be buried in a cathole 15–20 cm deep and at least 30 metres from any watercourse, path or field boundary. In busy, wet or unsuitable ground, the better option is to wait for proper facilities at the next village, pub, public toilet or campsite.

Food, Water and Resupply

The Stour Valley Way is not a remote trail, but it does have rural gaps where assuming a pub or shop will be open can leave you short. The easiest resupply points are the larger valley towns: Gillingham, Sturminster Newton, Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster and Christchurch.

Most walkers only need to carry food for the current day, plus an emergency snack. The exception is the longer middle section over Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill, where facilities are sparse and exposed ground makes water planning more important.

Water: do not rely on the River Stour

The route follows the River Stour for much of its length, but the river should not be treated as a normal drinking-water source. Agricultural run-off, livestock and general lowland river contamination make it unsuitable to drink untreated, and even filtered river water carries avoidable risk.

Plan to refill from accommodation, pubs, cafés, public toilets in larger towns and National Trust facilities where available. No continuous line of dedicated outdoor taps or refill points should be assumed. The Refill app may help in Dorset towns, but individual premises should be checked on the day.

As a practical baseline, carry at least 1.5–2 litres out of each overnight stop. In warm weather, carry more for the Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill section, as the hillforts have no facilities and can feel exposed.

Stage-by-stage food and water planning

Section	Food availability	Water availability	Notes
Stourton / Stourhead to East Stour	Good at the start if Stourhead facilities are open; Gillingham gives full resupply; East Stour has pub options nearby	Fill at Stourhead, Gillingham or accommodation; no dedicated trail taps should be assumed	The Spread Eagle Inn on the Stourhead estate and the National Trust café/restaurant are useful before starting. Stourhead opening is seasonal, so check before travelling.
East Stour to Sturminster Newton	Limited rural provision through West Stour, Stour Provost, Fifehead Magdalen and Marnhull; full resupply at Sturminster Newton	Carry from East Stour; refill in pubs or at the stage end	Marnhull has a village shop/post office and pubs, but rural opening hours matter. Sturminster Newton is the strongest early resupply point.
Sturminster Newton to Charlton Marshall / Blandford Forum	Sparse between villages; useful stops at Child Okeford and Stourpaine; full resupply at Blandford Forum	Carry 2 litres from the start and top up at Child Okeford or Stourpaine if open	This is the longest and most important stage for food planning. Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill have no facilities.

Section	Food availability	Water availability	Notes
Charlton Marshall to Wimborne Minster	Moderate; pubs and cafés at Shapwick, Sturminster Marshall and Pamphill/Kingston Lacy area; full resupply at Wimborne Minster	Refill at pubs, cafés and National Trust estate facilities; carry enough between villages	Pamphill Dairy is a particularly useful stop for food, drinks and local produce. The Vine Inn at Pamphill is cash only and opens from noon.
Wimborne Minster to Christchurch / Hengistbury Head	Good at start and finish; limited through the nature-reserve stretches; West Parley and Tuckton offer options	Fill in Wimborne; top up at cafés or in Christchurch/Hengistbury Head	Do not count on food through the quieter Stour Valley wetlands. Christchurch and Hengistbury Head have plenty of finish-line options.

Main resupply towns

Gillingham is the first major town on or near the route and has proper shop provision, including Co-op Food at Lodbourne Green Parade, plus cafés and pubs. It is also a useful rail-access point for section walkers.

Sturminster Newton is the best resupply point in the Blackmore Vale. The Co-op on Lower Market Way is useful for general supplies, while the town centre also has specialist food shops including Holbrooks deli, Oxfords bakery and Root and Vine. The Monday market can be useful if timings align.

Blandford Forum and Blandford St Mary provide the fullest mid-route resupply. Options include Co-op branches, Tesco at Stour Park and Morrisons, along with pubs, cafés and restaurants in the town.

Wimborne Minster is another strong resupply stop, with a town-centre Co-operative supermarket, bakery provision, pubs, cafés and restaurants. Christchurch has full town facilities at the coastward end, including M&S Food, Waitrose, Saxon Square cafés and numerous pubs and takeaway options.

Useful rural food stops

At the start, the National Trust facilities at Stourhead and the Spread Eagle Inn on the estate are the most dependable places to eat before leaving Stourton. Confirm Stourhead opening days and seasonal hours before travel, especially outside the main spring-to-autumn walking season.

East Stour has pub options close to the route, including the Crown Inn near the B3092/A30 area and the Kings Arms Inn in the East Stour area. These are useful overnight or end-of-day options, but should not be treated as guaranteed without checking current hours.

On the second stage, Marnhull is the most useful village stop, with a post office and village shop plus pubs including the Crown and the Blackmore Vale Inn. Small village shops may have reduced Sunday hours or close in the afternoon.

On the long third stage, the Baker Arms at Child Okeford is a key stop before the climb towards Hambledon Hill. Stourpaine is equally important: the White Horse Inn combines pub food with a village shop, deli counter and post office, making it one of the most useful mid-route resupply points.

Fiddleford Mill is a good riverside picnic spot but has no food or café facility. Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill also have no services, so eat and refill before committing to that section.

On the fourth stage, the Anchor Inn at Shapwick is a useful riverside lunch stop, while Sturminster Marshall has the Red Lion pub. Around Pamphill and Kingston Lacy, Pamphill Dairy farm shop and Parlour Café is excellent for drinks, lunch, light bites, ice cream and local produce. The Vine Inn at Pamphill is popular with walkers, but is cash only and opens from noon.

On the final stage, Herbie's Fish and Chips and Emily's Sandwich Shop on New Road at West Parley are useful short off-route food options. Tuckton Tea Gardens gives a good riverside stop before Christchurch. At Hengistbury Head, the Hiker Café at the visitor centre is open daily in all weathers, with snacks, coffee, ice cream and toilets nearby.

Sunday, seasonal and rural-opening cautions

Rural Dorset pubs can have limited lunch service, especially Monday to Wednesday, and Sunday hours are often shorter than town walkers expect. Do not plan a stage around a single village pub without checking opening times before setting off.

The Co-op stores in Gillingham, Sturminster Newton, Blandford Forum and Wimborne Minster are generally the safest supermarket-style resupply points, with long daily opening hours typical of town convenience supermarkets. Confirm current hours before relying on a late-evening arrival.

National Trust cafés and estate facilities at Stourhead and around Kingston Lacy/Pamphill are extremely useful when open, but seasonal hours vary. This should be checked before travelling.

How much to carry

For the shorter opening stages, a normal day's lunch, snacks and 1.5–2 litres of water is usually enough, provided Gillingham, Marnhull or Sturminster Newton stops are open as planned. Carry an emergency snack in case a rural pub is closed.

For Sturminster Newton to the Blandford Forum area, carry a full day's food and at least 2 litres of water from the start. Child Okeford and Stourpaine are useful stops, but the hillfort section itself has no facilities.

For the final two stages, food is easier to manage because Wimborne Minster, Christchurch and Hengistbury Head have strong provision. Still leave Wimborne with enough water for the quieter wetland and riverside approach, where cafés and shops are clustered rather than continuous.

Navigation and Waymarking

The Stour Valley Way is an officially waymarked lowland trail, but it should not be treated as a route where signs alone are enough. The line is usually straightforward, helped by the River Stour itself, frequent settlements and obvious valley landmarks, but waymarking can be inconsistent in places and is not at National Trail standard.

Most walkers will find the route manageable with basic map-reading skills, especially in settled sections around Gillingham, Sturminster Newton, Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster and Christchurch. For a full through-walk, a GPX file or offline mapping app is strongly recommended, with paper OS mapping as a backup.

Waymarking on the ground

The current Dorset Council route is marked with a teal-and-orange kingfisher logo. Look for it on:

- dedicated wooden waymarker posts in countryside sections
- fingerposts at path junctions
- lamp-post stickers through towns and villages

The route also appears on Ordnance Survey mapping as a recreational route, marked with coloured diamonds on both OS Explorer 1:25,000 and OS Landranger 1:50,000 maps.

In open fields, water-meadows and farmland, waymark posts may be spaced well apart. Through towns, the key skill is spotting small kingfisher stickers on lamp posts at road crossings and junctions rather than expecting large trail signs.

Do not rely on the old guidebook route

Older printed material can cause confusion on this walk. Edward Griffiths' Green Fields Books guide, *The new Stour Valley Path*, is long out of print and follows an older route in places.

Where an old guidebook, an old GPX file and the signs on the ground disagree, follow the current teal-and-orange kingfisher waymarks and check the line against current OS mapping or the Dorset Explorer route layer. This is particularly important around amended or developed sections such as the west side of Wimborne near Julian's Bridge.

Recommended maps

OS Explorer 1:25,000 mapping is the best paper-map scale for this route because it shows field boundaries, public rights of way, lanes and urban detail clearly. OS Landranger 1:50,000 is workable for broad planning, but less useful for exact field-path navigation.

Map series	Sheet	Useful for
OS Explorer	142 — Shepton Mallet, Mendip Hills East	Stourton / Stourhead western end
OS Explorer	129 — Yeovil & Sherborne	Gillingham and the western Stour valley approaches

Map series	Sheet	Useful for
OS Explorer	118 — Shaftesbury & Cranborne Chase	Sturminster Newton, Hambledon Hill, Hod Hill and north Dorset
OS Explorer	117 — Cerne Abbas & Bere Regis	Blandford Forum and central Dorset sections
OS Explorer	OL22 — New Forest	Christchurch, Hengistbury Head and the coastal finish
OS Landranger	183, 194, 195	1:50,000 overview coverage

Most full-route walkers will need several Explorer sheets, with 118 and 117 covering the heart of the walk. Sheet choice should be checked against the exact itinerary and access points before travelling.

