



Fife

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39 ELIE CHAIN WALK

FACTFILE

- Map** Ordnance Survey map 59, St Andrews
- Distance** 3 to 4 miles
- Height** 100m
- Terrain** quiet road, good path and beach ... then the Chain Walk
- Start point** Elie
- Time** 3 to 4 hours, depending on exploration time taken
- Nearest town** Elie
- Recommended refreshment spot** Elie

Even a hillwalker enjoys a coastal walk, especially if the weather on the high tops is dreadful. The east coast of Scotland is often a dry, sunny place, so how about a scramble round a rocky headland in Fife, and a walk to see remains of wartime fortifications? Whilst only a short outing, it could be a memorable one, especially for younger members of the family.

The Fife Coastal Path – completed in 2002 – runs from North Queensferry to the Tay Bridge, yet one short unofficial section is the most challenging. It is a real ‘walk on the wild side’, when the more adventurous can discover Fife’s best-kept secret: the Elie Chain Walk. Well, it was a secret to me until Jimbo told me about it.

The Chain Walk goes round the base of Kinraig Point amidst a jumble of volcanic rock pools and caves washed by the sea at high tide. Unlike the way-marked Fife Coastal Path, this detour has chains directing the way below dramatic cliffs and distinctive basalt columns. A modest head for heights is required on the series of carved steps, and vertical and horizontal chains – claimed to be Scotland’s only *via ferrata*.

This could be the highlight of the Fife Coastal Path, yet it receives little publicity or promotion – understandably so, because the Path is advertised with access at all times,

whereas a diversion to the Chain Walk is only possible at various tide times, and there is also an element of danger. There are warning signs placed comparatively recently by Fife Council. All the chains – eight in all – are of stainless steel and bolted to the rock. The old rusted chains were replaced in 2003.

There is a snag and that is why I suggest this traverse as an autumn walk. Tackling the chains with bare hands to get a better grip, could be painful or dangerous in cold weather, so pick a warmish day.

There is another snag: the tide, which would not wait for King Canute and will not wait for you. The walk should not be attempted when the tide is coming in, for it would be all too easy to get stranded. It is better to go when the tide is on the ebb, to maximise the time available. At low tide it is possible to walk some distance along the beach and rocks without needing to use all the chains, but it would seem a pity to do so. A compromise could be to do the traverse then return along the beach and coves, giving time to explore the caves and rock pools. It is essential to check tide times in *The Scotsman* and pick a calm day – unless that is you enjoy sea-spray. If in any doubt, phone the local coastguard on 01333 450666.

There is a mystery about the origins of the Chain Walk. I like to think of smugglers using it or perhaps scouring the base of the cliffs for cargo from a shipwreck. An idea that the chains were installed to help in the construction of the wartime fortifications on the headland is fanciful. It is possible that the chains and steps were built between the Wars, perhaps in the late 1920s. No one really seems to know, but maybe that is how it should be, with the mystery enhancing the enjoyment of the traverse.

For information on the Fife Coastal Path, phone their information desk at 01592 414300, or The Fife Coast & Countryside Trust at 01333 592 591.

Kincraig Point lies to the west of Elie, from where the short walk goes west to Earlsferry. From Earlsferry Links, take the path southwest through the golf course towards the coast, paying courteous attention to the golfers as requested. You will see the signpost highlighting the Fife Coastal Path, which you now join. Turn right by the side of the golf course, above the beach, for a lovely grassy walk by the sand dunes. Go towards the headland, and a good stepped path starting at map ref 473000. (A signpost at this point shows the way to the left [west] by the beach to the Chain Walk, but save that delight for the return.) The path climbs only some 50m, and with ups and downs later, the total climb for the day is no more than 100m.

Once on the headland, examine the remains of the fortifications, but also enjoy the views especially south,



Any port in a storm

over the Forth to the Lothians. It may be surprising to see how wide the Forth is at this point. Continue over the headland, descending gently until around map ref 463997, looking for a grassy path that leaves the official path and goes down to a cove. This drop is short but steep, with care needed if wet.