GPX and digital navigation

A current GPX file is useful on the Stour Valley Way, not because the route is technically difficult, but because many junctions are small field paths, riverbank trods, lane links and town crossings. It is easy to lose time at an unsigned corner or by following the wrong branch of a public footpath across farmland.

Useful digital options include:

- **OS Maps** — strong choice for this route because it uses OS mapping and allows offline tiles with a subscription.
- **Walking Englishman** — provides GPX and KMZ files for the Stour Valley Way.
- **LDWA Long Distance Paths** — provides GPX and other route files for members; the route file includes corrections made in July 2022 at Hammoon, Bryanston, Pamphill and Ilford Lane.
- **Dorset Explorer** — the official route can be viewed on the “Recreational Trails and Greenspaces” layer.
- **OpenStreetMap-based apps** — useful as an additional check, though OS mapping remains preferable for public rights of way detail.

Before starting, download the GPX and offline map tiles rather than relying on live mobile data. A power bank is sensible for a multi-day walk if a phone is the main navigation device.

Sections needing extra attention

Section	Navigation issue	Practical approach
Wimborne / Eye Mead	The direct riverside route via Eye Mead Weir is flood-prone, and an official alternative loop is waymarked around Wimborne. Both loops are marked on OS maps.	Check conditions and follow current waymarks. Older guides or GPX files may not reflect amendments near Julian’s Bridge.
West Parley to Throop	The south-bank cycle route is clearly waymarked, but the north-bank footpath has less clear waymarking.	Pay close attention at path junctions and keep the GPX visible.

Section	Navigation issue	Practical approach
Sturminster Newton to Blandford Forum	River meanders, field paths and water-meadows can make the exact right of way less obvious.	Use OS mapping to stay on public rights of way, especially where posts are spaced far apart.
Gillingham, Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster and Christchurch	Urban waymarking is often by small stickers on lamp posts rather than prominent countryside signs.	Slow down at junctions and look for the kingfisher logo before committing to a road or alleyway.
Hammoon, Bryanston, Pamphill and Ilford Lane	Route files have had corrections in these areas.	Use the most current GPX available and give waymarks priority over old printed descriptions.

Mobile signal and offline planning

The trail passes through enough towns and villages that mobile signal is generally available at intervals. Signal can still be patchy in rural stretches of the Blackmore Vale and across low-lying water-meadow and farmland sections between settlements.

Do not depend on being able to load a map at the moment a decision is needed. Download maps in advance, save accommodation locations offline, and carry either paper OS maps or a second navigation device for backup.

Suitability for less-experienced navigators

The Stour Valley Way is a reasonable first long-distance walk for hikers with limited navigation experience, provided they are comfortable using an OS map or following a GPX track. There are no especially remote, exposed or technical navigation sections, and the route rarely strays far from roads, villages or valley landmarks.

It is not, however, a route to walk entirely by following signs. The safest approach is to combine the kingfisher waymarks, a current GPX track, and OS Explorer mapping, using the River Stour as a general aid but not as a substitute for the exact right of way.

Terrain, Conditions and Difficulty in Practice

The Stour Valley Way is moderate in practice because of distance, mud, navigation through field paths and a few steep chalk climbs, not because of technical mountain terrain. Most of the route follows lowland river-valley paths, water-meadows, farmland, woodland edges, quiet lanes and town approaches.

The walking is generally forgiving underfoot in dry weather. After sustained rain, the character changes significantly: the Stour floodplain can become waterlogged, riverbanks turn soft and slippery, and some low-lying paths may be flooded even after the rain has stopped.

Path surfaces underfoot

Expect a mixed lowland surface rather than one consistent trail. The dominant feel is grassy riverside walking, especially in the upper and middle valley, broken by farm tracks, cross-field rights of way, lanes and short urban sections.

Surface	Where it matters	Practical effect
Grass riverside paths	Frequent along the Stour	Easy in summer; wet, slippery and slow after rain
Field paths across arable and pasture	Common through the Blackmore Vale and between villages	Can be indistinct, ploughed, cropped or muddy
Farm tracks and gravel tracks	Farmland sections and estate approaches	Usually straightforward, though rutted tracks can hold mud
Quiet lanes and minor roads	Village links, bridge crossings and short connecting sections	Generally simple walking, but stay alert for traffic and narrow verges
Chalk grassland	Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill	Firm and pleasant when dry; slippery on wet chalk slopes
Pavement and suburban paths	Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster, Christchurch and the Bournemouth urban fringe	Physically easy, but requires closer waymark and map attention
Sandy, gravel and shingle surfaces	Hengistbury Head and the coastal finish	Main paths are well made; beach or harbour-side options are tougher underfoot

There is no sustained rocky or scrambling terrain on the Stour Valley Way. The route is not technically difficult in the upland sense, and poles are more useful for mud, wet grass and steep chalk than for boulder-hopping.

Mud, flooding and wet ground

Wet ground is the main practical hazard on this route. The path often lies in or close to the River Stour floodplain, so heavy rain can affect the walking well beyond the day it falls. There is usually a lag between rainfall and the river swelling, meaning a fine-weather walking day can still involve flooded or waterlogged sections.

Riverside grass can become soft and claggy, particularly in quieter sections away from towns. Riverbanks can also be slippery, so do not assume that a flat riverside path will be quick after rain.

Around Wimborne, the flood-prone Eye-Mead area has waymarked loops to avoid the worst flooding. These alternatives are useful in wet periods, but they do not remove the need to judge conditions on the day.

Agricultural sections can also be slow after rain. Farm tracks may be rutted, gateways churned by livestock, and cross-field paths may be heavy going where soil has been ploughed or disturbed.

The main climbs: Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill

Hambledon Hill is the high point of the route at around 190 m and is the clearest place where the Stour Valley Way stops feeling like a simple river walk. The approach from the Child Okeford and Shroton area climbs steeply on chalk slopes to the hillfort ramparts, followed by easier walking across the top and a steep descent.

Hod Hill follows nearby and adds a second significant effort. Walkers tackling both hills face a double ascent, with separate tops divided by lower ground. The climb to Hod Hill is steep, then gives way to a more level walk on the hillfort.

Neither hill is mountainous, but both deserve respect in poor weather. Wet chalk can be slick, the ramparts are exposed, and there is little shelter on the open tops if wind or rain comes in. These hillforts are the only sections where the route has a noticeably upland character.

Smaller rises and the coastal finish

Spetisbury Rings adds a smaller hillfort rise near Blandford, and Dudsbury near Ferndown gives another short climb in East Dorset. These are not major obstacles, but they can be felt late in the day if walking the longer stages.

The final approach to Hengistbury Head includes a gentle climb to the low headland. The main visitor paths are generally well made, but rougher sandy tracks and shingle beach options are harder work than the mapped distance suggests.

Road walking and urban edges

Road walking is unavoidable but usually modest. Short lane sections connect villages, cross bridges and link rights of way, and traffic is generally quiet on the rural stretches. Even so, verges can be narrow, so walkers should be prepared for single-file walking and good visibility in dull conditions.

There is more pavement and suburban walking later in the route. Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster and Christchurch all involve town approaches, and the final stages negotiate the urban fringe around West Parley, Longham, Holdenhurst and Tuckton before the coast. These sections are physically easier than the muddy farmland, but they demand more attention to waymarks, junctions and street navigation.

Stiles, gates and livestock

This is working lowland farmland, so expect frequent gates, kissing gates, field gates and squeeze stiles. They are part of the normal rhythm of the route and can slow progress, especially with a large pack or in

wet weather.

Livestock fields are common along the Stour. Cattle, bullocks and sheep may be present in pasture, and animals can gather around stiles, gates and drinking points. Give cattle space, keep dogs under close control, and avoid getting boxed in at gateways.

Cross-field rights of way can be less obvious than riverside paths. In arable areas, the legal line may cross ploughed or cropped ground; in practice, field-edge walking or careful map-and-waymark checking may be needed where the trodden line is unclear.

Exposure and shelter

For most of its length, the route is well sheltered by hedgerows, woodland, riverbanks and village edges. Wind exposure is rarely a problem in the valley itself.

The exceptions are Hambledon Hill, Hod Hill and Hengistbury Head. The hillfort tops are open chalk downland with little cover, while Hengistbury Head is a low coastal headland exposed to weather from the sea. Carry an accessible waterproof and warm layer even when the valley sections feel calm.

Seasonal conditions

Season	What to expect
Spring	Ground may still be drying after winter, with muddy riverside and field sections. Chalk grassland and meadows are rewarding, but waterproof footwear remains sensible.
Summer	Usually the easiest underfoot. Grass paths firm up, the hillfort climbs are drier, and flood risk is generally lower, though heavy rain can still affect the river.
Autumn	Often good walking in early autumn, but conditions deteriorate after prolonged rain. Shorter days make the longer 20–23 km stages less forgiving.
Winter	The most difficult season. Floodplain paths may be waterlogged or flooded, riverbanks soft, chalk slopes slippery, and gates or stiles awkward in deep mud. Winter walking is possible but needs care, good waterproofs and flexible route decisions.

What actually makes it hard

The Stour Valley Way is accessible to fit beginners, but the easier terrain should not be confused with an effortless walk. On the common 5-day schedule, several days are around 20–23 km, so fatigue builds through repeated lowland mileage.

The steep chalk climbs over Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill are the main physical tests. The more unpredictable challenge is wet ground: a flat floodplain section can take far longer than expected if the Stour is high or the fields are saturated.

Navigation is usually helped by waymarking, but the route crosses enough farmland, village edges and urban fringe to require proper map or GPX backup. The hardest days are likely to be those combining long distance, muddy fields, livestock interruptions and a town approach at the end.

Waterproof boots are strongly recommended outside the driest summer spells and remain a sensible choice year-round. Trail shoes can work in dry summer conditions, but they leave little margin on wet

riverbanks, churned gateways and slippery chalk descents.

Weather and Best Time to Walk

The practical walking season for the Stour Valley Way is March to mid-October, matching the period used by self-guided walking operators. The best all-round months are **May-June** and **September-October**, when daylight is useful, temperatures are manageable and the valley paths are usually less waterlogged than in winter.

This is a lowland river route, so the main weather issue is not altitude or exposure but **flooding, mud and saturated fields**. The Stour regularly spreads across its flood plain, and some sections of the waymarked path can become wet, slow or impassable after prolonged rain.

Best months at a glance

Period	What to expect	Practical verdict
March-April	Improving daylight, but early spring can still be muddy or flood-affected after winter rain. Bluebells begin from mid-April.	Good later in the period; check river and path conditions in March.
May-June	Long days, spring flowers, generally drier paths and warm but usually not excessive temperatures.	One of the best windows for a full walk.
July-August	Warmest period, with August average highs around 21°C. Long daylight, but humid days are possible and Christchurch/Hengistbury Head is busier.	Good underfoot, but book accommodation early and carry enough water.
September-early October	Cooler walking, autumn colour in the Blackmore Vale and valley woodlands, fewer walkers than high summer.	Another excellent window, especially for a quieter trip.
Mid-October-November	Rain increases and lowland paths begin to soften. Daylight shortens quickly.	Still possible in settled weather, but conditions deteriorate.
December-February	Highest flood and waterlogging risk, short daylight and muddy clay soils.	Not recommended for a full through-walk without careful current checks.

Rain, flooding and mud

The Stour Valley Way follows an active river corridor for much of its length. Low-lying water-meadows and flood-plain paths can be underwater, especially after sustained autumn and winter rain.

Clay-heavy ground in the valley holds water, so conditions can worsen after rain has stopped. The river may rise with a delay, and a path that was passable one day may become awkward or impassable the next.

Sections where muddy or flooded ground is most likely include low-lying paths around **Stourton**, **Marnhull**, **Sturminster Newton**, **Hammoon**, **Stourpaine**, **Spetisbury**, **Pamphill / Kingston Lacy** and the approaches towards **Christchurch**. Around **Wimborne**, there is a waymarked diversion to avoid the flood-prone **Eye-Mead** section.

In genuine winter flooding, the Environment Agency advises avoiding low-lying footpaths near watercourses. Before a winter or early-spring walk, check current flood alerts for the Upper and Lower Stour and be prepared to reroute or postpone.

Daylight and daily timing

Daylight is generous in late spring and summer, which suits the longer 23 km days often used between **Sturminster Newton, Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster** and **Christchurch**. In late June, Dorset has roughly **16.5 hours** of daylight; in April, around **13.5–14.5 hours**.

By late September there are about **12 hours** of daylight, still adequate for most walkers with an early start. Late October drops to around **10.5 hours**, while late December has only about **7.5 hours**, making winter progress slow if paths are muddy or diversions are needed.

Heat, cold, wind and exposure

The Stour Valley has a temperate maritime climate: mild, changeable and damp rather than extreme. Summer heat is usually moderate, but exposed farmland, chalk slopes and long road or lane sections can feel hot on still days, so carry enough water between towns.

Cold and wind are less serious hazards here than on upland routes, but the climbs over **Hambledon Hill** and **Hod Hill** are noticeably more exposed than the sheltered valley. These chalk hillforts reach about 190 m, and wind, low cloud or driving rain can make them feel much harsher than the surrounding lowland paths.

At the finish, **Hengistbury Head** can be breezy because it is open to Christchurch Bay. There are no tidal hazards to plan around on this walk, but a windproof layer is useful in colder months for the final coastal section.

Snow is not the main planning problem on this lowland route. Flooding, mud, short daylight and slippery grass or chalk are far more likely to affect winter walking.

Trail surface by season

Underfoot, expect a mixture of riverside paths, grass, dirt tracks, gravel, quiet lanes, farmland and occasional boardwalk over marshy ground. In dry spells this is straightforward lowland walking; after rain, grass fields and water-meadows can become slow and greasy.

Spring paths recover gradually from winter. Early March can still feel like winter underfoot, while late April and May are normally more reliable.

Summer gives the firmest conditions overall, although riverside grass can remain damp in the mornings and some stile-heavy farmland can be tussocky. Autumn is often excellent until repeated rain softens the valley floor, particularly from mid-October onwards.

Ticks and insects

Ticks are a real consideration on this route because it passes through long grass, riverside vegetation, woodland and farmland. They are active from spring to early autumn, with the main peak from **May to August**.

Wear long trousers or gaiters in overgrown sections, use insect repellent, and check skin and clothing at the end of each day. Remove ticks promptly with a proper tick tool; Lyme disease is present in Dorset.

Summer also brings dragonflies, damselflies, butterflies, kingfishers and herons along the Stour and its wetlands. Spring is good for bluebells, wood anemones and migrant birds, while autumn brings fungi, colour in the hedgerows and winter thrushes arriving from October.

Accommodation and seasonal planning

Accommodation and self-guided packages are most straightforward during the March to mid-October walking season. July and August are the busiest months, especially near **Christchurch** and **Hengistbury Head**, so overnight stops should be booked well ahead.

Outside the main season, services may still be available in larger towns such as **Gillingham**, **Sturminster Newton**, **Blandford Forum**, **Wimborne Minster** and **Christchurch**, but winter walking is constrained more by ground conditions than by distance. Availability, opening dates and luggage-transfer arrangements should be checked before travelling.

Safety Notes

The Stour Valley Way is a moderate lowland route rather than a mountain walk, but its river setting creates specific hazards. Flooding, mud, livestock and quiet rural sections are the main issues to plan around.

For emergencies in the UK, call **999** or **112**. For non-life-threatening medical help use **NHS 111**; for non-emergency police matters use **101**.

Flooding and waterlogged paths

Flooding is the most important safety issue on the Stour Valley Way. The River Stour regularly floods its floodplain, and the footpath itself runs through low-lying riverside ground in several places.

Do not assume a dry start means the route will remain passable all day. There can be a time-lag between heavy rain and the river rising, so paths may flood hours after rainfall has stopped.

The most flood-prone areas include:

Area	Safety issue
Around Sturminster Newton	Low-lying riverside sections can become muddy, waterlogged or flooded.
Wimborne Minster / Eye-Mead	The main path can flood; use the waymarked flood-diversion loop when required.
Lower Stour valley between Wimborne Minster and Christchurch	Broad floodplain walking, wetlands and water-meadows are vulnerable after heavy rain.

Check the Environment Agency live flood service before setting out: <https://check-for-flooding.service.gov.uk/>. During flood events, avoid low-lying footpaths and bridges near watercourses, even if the official route appears to continue that way on the map.

Mud is common after rain even when there is no full flood. Some grassy riverside sections can become ankle-deep in prolonged wet weather, so waterproof footwear and poles are useful outside dry summer spells.

Mobile signal and quieter sections

Mobile coverage is patchy in parts of rural Dorset and Wiltshire. Signal can be unreliable in the upper river sections near **Stourton / Stourhead** and in the **Blackmore Vale** between **Sturminster Newton** and **Blandford Forum**.

Do not rely on a phone as the only navigation or emergency tool on the northern stages. Carry a printed OS map or a current guidebook backup, and download any digital maps for offline use before leaving accommodation.

The route is not wilderness, but the first two stages from **Stourton** through **Gillingham** to **Sturminster Newton** are quieter than the southern end near Christchurch. Between villages there may be stretches

where help is not immediately available.

Road walking and traffic

The route includes some country-lane walking, especially near farmland and on approaches to settlements. Traffic is generally light on rural lanes, but take care on bends, narrow verges and shaded sections where drivers may have limited visibility.

Expect more road and urban-fringe walking around **Blandford Forum**, **Canford Magna** and **Longham**. A reflective item or high-visibility layer is sensible in poor light, mist or rain.

Livestock, dogs and field access

The Stour Valley Way crosses farmland throughout, including livestock pasture. Keep dogs on a short lead around animals, close gates behind you, and give cattle plenty of space, especially if calves are present.

Cattle graze on **Hambledon Hill**, one of the main hillfort sections. Dogs should be kept on a short lead there; if cattle approach aggressively, let go of the lead and move away calmly rather than holding the dog close.

Some sections near **White Mill** in the Wimborne area do not permit dogs because of livestock. Follow local signs on the ground and be prepared to use an alternative if walking with a dog.

The route also includes stiles, kissing gates and field gates. These can be awkward with large packs, dogs or tired legs late in the day.

Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill

Hambledon Hill and **Hod Hill** are the route's most exposed sections. The climbs are not technical, but they are real climbs, and wet chalk or grass can be slippery on both the ascent and descent.

The chalk track up Hambledon Hill from the **Shroton** side is particularly worth treating with care in wet weather. Keep to the marked path, including around the western side of Hambledon Hill where landslip has affected the ramparts area.

These hillforts are open grassland, so wind and rain feel stronger than down in the sheltered river valley. Check the forecast before the Sturminster Newton to Blandford Forum area stage and carry an extra layer even in settled weather.

Heat, cold and exposure

In hot weather, the lowland valley can feel humid and the exposed sections have limited shade.

Hambledon Hill, **Hod Hill** and **Hengistbury Head** are the places where sun and wind exposure matter most.

Carry at least **2 litres of water on hot days**, use sun protection and avoid pushing hard through the middle of the day if temperatures are high. Plan refills in towns such as **Gillingham**, **Sturminster Newton**, **Blandford Forum** and **Wimborne Minster**, as gaps between services can be 10–15 km.

In colder months, the main issue is not altitude but wet ground, wind and short daylight. Winter walking needs particular care because the Stour floodplain is more likely to be muddy or flooded.

Ticks and Lyme disease

Ticks are present in Dorset countryside, especially in grassland, woodland and bracken from early spring to late autumn, with a peak around May to July. Higher-risk areas on this route include **Hambledon Hill**, water-meadows and woodland sections.

Wear long trousers, consider tucking trousers into socks, and use insect repellent in long grass. Check skin and clothing after each day's walk, especially behind knees, around the waist, armpits, groin and hairline.

Remove ticks promptly with a proper tick-removal tool. If a bull's-eye rash or flu-like symptoms appear in the weeks after a bite, contact a GP or NHS 111.

Christchurch Harbour and Hengistbury Head

The finish at **Hengistbury Head** and **Christchurch Harbour** is a low-lying coastal walking area, not a cliff-top hazard. The paths are popular, well maintained and well signed.

The narrow tidal channel known as **The Run**, where the Stour reaches the sea, has strong currents and is not a swimming spot. This is mainly relevant to anyone tempted to swim; walkers staying on the path are not at risk from the channel itself.

Solo hiking

The Stour Valley Way is suitable for solo walkers because it passes through towns and villages regularly and is waymarked throughout. The southern sections from **Wimborne Minster** towards **Christchurch** are much busier than the inland northern stages.

Solo walkers should share the day's route, overnight stop and expected finish time with someone before setting out. This is especially important on the quieter **Stourton to Sturminster Newton** section, where mobile signal and passing foot traffic may be limited.

Check before setting off each day

Before leaving each morning, check:

1. **Environment Agency flood map** for the River Stour: <https://check-for-flooding.service.gov.uk/>.
2. **Weather forecast**, especially before the **Hambledon Hill** and **Hod Hill** stage.
3. **Mobile coverage** for the next section and overnight stop.
4. **Local access issues**, including gates, stiles or temporary landowner restrictions; accommodation hosts may know recent problems.
5. **Food and drink stops**, as rural pub and shop opening hours can be limited, especially on weekdays.
6. **Daylight and finish time**, particularly outside summer or when taking the longer 23 km stages.

Gear Recommendations

Footwear

Waterproof walking boots with good tread are the safest default for the Stour Valley Way. The route is mostly lowland, but the riverside paths, field edges and water-meadows can become muddy or waterlogged after rain, and the River Stour flood plain can affect the footpath in places.

Ankle support is useful because the route has many stiles, gates and uneven field paths. Low-cut trail shoes may be comfortable in dry summer conditions for short sections, but they are a poor choice for a full wet-weather traverse.

Pay particular attention to grip for Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill. The chalk tracks and grass slopes on these hillfort climbs can be slippery when wet, especially on descents.

Low or mid-height gaiters are worthwhile in autumn, winter, spring, or after heavy rain. Wellingtons can make sense for a very short flooded local walk, but they are not practical footwear for a 5–6 day long-distance route.

Waterproofs and clothing

Carry a proper waterproof jacket with sealed seams in every season. This is not a high mountain route, but the Stour valley is exposed to ordinary UK weather, and long wet grass can soak clothing even when rainfall is light.

Waterproof overtrousers are optional in settled summer weather, but strongly recommended for spring, autumn and winter. They are also useful after sustained rain, when field paths and flood-plain sections can be very wet underfoot.

Use lightweight base layers with an insulating mid-layer rather than heavy clothing. The route is low-lying, but cold damp conditions are common outside summer, especially from October to March.

In summer, add a sun hat, SPF and lip balm. Hambledon Hill, Hod Hill and Hengistbury Head have more exposed sections than the wooded and riverside parts of the route.

Insect protection: Blandford fly

Blandford fly protection is genuinely important on this route. The fly is associated with the River Stour and is a particular issue downstream of Blandford Forum, especially between Blandford and the coast.

Peak biting season is May and June, with risk beginning in late April on warm, calm days near the riverbank. Bites commonly affect ankles and lower legs and can cause painful swelling and intense itching.

For May–June walks, wear long trousers and long socks, especially on the Blandford Forum–Wimborne Minster and Wimborne Minster–Christchurch/Hengistbury Head stages. Apply a DEET-based repellent to lower legs and carry antihistamine tablets or cream in the first-aid kit.

Dorset Council and the local NHS run annual larval treatment on the Stour, but this reduces rather than removes the risk. Standard tick precautions are also sensible in long grass: check skin after walking and

carry a tick remover.

Navigation

The Stour Valley Way is waymarked with the teal-and-orange kingfisher logo on waymarkers, fingerposts and lamp-post stickers, but do not rely on waymarking alone. Signage can be less obvious in quieter rural sections and around field boundaries.

A phone mapping app with the route GPX loaded is useful, backed up by OS mapping. A GPX is available from Walking Englishman, and the route can be followed on apps such as OS Maps, Outdooractive or Komoot.

For paper mapping, the route is covered by OS Explorer 142, 129, 118, 117 and 22. Carrying every sheet is bulky for an inn-to-inn walk, so many walkers use a phone for daily navigation and carry paper mapping or printed extracts as backup.

Mobile signal is generally better in valley towns than between villages. Carry a compass as a simple backup, particularly if walking alone or in poor weather.

Water and food carry

A 1-litre bottle is usually enough between settlements in normal conditions, but 1–1.5 litres is a better minimum for each half-day section. In warm weather, carry more for the exposed chalk hillforts and the final approach towards Hengistbury Head.

Do not drink from the River Stour untreated. Agricultural run-off makes river water unsuitable without proper filtration and purification.

Food resupply is easier than on remote upland trails, but do not assume every village will have a shop or an open pub when needed. Carry lunch or substantial snacks on the quieter rural stretches, especially early in the route between Stourton and East Stour and around the Sturminster Newton–Fiddleford Mill–Hammoon–Child Okeford area.

Trekking poles

Poles are not essential for the whole route, but they are useful in the right conditions. They help on the wet chalk descents of Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill, on muddy riverside paths, and when balancing over repeated stiles.

Campers carrying a heavier pack should strongly consider poles. Inn-to-inn walkers can treat them as optional, but they become more valuable after prolonged rain or on a later-stage tired-knee day.

Rucksack and luggage style

Walking style	Recommended pack	Route-specific notes
Inn-to-inn or self-guided with luggage transfer	20–25 litres	Enough for waterproofs, spare layer, water, food, first aid, navigation and insect protection. No camping gear needed.

Walking style	Recommended pack	Route-specific notes
Fast or section hiker	20–30 litres	Keep the pack light, but still carry boots or wet-weather footwear, waterproofs, navigation backup and enough water for rural gaps.
Camper	55–65 litres	Add tent, sleeping bag, mat, stove and food. Campsites are limited on the route, so overnight plans should be checked before travelling.

Dry bags or a pack cover are recommended for all styles. Wet grass, rain and occasional marshy boardwalk sections make it easy for kit to become damp even on a lowland walk.

Camping gear

Camping is possible only with proper planning. Do not build an itinerary around wild camping; use campsites and check availability before travelling.

A lightweight tent, season-appropriate sleeping bag, insulated mat and compact stove are the core items if camping. Because the route includes many stiles, muddy fields and some road walking, keep pack weight as low as practical.

Boots and trekking poles become more important with a camping load. A heavy pack makes the slippery chalk sections on Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill more demanding than the route profile suggests.

Power and electronics

Carry a power bank if using a phone for mapping. GPS tracking, screen use and poor signal patches can drain a battery long before the end of a walking day.

Charging is usually possible at overnight accommodation, pubs or inns, but it should not be assumed during the day. Keep the GPX route, maps and accommodation details available offline.

Seasonal adjustments

Season	Add or emphasise
Spring	Full waterproofs, gaiters after rain, warm mid-layer, and Blandford fly protection from late April into June.
Summer	Sun hat, SPF, extra water, insect repellent, long trousers and long socks near the river in May–June.
Autumn	Waterproof overtrousers, gaiters, warmer layers and dry bags for clothing and electronics.
Winter	Full waterproofs, gaiters, warm layers and conservative footwear choices. Low-lying Stour sections can flood or become very muddy, and route conditions should be checked before travelling.