The start of the Chain Walk is at this small rocky inlet with the sea surging towards a cave, and as the inlet is mostly under water, the rocks can be slippery. Some experience of very easy scrambling could be an advantage. All the pitches are short and the steep ones have footholds dug into the rock, some of which have been eroded over the years by the tide. The safest way of tackling the descents is to face into the rock, holding on to the chains with both hands. The first move over the edge may seem difficult, facing in and trying to find the foothold steps. Oddly enough, other chains to be climbed in near vertical ascents may be the easiest to tackle, with minimal overhangs. The last section is the most interesting, with a slanting diagonal chain and an awkward step to a raised rib of rock, leading to a cave. Then there is a horizontal chain. The rock overhangs slightly and the chain is a bit too slack, such that pressure is put on the arms in leaning outwards. Unless it is almost full tide, one can walk over the pebbles and rejoin the chain later, but you would not want to do that, would you? A short stroll along the beach leads back to the official path.

40 LARGO LAW AND THE NOT SO GREEN HILLWALKER

FACTFILE

- Map** Ordnance Survey map 59, St Andrews, Kirkcaldy & Glenrothes
Distance 2 miles
Height 250m
Terrain farm tracks, then steep grassy hillside
Start point off-road parking area between cemetery and Kirkton of Largo primary school
Time 1 to 2 hours
Nearest village Upper Largo
Recommended refreshment spot Upper Largo Hotel

At home we pride ourselves on our responsibilities concerning green issues. The garden produces some of our fruit and vegetable needs; eight compost heaps attend to organic garden and kitchen waste; then there is the weekly ritual of sorting out glass, cans, plastic bottles, newspapers etc for collection. As a result, our dustbin need only be emptied every three weeks.

Yet we all have a weak point in matters green and mine is hillwalking, driving some 10,000 miles a year to get to the hills. Nevertheless, my friends and I share cars as far as possible and prefer to be away for a week or more in the summer rather than

have daily trips from home. Yet recently I incurred a ridiculous mileage. The forecast was not exactly encouraging: severe gales with temporary blizzard conditions – when visibility would be virtually nil – wind at 900m averaging 70 to 80 miles an hour with gusts as high as 120mph, and temperature of -4°C with an extreme wind-chill effect.

Not a day for the high tops, so I spread out a few maps to see what might be possible at lower level. It may have been the subconscious memory of watching the Humphrey Bogart film *Key Largo* over New Year that led my eye to Largo Law in Fife: a 290m hill that inexplicably I had never climbed. The plan was to extend the day at lower level with a visit to nearby Keil's Den – the wooded defile of the Keil Burn. Well, I managed the former... just – but not the latter.

None of the usual gang was free that day, so I set off on my own. Being a short day, I had a leisurely start from Edinburgh, anticipating being in Upper Largo in an hour. However, on reaching Queensferry I was dismayed to see that the Forth Road Bridge had just been closed to cars after sections of a painting platform had been torn down in the gales. Oh dear, what to do? My desire to climb Largo Law over-ride common sense. A detour over the Kincardine Bridge would add an extra hour, but still give time for the complete walk and, with gales forecast to subside, the Forth Bridge would surely be re-opened by my return. Big mistake! Half the lorries and cars in Scotland seemed to converge on Kincardine – a tedious tiring travel such that I did not reach Upper Largo until 2pm, two hours later than planned.

If coming from the west, follow the A915 through Lundin Links, bypassing Lower Largo to reach Upper Largo. A minor road heads northwest from the village, skirting the southwest slopes of Largo Law. If in doubt, continue to the junction of the A915 and the A917, then return to the minor road. Go past Kirkton of Largo primary school and park on the east side of the road between the school and a cemetery.

A notice board at the start of the walk gives some details about Largo Law – the eroded remains of a volcano active between 300 and 350 million years ago. Largo Law forms part of a working farm and cattle graze much of the hill's slopes. Walkers are asked not to take their dogs and to keep to the marked route for both ascent and descent.

Walk northeast on the well-marked route: a track leading to Chesterstone Farm. On my outing, the track was very muddy – scarcely surprising considering the recent torrential downpour. The route goes through the farmyard and north, the track again signposted, to reach the base of the cone. Now for the grassy climb – short but steep – to reach the twin-topped summit. The northern bump with the trig point is the higher.

The summit offers superb views over the Forth ... or so the notice board said, but clutching the trig point all I could see was surging storm-tossed water in front of a grey curtain of cloud. The notice board also says that throughout the summer months a variety of wild plants grow on the slopes, one such being Ragged Robin – an apt description of the storm-clad solitary walker on the hillside. Buzzards are commonly seen as they soar above the slopes, but not today! Even birds have more sense.