Budget and Costs

The Stour Valley Way is a relatively flexible UK long-distance walk: costs depend mainly on whether you book a self-guided package, use B&Bs independently, or keep the trip low-cost with camping where available. Prices below are in GBP and reflect typical 2025 levels; accommodation, rail fares and package prices should be checked before booking.

Typical total cost

For a 5-walking-day itinerary, most independent walkers should budget broadly as follows, excluding travel from home if starting elsewhere in the UK.

Style	Likely cost per person	What this usually means
Budget	~£400–500	Campsites where practical, simple food, off-peak rail, minimal paid attractions
Mid-range	~£650–900	B&Bs or guesthouses sharing a twin/double, pub meals most evenings, rail to/from the route
Comfortable	~£1,000–1,200+	Better inns or hotels, restaurant/pub meals, taxi flexibility, possible luggage transfer
Self-guided package	From £856pp	Booked accommodation, luggage transfer, maps/notes and support included

The main cost pressure is accommodation in smaller valley settlements. Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster and Christchurch have the widest choice, while Sturminster Newton and Gillingham have fewer options and may need earlier booking.

Accommodation costs

B&Bs, guesthouses, inns and small hotels are the standard accommodation style on the Stour Valley Way. Expect the following per-person prices when sharing a twin or double room:

Accommodation type	Typical cost
Budget B&B/guesthouse	~£50–60pp per night
Mid-range B&B/inn	~£70–90pp per night
Comfortable inn or hotel	~£90–120pp per night

Breakfast is usually included in B&B-style accommodation, which helps keep daily food costs predictable. Single rooms and solo bookings can be significantly more expensive than sharing.

Formal campsites in Dorset typically cost around £12–35 per night for a pitch for two people with a tent. Wild camping is not legal in England, so camping budgets should be based on booked sites rather than informal overnight stops.

Food and drink

Food costs are manageable because the route passes through proper towns and villages, but there are still rural stretches where carrying lunch is sensible. Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster and Christchurch have the best choice of pubs, cafés and restaurants.

Item	Typical cost per person
Packed lunch from a shop or supermarket	~£5–8
Pub lunch, such as soup/sandwich and a drink	~£10–15
Pub evening meal, main and drink	~£15–25
Bought breakfast if not included	~£8–12

A practical daily food budget is around £25–35 for budget walkers, £35–55 for a mid-range approach, and £55–70+ if eating well each evening. The Fiddleford Inn, between Sturminster Newton and Blandford Forum, is directly on the route and is a useful food stop, open lunchtimes and evenings Tuesday to Sunday; current opening hours should be checked before relying on it.

Transport to and from the route

The start at Stourton/Stourhead is not as straightforward by public transport as the finish. Gillingham is the nearest useful railhead for many walkers, with South Western Railway services from London Waterloo taking roughly 2 hours.

Typical advance or off-peak rail fares from London to Gillingham vary widely, roughly £30–70 single. From Gillingham, a taxi to Stourton/Stourhead is the practical option: allow around £15–20 for the short journey, but agree or check the fare with the operator before travelling. Local operators include A2B Taxis Dorset and Stag Taxis.

Christchurch is a convenient finish, with rail services towards Bournemouth and London Waterloo. Advance or off-peak fares from Christchurch to London are typically around £25–60 single, depending on timing and ticket type.

For walkers starting at Gillingham rather than Stourhead, the taxi to the official start can be avoided. Morebus and Wilts & Dorset services connect places such as Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster, Christchurch and Bournemouth, but Gillingham has no direct bus to Stourton, so this should not be relied on for reaching the start.

Luggage transfer

Luggage transfer is included in the main self-guided package option. Independent walkers who want bags moved between overnight stops should budget around £10–15 per bag per day where a provider can cover the itinerary.

Specialist companies such as Luggage Transfers cover parts of the South West, but Stour Valley Way coverage and exact prices should be checked before booking. On this route, luggage transfer is most useful for walkers using B&Bs and inns rather than campsites.

Self-guided package costs

The main commercial self-guided option on the Stour Valley Way is offered by Let's Go Walking. Package prices should be checked before booking, but typical 2025 prices are:

Package	Twin/double occupancy	Single supplement	Solo traveller
7 days / 6 nights / 5 walking days	£856pp	£1,330pp	£1,450pp
8 days / 7 nights / 6 walking days	£996pp	£1,549pp	£1,689pp

These packages include B&B accommodation in guesthouses, inns or small hotels, daily luggage transfer, detailed walking notes, OS 1:25,000 maps and route support. Lunches, evening meals and transport to and from the route are not included.

A deposit of £85pp secures a booking, with the balance due 6 weeks before departure. Extra nights are available from around £55pp depending on location. Packages normally run from March to mid-October.

Attractions and entry fees

Stourhead is directly relevant because the route starts at the National Trust estate. Non-members should allow for admission if visiting the estate at the start: adult entry is around £23, children aged 5–17 around £11.50, and a family ticket around £57.50. National Trust members enter free; non-member car parking is around £4.50.

Kingston Lacy is another National Trust highlight near Pamphill. Many walkers pass through the estate area on the public route without visiting the house or formal gardens, but admission is required for those areas. Typical non-member entry is around £19–21 for adults and £9.50–10.50 for children.

Hambledon Hill has open access and no admission charge. Hengistbury Head is also free to access, though the seasonal land train costs a small extra charge of roughly £2–3 one way.

Sensible ways to keep costs down

Book accommodation early in smaller overnight stops, especially if walking in summer or at weekends. Sharing twin or double rooms is much cheaper than booking single rooms across the whole route.

National Trust membership can make a noticeable difference if visiting Stourhead and Kingston Lacy as part of the walk. It is less important if simply following the public route and not entering paid areas.

Travelling off-peak and booking rail tickets in advance can reduce transport costs substantially. Walkers on a tighter budget can also start at Gillingham to avoid the taxi transfer to Stourton/Stourhead, although that means missing the official inland start at Stourhead.

Luggage Transfer, Guided Tours and Support Services

The Stour Valley Way is straightforward to organise independently, but luggage transfer and pre-booked accommodation can make the five- or six-day walk much easier. Support is most useful on the longer middle and southern stages, where walkers often finish in or near Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster and Christchurch rather than at isolated rural stops.

Self-guided walking-holiday packages

Companies such as **Let's Go Walking** offer self-guided Stour Valley Way packages. This is the most complete support option for walkers who want accommodation, luggage transfer and route materials arranged in one booking, while still walking independently each day.

Typical Stour Valley Way packages include:

Package element	What to expect
Itinerary	7-day package with 6 nights and 5 walking days, or 8-day package with 7 nights and 6 walking days
Accommodation	Guest houses, inns or small hotels, usually with en-suite or private bathrooms
Meals	Bed and breakfast; lunches and evening meals are not normally included
Luggage	Daily bag transfer to the next accommodation, with target delivery by 4pm, subject to traffic and local conditions
Navigation	Detailed route itinerary and notes, plus OS 1:25,000 maps
Support	Telephone assistance during the walk
Flexibility	Extra nights and tailored itineraries may be available

Published prices for Let's Go Walking packages have been in the region of **£856 per person** for a 7-day double/twin booking and **£996 per person** for an 8-day double/twin booking. Single and solo-traveller prices are higher, with solo rates published from around **£1,450–£1,689** depending on itinerary length. Extra nights have been listed from **£55 per person**.

Prices, deposits and availability change, so confirm current details before booking. Let's Go Walking lists a deposit of **£85 per person**, with the balance due 6 weeks before departure. The company can also accommodate common dietary requirements such as vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free diets, but these should be stated when booking.

This format suits solo travellers, non-drivers and anyone who wants to avoid the work of stitching together accommodation across the valley. It is not a guided group walk: you still need to be comfortable following waymarks, route notes and OS mapping.

Independent luggage transfer

The Stour Valley Way does not have a large, route-specific baggage-courier network in the way that busier national trails do. Independent walkers who want bags moved without buying a full walking-

holiday package usually need to arrange transfers stage by stage with local taxi or private-hire operators.

Useful contacts for the Blandford Forum, Stour valley and Wimborne areas include:

Provider	Area / use
Oakwood Taxis	Blandford Forum area; tel 01258 455555
Riverside Travel	Minibus and accessible transport near Blandford Forum and Wimborne; riverside-travel.co.uk

When arranging your own luggage shuttle, agree the details clearly in advance: accommodation names, collection time, delivery address, bag labels, mobile number and what should happen if the driver cannot access the property. Many B&Bs and inns can advise on local taxi firms, but do not assume they will organise baggage movement for you.

For a five-day itinerary, pre-arranged transfers are especially useful between overnight stops around **East Stour, Sturminster Newton**, the **Blandford Forum / Charlton Marshall** area, **Wimborne Minster** and **Christchurch**. Exact pick-up and drop-off points should be fixed once accommodation is booked.

Guided walking options

The Stour Valley Way is mainly a self-guided route. It is waymarked with the kingfisher logo and has accessible mapping, so most walkers do not need a guide if they are confident with OS maps and basic navigation.

There is limited demand for scheduled guided group departures on this trail compared with better-known commercial routes. Walkers who want a guide for the whole route should enquire with self-guided operators such as Let's Go Walking about bespoke support, or approach general Dorset guided-walk providers listed through Visit Dorset.

A guided option may be worthwhile for groups, less confident navigators, or walkers who want extra interpretation around places such as **Hambledon Hill, Hod Hill, Kingston Lacy, Wimborne Minster** and the lower Stour wetlands. For most experienced walkers, route notes, OS mapping and the waymarks will be enough.

When support services are worth paying for

A package or luggage-transfer arrangement is most useful if:

- you are walking the whole trail in one continuous trip;
- you do not want to carry a full pack for 5–6 days;
- you are travelling solo and want accommodation and route logistics handled together;
- you have fixed holiday dates and need each overnight stop secured in advance;
- you want telephone backup during the walk.

Support is less necessary for section hikers. **Gillingham** and **Christchurch** have railway stations, and buses link key valley towns including **Sturminster Newton, Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster** and the Christchurch/Bournemouth area, making day sections and weekend blocks practical without luggage transfer.

What to book ahead

Book accommodation and luggage arrangements before committing to train tickets or long-distance travel. The smaller overnight stops have limited choice, while **Wimborne Minster** and **Christchurch** can fill quickly in summer because of wider Dorset and coastal tourism demand.

For July and August, full self-guided packages should be booked months ahead where possible. Independent walkers should also reserve B&Bs and inns well in advance, especially for weekend nights and for the final approach to Christchurch and Hengistbury Head.

If arranging taxi-based luggage transfer, do it once the accommodation sequence is fixed, not on the morning of the walk. Rural taxi availability can be limited, and a missed bag transfer can cause more disruption than a missed passenger journey.

Shorter Hikes and Best Sections

The Stour Valley Way works well as a section hike because its character changes clearly from the quiet upper valley around Stourhead, through the Blackmore Vale and chalk hillforts, to the lower Stour wetlands and coast. The main limitation is transport: Gillingham and Christchurch have railway stations, while Sturminster Newton, Blandford Forum and Wimborne Minster rely on buses, taxis or car shuttles.

Best short options at a glance

Best for	Start → End	Approx. distance	Why choose it	Transport notes
Best coastal day walk	Christchurch / Tuckton Bridge → Hengistbury Head, with Wick Ferry where useful	About 7–9 miles as a fuller loop	Reedbeds, saltmarsh, harbour views and the classic finish at Hengistbury Head	Christchurch has a South Western Railway station. Wick Ferry is seasonal; this should be checked before travelling.
Best inland day walk	Sturminster Newton → Hambledon Hill / Hod Hill → Blandford Forum	About 14 miles / 23 km	The route's biggest climbs and best inland views, with two major hillforts	Best with a car or taxi drop-off. Blandford Forum has bus links but no station.
Best weekend section	Sturminster Newton → Blandford Forum → Wimborne Minster	About 46 km over 2 days	Hillforts, the Georgian centre of Blandford Forum, Kingston Lacy parkland and Wimborne Minster	Overnight in or near Blandford Forum. Wimborne has buses to Bournemouth.
Best 3–4 day section	Gillingham → Wimborne Minster	Roughly 52 km	The strongest practical section: rail access, Blackmore Vale, Sturminster Newton, Hambledon Hill, Hod Hill, Blandford Forum and Kingston Lacy	Start at Gillingham station. Finish with buses from Wimborne to Bournemouth.
Best for beginners	Wimborne Minster → Christchurch / Hengistbury Head	About 23 km if walked in one day	Gentle lower-valley walking with no major climbs, plus Longham Lakes, Throop Mill and the coastal finish	Use buses to Wimborne and the railway from Christchurch. Can be split or shortened around Throop, Tuckton and Hengistbury Head.
Best scenery sampler	Stourton / Stourhead → Gillingham	About 9 miles	Stourhead, the quiet upper Stour valley, pastoral fields and small villages	Stourhead is best reached by car or taxi. Gillingham has a South Western Railway station.
Best circular from Wimborne	Eye Bridge → Pamphill / Kingston Lacy area → Eye Bridge	About 3 miles	Easy off-road walking through National Trust land, meadows and common	Start from Eye Bridge car park on Cowgrove Road. Bus 88 serves Kingston Lacy from Wimborne on some weekdays; this should be checked before travelling.

Best for	Start → End	Approx. distance	Why choose it	Transport notes
Best circular at the coast	Mudeford Quay → Stanpit Marsh → Wick → Hengistbury Head → Mudeford Quay	About 12 km / 7.4 miles	A compact estuary, river and headland walk using part of the Stour Valley Way	Public parking at Mudeford Quay and bus connections to Christchurch; Christchurch station is about 2 km from Mudeford.

Best day walk: Christchurch or Tuckton Bridge to Hengistbury Head

For an easy, memorable taste of the Stour Valley Way, use the final miles of the route between the lower Stour and Hengistbury Head. A fuller version links Christchurch or Tuckton Bridge, the river near Wick, the Double Dykes area and the headland, with a loop of roughly 7–9 miles depending on the exact line taken.

This is the best choice if public transport matters. Christchurch station is on the South Western Railway network, with regular services towards Bournemouth and London Waterloo, so the walk can be done without a car.

The ground is generally gentle, but allow time for wetland paths, harbour-side detours and the headland. Wick Ferry and other local ferry options are seasonal, so ferry times should be checked before travelling.

Best inland day walk: Sturminster Newton to Blandford Forum via Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill

The strongest inland one-day section is the Sturminster Newton to Blandford Forum stretch, about 23 km / 14 miles. It takes in Hambledon Hill, the route's high point at 190 m, and Hod Hill, another major chalk hillfort with dramatic earthworks.

This is the day to choose for views over the Blackmore Vale and for the most physical walking on the trail. The climb from the Child Okeford side to Hambledon Hill is short but steep, and it changes the feel of the route from lowland river walking to open chalk downland.

Transport is the drawback. Sturminster Newton and Blandford Forum do not have railway stations, so this section works best with a car shuttle, taxi arrangement or carefully checked buses. Blandford Forum has bus links towards Bournemouth and Wimborne, but onward journeys may be slow.

Best weekend section: Sturminster Newton to Wimborne Minster

A two-day section from Sturminster Newton to Wimborne Minster gives the best concentration of inland highlights. The usual split is Sturminster Newton to the Blandford Forum area, then Blandford Forum or Charlton Marshall through the middle Stour valley to Wimborne Minster, for about 46 km in total.

Day one is the hillfort day, with Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill before the approach to Blandford Forum. Day two is gentler, passing through places such as Spetisbury, Shapwick and Sturminster Marshall before the Kingston Lacy and Pamphill area and the finish in Wimborne Minster.

Blandford Forum is the natural overnight stop because it has the best mix of services in the middle of this section. Wimborne Minster has buses to Bournemouth, but there is no direct bus between

Wimborne and Blandford Forum; a car or taxi is often the more realistic option for linking ends.

Best 3–4 day section: Gillingham to Wimborne Minster

For a practical multi-day section without committing to the full route, Gillingham to Wimborne Minster is the best-balanced choice. It is roughly 52 km and can be walked over three or four easier days, using Sturminster Newton and Blandford Forum as sensible overnight bases.

This section includes Hardy country around Marnhull, the market town of Sturminster Newton, Fiddleford Mill, Hambledon Hill, Hod Hill, Blandford Forum, the Kingston Lacy and Pamphill area, and Wimborne Minster. It gives a strong sense of the Stour Valley Way without the more awkward inland start at Stourhead or the final urban-fringe approach to Christchurch.

Gillingham station is the key access point, with South Western Railway services on the London Waterloo–Exeter line. From Wimborne Minster, buses such as the X3 and route 13 link towards Bournemouth; current timetables should be checked before travelling.

Best section for beginners: Wimborne Minster to Christchurch / Hengistbury Head

The lower Stour from Wimborne Minster towards Christchurch is the most beginner-friendly long section. It avoids the hillfort climbs and follows gentler riverside, wetland and lowland terrain, with interest at Longham Lakes, Throop Mill, the Stour Valley nature reserves and Hengistbury Head.

At about 23 km, it is still a long walking day, so beginners may prefer to split it or walk only the Christchurch, Tuckton and Hengistbury Head end. Throop, Holdenhurst and the Tuckton area offer useful break points for shorter linear or out-and-back walks.

Transport is better here than on most inland sections. Wimborne has bus links towards Bournemouth, and Christchurch has a railway station for the return journey.

Best for scenery: Stourhead to Gillingham, or the Hambledon Hill section

For landscaped estate scenery and a quiet upper-valley feel, the Stourton / Stourhead to Gillingham section is the best short sampler. Stourhead's National Trust garden and estate sit near the inland start, and the route then follows the gentle upper Stour through pastoral countryside and small villages.

Services are limited on this stretch, so carry food and water rather than relying on stops en route. Stourhead is most easily reached by car or taxi, while Gillingham gives a useful railway exit.

For bigger views, choose the Sturminster Newton to Blandford Forum section instead. Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill provide the broadest panoramas and the most dramatic walking on the Stour Valley Way.

Best for villages, food and accommodation

Gillingham to Wimborne Minster is the most convenient section for walkers who want regular overnight stops and town services. Gillingham, Sturminster Newton, Blandford Forum and Wimborne Minster give the best sequence of practical bases, with pubs, cafés, shops and accommodation concentrated in the valley towns.

The quieter upper valley around Stourhead and East Stour has fewer services, and the hillfort section has long rural stretches between villages. Book accommodation ahead in the smaller towns and villages,

especially if walking during the main self-guided season from spring to early autumn.