I headed home, dismayed to learn from the car radio that the Forth Bridge was still closed. It was back to Kincardine again. The Forth Bridge re-opened at 6pm when I was still part of a five-mile tailback before Kincardine, and too late to turn back.

I got home disgusted with myself – an eight-hour day of which six hours had been wasted in the car; far too many carbon footprints just to climb a hill. Not even Largo Law is worth that.

41 KEIL'S DEN

FACTFILE

- Map** Ordnance Survey map 59, St Andrews, Kirkcaldy & Glenrothes
Distance 2 miles
Height negligible
Terrain mostly unmade paths, then short road walk
Start point off the A915 by Lundin Links, on north side of Cupar Road, at map ref 410032
Time 1 hour
Nearest village Lundin Links
Recommended refreshment spot Blacketyside Farm Shop on the A915, one mile west of Lundin Links

Unsettled weather at this time of year poses problems for hillwalkers. Three weeks ago I described a less-than-green trip to Largo Law on a day definitely not made for the high tops. The Forth Road Bridge had been closed to traffic after sections of a painting platform had been torn down in the gales and I had been obliged to take a long detour via Kincardine. I got home disgusted with myself – an eight-hour day of which six hours had been wasted in the car; far too many carbon footprints just to climb a hill.

The original plan had been to extend that walk beyond Largo Law with an hour's visit to nearby Keil's Den. Well, I managed the former... just, but not the latter, so was determined to complete this unfinished business on a day of no traffic problems, but a day when again it would be prudent to avoid high ground.

Situated southwest of Largo Law, Keil's Den is a long, narrow wooded glen set in an agricultural landscape – a woodland site with a long history of management. Keil is possibly a corruption of *coille* (Gaelic for 'wood') or *cuil*, meaning a 'nook'. The Den is the steep-sided defile of the Keil Burn, or more correctly the Boghall Burn that flows only some three miles south to Lower Largo. A burn is normally a good description of this flow of water but on my visit, after another day of heavy rain, it was in muddy spate. Jimbo (plus his two dogs) and Joe came along. Quickly wet and bespattered, the dogs had a whale of a time splashing across the burn and chasing rabbits through the thick undergrowth.

The Den was bought by Woodland Trust Scotland in 1992 with a huge amount of support from the local community who in the space of only two weeks raised 75% of the purchase price. Indeed it is claimed that most of the 9000 folk per annum who visit the Den are local regular walkers.

Keil's Den has features similar to those of Maspie Den by Falkland (visited earlier in January) but the former is a wilder place with fewer made-up paths and briefly one has the illusion of being well away from civilisation. The Den offers a short summer stroll or, on our visit, a sheltered slippery walk on a day not made for the high tops. Ordnance Survey map 59 (St Andrews, Kirkcaldy & Glenrothes) may be useful if unfamiliar with the Largo area, but is not needed for the Den.

If coming from the west, follow the A915 through Lundin Links. After the A915 dips to cross the Burn, turn left (north) on a minor road marked as Cupar Road, and a short distance later park with consideration at map ref 410032 on the north side of the road. Take the obvious path between field and burn, heading northeast to soon reach the Den. The path then goes north on the west bank of the opening defile; a path that was very wet on our visit.

An old Coffin Road, now partly shown as a path on the map, traverses the Den – a short cut no doubt from Hatton to Kirkton of Largo cemetery by the lower slopes of Largo Law, but quite a pull up for those carrying the coffin.

About halfway along the Den a stepped path descends to the burn and a new wooden bridge erected in 1999, but this crossing would make for too short a walk. Continue north. The turning point of the Den walk is where a minor road crosses the burn just south of Pitcruvie Castle, whose tower is just visible through the trees. At this stage the burn can usually be stepped over. If not, use the road bridge.

Head south on the east bank of the Den, by now on a better path. Further downstream from the wooden bridge a 300m long upgraded path cuts back from the main entrance to the Den, leading to a picnic spot from where the burn can normally be forded, partially using a fallen tree. That crossing was not possible on our visit so we walked back again to the main entrance and took the minor road past the Woodland Gardens caravan site to reach the A915 within 400m. A short walk west by pavement easily got us back to the starting point.

It had been a short outing snatched from bad weather; an outing subsequently enhanced by watching the heavens open up again as we enjoyed our coffee and sticky buns.