Camping and budget overnights

Camping is possible in parts of the Stour valley, but it is not the easiest way to organise this trail unless specific campsites are planned in advance. The route is better served by inns, guesthouses, B&Bs and hotels in towns such as Gillingham, Sturminster Newton, Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster and Christchurch.

Do not assume there will be a campsite at the end of each natural walking day. Campsite locations, opening dates and whether they accept backpacking walkers should be checked before travelling.

Highlights and Points of Interest

The Stour Valley Way is strongest when treated as more than a river walk. Its best moments come from the contrast between designed estates, quiet water-meadows, hillfort summits, old river towns and the sudden coastal finish at Christchurch Harbour.

For walkers with spare time, the places below are the ones most worth slowing down for, building a longer lunch stop around, or adding an extra overnight nearby.

Stourhead and the upper Stour

Stourhead gives the route an unusually memorable inland start. The National Trust estate at Stourton covers 2,650 acres and includes one of England's great 18th-century landscape gardens, laid out around an artificial lake with classical buildings including the Temple of Flora, Temple of Apollo and the Pantheon.

The Palladian mansion is one of the earliest grand Palladian-style villas in England, with Chippendale furniture inside. If time allows before starting the walk, this is the obvious place to spend extra hours rather than rushing straight onto the trail.

The River Stour rises on or near the estate, so the setting also gives the walk a clear geographical beginning. Park Hill Camp, an Iron Age hillfort on the estate, lies close to the Stour Valley Way and adds an early prehistoric thread that continues later at Hambledon Hill, Hod Hill and Hengistbury Head.

Alfred's Tower is also on the wider Stourhead estate. The 160 ft / 49 m folly was built in 1772 and gives broad views over Wiltshire, Dorset and Somerset, but it is best treated as an add-on circular walk rather than part of a fast-through route day. National Trust opening times and admission charges should be checked before travelling.

Sturminster Newton and Fiddleford Mill

Sturminster Newton is one of the best natural pauses in the Blackmore Vale section. It is a working market town with pubs, independent shops and the six-arched medieval bridge over the River Stour, making it a useful overnight stop as well as a point of interest.

Downstream, Fiddleford Mill is one of the most atmospheric river sites on the route. The mill has medieval origins, a Domesday Book connection and a surviving 1566 inscription, while the present stone structure is largely 18th century.

The setting is part of the appeal: tawny stone buildings, pollarded willows, reedbeds and a bend in the Stour. Beside it is Fiddleford Manor, a Grade I listed 14th-century manor house with a notable medieval great hall roof.

This stretch also gives the route a surprising smuggling story. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Fiddleford was used to store contraband such as French brandy, wine, silk and cloth brought upriver from the coast around Hengistbury Head.

Hambledon Hill

Hambledon Hill is the route's high point and one of its defining climbs. Rising to 190 m above the Blackmore Vale near Child Okeford and Shroton, it is one of Britain's best-preserved Iron Age hillforts and a National Nature Reserve.

This is where the Stour Valley Way briefly stops feeling like gentle lowland walking. The climb is worth saving energy for, as the summit gives wide views across Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire.

The hill is important for more than its ramparts. It also preserves a Neolithic landscape and rare unimproved chalk grassland, with 28 butterfly species recorded, including Adonis blue and dark green fritillary, plus five orchid species.

Hambledon Hill is National Trust land with free access and is open dawn to dusk year-round. In poor weather, the exposed top can feel very different from the sheltered valley floor, so it is worth having a windproof layer accessible rather than buried in the pack.

Hod Hill

Hod Hill is the second major hillfort highlight of the north Dorset section. It is a large Iron Age hillfort overlooking the Stour, with steep natural slopes dropping towards the river and views back towards Hambledon Hill and across the surrounding farmland.

At 22 hectares / 54 acres, it is the largest hillfort of its type in Dorset. Its roughly rectangular earthworks are impressive in scale, but the most distinctive feature is the Roman fort built inside the north-west corner after the conquest of AD 43.

That Iron Age and Roman layering makes Hod Hill one of the route's best historic sites. It is also a strong downland wildlife stop, and walkers with time should avoid treating it as just another climb between valley villages.

Blandford Forum and the Stour Meadows

Blandford Forum is the most architecturally distinctive town on the Stour Valley Way. After the fire of 1731 destroyed most of the town, it was rebuilt by the local architect brothers John and William Bastard, giving the centre its uniform Georgian brick frontages, sash windows and classical detailing.

It is widely regarded as the best-preserved small Georgian town in the UK. The Fire Monument is the key reminder of the disaster that shaped the townscape.

The riverside setting matters too. The Mortain suspension bridge and Preetz Bridge link the town with Stour Meadows, making it easy to combine an overnight stop with a short evening walk by the river.

Kingston Lacy and Pamphill

Kingston Lacy is the major estate highlight of the middle Stour valley. The Stour Valley Way passes through the parkland of this National Trust property near Wimborne Minster, so it is one of the easiest big-ticket heritage stops to combine with the walk.

The estate covers 8,500 acres, with parkland, heathland, water meadows and Iron Age earthworks. The house itself was transformed by William John Bankes into a Venetian-style palazzo between 1834 and

1855, with collections including works by Rubens, Van Dyck, Titian and Brueghel, as well as the UK's largest private collection of ancient Egyptian artefacts.

Pamphill, part of the Bankes Estate, is a quieter companion highlight. The oak avenue and Pamphill Dairy Farm Shop make it a good place to slow the day down if the itinerary allows.

Kingston Lacy is worth extra time, but a full house visit can be hard to fit into a long walking day. Opening hours and admission prices should be checked before planning a visit around the route.

Wimborne Minster

Wimborne Minster is one of the best overnight towns on the route because the trail reaches a real historic centre rather than just passing a landmark. The town sits at the confluence of the Stour and Allen rivers and has a Saxon foundation.

The Minster Church of St Cuthburga is the main focus, with twin towers, Norman and Gothic architecture, and more than 1,300 years of history. Its Chained Library is one of only a handful of surviving chained libraries in the country and is the second-largest, with a medieval manuscript among its oldest items.

The church also contains the tombs of King Ethelred and John Beaufort. Around the church, the town has historic buildings from the 15th century, almshouses, thatched cottages and a busy high street, making it a rewarding place to arrive before the final day to the coast.

Longham Lakes, Throop Mill and the lower Stour wetlands

The lower Stour becomes increasingly rich in wetland wildlife as the route approaches Christchurch. Longham Lakes, near Longham, is a notable wildlife area where former gravel pits have become important wildfowl lakes.

Further downstream, Throop Mill is one of the key river landmarks. Milling is recorded here from the Domesday period, and the site has around 900 years of milling history, with weirs and the old mill setting giving a clear sense of the working river.

The Stour Valley Nature Reserve is especially worth slowing down for. This Green Flag award-winning riverside stretch north-west of Bournemouth is rich in birds and plant life, with dragonflies and butterflies in summer.

This is also one of the best places on the route to look for the wildlife that gives the trail its identity. The teal-and-orange kingfisher on the waymarks is well chosen: kingfishers occur through the valley, especially on the middle and lower Stour, and multiple pairs are found around the lower river. Otters also live along the Stour Valley Nature Reserve near Throop.

Christchurch, The Run and Hengistbury Head

The final approach changes the character of the whole walk. After days of inland river valley, the Stour reaches Christchurch Harbour, where it meets the Avon and flows towards the sea through the narrow tidal channel known as The Run.

Christchurch itself is worth time before or after finishing. Christchurch Priory stands by the town quay and is one of the longest parish churches in England.

Hengistbury Head gives the route a proper coastal ending. The low headland is a nature reserve with more than 300 bird species recorded, including Barn Owls, Purple Heron, Skylarks and migrating raptors, as well as more than 500 plant species.

There is also deep human history here. The Double Dykes on the approach mark Iron Age earthworks, and the headland has a long history of settlement and coastal use, including ironstone dogger boulders on the shoreline that were historically extracted as ballast for barges.

For many walkers, this is the place to allow extra time rather than ending at the first bus stop or station. The Stour Valley Way and Bournemouth Coast Path meet at Hengistbury Head, and the shift from river walking to open harbour and sea makes it the most satisfying finish on the route. The land train and ferry links around Hengistbury Head, Tuckton and Mudeford Sandbank are seasonal or timetable-dependent and should be checked before travelling.

Best places to build in extra time

Place	Best for	Why linger
Stourhead	Landscape garden, estate history, route beginning	Major National Trust estate beside the upper Stour, with lake, temples, mansion and nearby hillfort
Hambledon Hill	Viewpoint, hillfort, chalk grassland wildlife	Route high point, wide views and one of Britain's best-preserved Iron Age hillforts
Hod Hill	Archaeology and views	Large Iron Age hillfort with a Roman fort inside its earthworks
Sturminster Newton and Fiddleford Mill	River heritage and overnight stop	Market town, medieval bridge, mill, manor house and quiet riverside walking
Blandford Forum	Townscape and services	Exceptional Georgian architecture beside the Stour, with riverside meadows
Kingston Lacy and Pamphill	Country estate and parkland	National Trust house, 8,500-acre estate, water meadows, heathland and Bankes Estate landscape
Wimborne Minster	Historic town stop	Twin-towered minster, Chained Library, old streets and useful end-of-day facilities
Throop Mill and Stour Valley Nature Reserve	Wildlife and lower-river scenery	Kingfishers, otters, wetland plants, birds and a historic mill site
Hengistbury Head and Christchurch	Coastal finish and nature reserve	Harbour, priory, Iron Age earthworks, headland wildlife and the point where the river walk meets the sea

Common Mistakes and Planning Tips

Assuming Stourhead is easy by public transport

Stourton and the Stourhead estate are a remote inland start point, not a station village. There is no direct train or simple turn-up bus connection to the estate, and anyone walking northbound has the same problem at the finish.

The nearest useful railway stations are Gillingham, Bruton and Warminster, but the onward leg normally needs a pre-booked taxi or a pre-arranged on-demand service. There is no taxi rank at Gillingham station, so arriving and hoping to find a cab is a poor plan.

Fix: book the final leg to Stourhead before travel. Wiltshire Connect can be useful from the Gillingham area when available, but it must be booked in advance and its operating days and hours should be checked before travelling. Do not rely on Sunday buses to reach Stourhead.

Leaving accommodation too late

The Stour Valley Way has several good overnight towns, but the actual number of walker-friendly rooms can be limited. Gillingham or East Stour, Sturminster Newton, Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster and Christchurch are the main practical stopping areas, while smaller places such as East Stour and Charlton Marshall have much less choice.

Summer weekends, bank holidays and local events can make Blandford Forum and Wimborne Minster harder to book. Christchurch also fills quickly in the warmer months because it is a coastal town as well as a trail finish.

Fix: book every night before setting off, especially from June to August. If using a self-guided package, wait for the accommodation confirmation before buying fixed rail tickets or committing to non-refundable travel.

Expecting every village to have a shop

The route passes many small villages and hamlets that are useful for navigation but not for resupply. Stour Provost, Fifehead Magdalen, Hammoon, Durweston, Charlton Marshall, Shapwick, Spetisbury and Pamphill should not be treated as guaranteed food stops.

The reliable town-level resupply points are Gillingham, Sturminster Newton, Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster and Christchurch. Some individual pubs, cafés or farm shops may help on particular days, but rural opening hours are variable.

Fix: carry lunch and snacks from the main towns, not from a hoped-for village shop. On the longer middle days, check the opening times of places such as the Anchor Inn at Shapwick and Pamphill Dairy before relying on them.

Underestimating flooding and muddy water-meadows

This is a lowland river-valley route, so wet ground is one of the main practical issues. The upper Stour above Sturminster Newton, the flat meadow sections north of Blandford and the Eye Mead area near

Wimborne can be waterlogged after rain.

The problem is not always limited to the day it rains. The Stour can rise after a delay, and floodplain paths may remain muddy or impassable for days.

Fix: check river levels and recent rainfall before each stage in wet periods. Use the signed flood-bypass routes at Wimborne, including the Eye Mead Weir to Dawsons Hole option, and the bypass near West Parley when needed. Do not try to force a flooded riverside or meadow line simply because it appears on an old track file.

Using an old GPX or relying on an outdated guidebook

The Stour Valley Way has had route amendments in places including Hammoon, Bryanston, Pamphill and the Wimborne / Julian's Bridge area. Older guidebooks and GPX files may therefore send walkers onto superseded lines.

The old Green Fields Books guide by Edward Griffiths is useful background, but it should not be treated as the final routing on the ground. Some older mapping also shows the flood-prone Eye Mead line rather than the current bypass option.

Fix: download a current GPX from LDWA or Dorset Council shortly before the walk, and cross-check it with current OS Explorer mapping. The relevant OS Explorer sheets are OL22, 117, 118, 129 and 142. Follow current kingfisher waymarks and current access signs where they differ from old printed directions.

Thinking the path will always stay beside the River Stour

The Stour Valley Way follows the river valley, not a continuous riverbank. Long sections head away from the water through farmland, villages, woodland, lanes and higher ground.

This can feel counter-intuitive if the river is expected to remain in sight all day. The longest more obviously riverside walking is around Wimborne, but elsewhere the waymarks often lead inland for good reason.

Fix: navigate the signed route rather than trying to keep close to the water. If the kingfisher waymarks take the path away from the river, assume the route is following the valley line unless current mapping clearly shows otherwise.

Making the middle stages too long without a food plan

The Sturminster Newton to Blandford area and the Blandford to Wimborne section are the days most likely to catch walkers out. They are longer stages in the common five-day split, and facilities between the main towns are intermittent.

Between Blandford Forum and Wimborne Minster, the path passes places such as Charlton Marshall, Spetisbury, Shapwick and Sturminster Marshall, but not every rural pub or café opens every day. Sunday and Monday closures are common enough to matter.

Fix: carry a packed lunch on the longer middle stages unless a stop has been checked directly. Treat cafés and pubs as a bonus unless their current opening hours suit the exact day of walking.

Forgetting that Hengistbury Head is not the railhead

Hengistbury Head is the route's coastal finish, but it is not where the railway station is. Christchurch station is the logical rail exit, and the connection from the headland needs planning.

Depending on season and timing, walkers may use the Hengistbury Head Land Train, a bus, or a taxi from the Tuckton / Christchurch area. Returning to Gillingham for the Stourhead end is not a direct train journey and normally involves changes.

Fix: plan the finish-day transfer before setting off for the final stage. Check current train times from Christchurch and allow enough margin after reaching Hengistbury Head. If finishing late, staying in Christchurch can be simpler than attempting a long evening return.

Treating Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill as minor bumps

Most of the route is gentle lowland walking, which can make the hillfort section feel more abrupt than expected. Hambledon Hill is the high point at about 190 m, and Hod Hill is the other major climb.

Both are open chalk grassland with little shelter on the tops. The climbs and descents around Child Okeford, Hambledon Hill, Hod Hill and Stourpaine can be slippery in wet weather.

Fix: take the hillfort day seriously, even though the absolute height is modest. Carry waterproofs and an extra layer, and avoid planning this section for poor weather if the itinerary has any flexibility.

Misjudging access and opening times at major sites

Stourhead, Fiddleford Mill and Kingston Lacy are important places on or near the route, but they are not all open in the same way year-round. Stourhead is a National Trust property with managed parking and seasonal opening arrangements, while Fiddleford Mill has limited opening periods.

Kingston Lacy and the Pamphill area can also be busy at weekends. These sites can work well as rest stops or short visits, but only if their access arrangements fit the walking day.

Fix: check current opening times, car parking arrangements and any entry requirements before building visits into the schedule. Do not assume that a heritage site beside the route will be open, free to park at, or suitable as a guaranteed indoor break.

Final Advice

Who the Stour Valley Way suits best

The Stour Valley Way is a strong choice for fit beginners, first-time long-distance walkers and families who want a manageable multi-day route with towns, services and public transport never too far away. It is also rewarding for experienced walkers who enjoy heritage-rich lowland walking: Stourhead, Hambledon Hill, Hod Hill, Blandford Forum, Kingston Lacy, Wimborne Minster and Hengistbury Head give the route more variety than a simple riverside path.

It is not a wilderness walk. Choose it for river meadows, farmland, old mills, market towns, hillforts and a coastal finish, rather than for solitude or sustained upland terrain.

The main thing to plan carefully

Accommodation is the key booking issue. Beds are more limited in the smaller northern villages and around Sturminster Newton, while Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster and Christchurch give more options; book ahead, especially for weekends, school holidays and summer dates.

Navigation also needs proper preparation. The route is waymarked with the kingfisher logo, but waymarking can be inconsistent, and older guidebooks may not match current line changes. Carry OS 1:25,000 mapping or a current downloaded GPX, and do not rely on signs alone.

Wet ground is the other major practical concern. The Stour floodplain can become waterlogged after heavy rain, particularly on low-lying sections between Wimborne and Christchurch. Check conditions before each day's walk and be ready to use flood-bypass options where necessary.

Full hike or section hike?

The full route works well as a compact 5–6 day walk. Five days is realistic for walkers happy with several longer lowland stages; six days gives a more comfortable pace and more time for Stourhead, the hillforts, Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster and Hengistbury Head.

Section hiking is equally practical. Gillingham and Christchurch have railway stations, and buses serve key valley towns including Blandford Forum, Wimborne Minster and Sturminster Newton, making it straightforward to break the route into separate days or weekends. The inland start at Stourton/Stourhead needs more planning, as it is not on the railway; arrange a taxi, bus connection or lift from nearby rail towns before committing to an early start.

The most rewarding parts

The strongest walking comes in north Dorset, where Hambledon Hill and Hod Hill add the route's main climbs and its broadest views over the Blackmore Vale. These hills are worth allowing time for, rather than treating them as just another stage on the way to Blandford Forum.

The start and finish also give the walk a satisfying shape. Stourhead provides a memorable inland departure point, while Hengistbury Head and Christchurch Harbour give a clear sense of arrival as the Stour reaches the sea.

Final warnings before you go

- Do not leave accommodation booking until the last minute, especially in the northern half of the route.
- Do not rely solely on waymarks; carry current OS mapping or a GPX.
- Check river and ground conditions after wet weather, especially near Wimborne and Christchurch.
- Dogs are not permitted on the White Mill stretch, and livestock is common in fields throughout the route.
- Close gates carefully and expect stiles, muddy field edges, quiet lanes and occasional roadside walking.

For most walkers, the best direction is Stourton to Hengistbury Head. It follows the river downstream, gives the walk a natural journey-to-the-sea progression, and leaves the easier rail connection at Christchurch for the finish.