

Smeaton's Tower
on Plymouth Hoe

Plymouth PILGRIMAGE

Don Jolly sets sail for a Devon city that played a significant role in England's maritime history



PLYMOUTH FACTFILE

1. The city's first dockyard, HMS Drake (now HMNB Devonport), opened in 1690
2. Artefacts from the Bronze Age to the Middle Iron Age have been found at Mount Batten
3. Sir Francis Drake became the Mayor of Plymouth in September 1581
4. The original Eddystone was the first offshore lighthouse in the world made of wood
5. Aircraftsman Shaw (Lawrence of Arabia) served with the RAF in Plymouth

Situated at the mouth of the River Tamar, Plymouth is not unusual in having park and ride sites to help reduce congestion. But where this maritime city differs from most is that it also has a park and sail option!

Ideal for those staying at The Caravan Club's Plymouth Sound site, the Mount Batten Ferry plies a frequent service between Mount Batten Pier (there is a free car park next to the Hotel Mount Batten) and the Barbican. You land close to the Mayflower Steps, from where the Pilgrim Fathers sailed for North America in 1620 in search of a new life.

From the Barbican landing stage it is just yards to the Plymouth Mayflower Exhibition, which houses the Tourist Information Centre as well as exhibits tracing the city's nautical history. In addition to the Pilgrim Fathers, other adventurers to sail from Plymouth include Sir Francis Drake, Captain James Cook and naturalist Charles Darwin, while Robert Falcon Scott, who led the ill-fated expedition to the South Pole in 1912, was born in the city.

The Barbican would have been a dodgy place to wander in days gone by – drink too much in one of its dingy hosteries and you risked being press-ganged into service aboard a vessel sailing for distant shores. These days, the district is charm itself, with cobbled lanes and a mix of friendly pubs, cafés, restaurants and artists' galleries overlooking sailing craft built for leisure rather than sweat and toil.

THAT'S THE SPIRIT!

Housed in a former Dominican monastery in Southside Street, where the Pilgrim Fathers stayed on their last night in England, the Black Friars Distillery has been the home of Plymouth Gin since 1793. Join a tour, taste the product or a cocktail made from it, and buy a bottle, its label decorated with an image of the *Mayflower*. You can even enjoy a meal in the distillery's Barbican Kitchen, created by top chefs Chris and James Tanner.

One of the Royal Navy's main southern bases, Plymouth suffered serious bombing during the Second World War and much of it was rebuilt in the 1960s. However, the Barbican does have some architectural gems surviving from its early days. Among them are the Elizabethan House, a former sea captain's home in New Street, and, opposite, the Tudor House, now a shop. Near by, in St Andrew Street, the handsome timber-framed Merchant's House was the home of early Plymouth mayors. The city's oldest building, Prysene House in nearby

Finewell Street, dates from 1498 and houses one of Plymouth's best restaurants, Tanners – another creation of the Tanner brothers. Deep pockets are needed if you go à la carte, but the three-course set menu is a manageable £20 a head.

The Barbican can capture your imagination for some time, but there are plenty of other places to explore in the city. Over the footbridge by Sutton Harbour is the National Marine Aquarium. The country's largest aquarium, it is dedicated to raising awareness of marine environments from moorland streams to ocean depths. The highlight for most is its 70 sharks, the largest of which is the 3m-long sand tiger. Related to the great white, its fearsome appearance belies its placid temperament. Don't miss feeding time! You certainly can't miss the *Leviathan*, an imaginative sculpture combining various sea creatures, by the harbour.

Culture is well represented in Plymouth. The Theatre Royal's extensive programme of musicals and drama is supplemented by further drama, along with contemporary dance, at the Barbican Theatre, while the Plymouth Arts Centre houses an independent cinema and art gallery.

DOWN TO THE HOE

Plymouth is a very walkable city, with the South West Coast Path (popular with cyclists, too) meandering along its waterfront. From the National Marine Aquarium, the path takes you past the Royal Citadel to the Hoe's open spaces and beyond to Devil's Point.

The Royal Citadel, a formidable fortress built to repel a Dutch threat in the 1660s, is still occupied by the military, though tours are sometimes available. On a sunny day, you may prefer to walk on to the Hoe, where Drake reputedly finished his game of bowls before setting sail to engage the Spanish fleet. A fine statue of Drake – plus several other memorials remembering Plymouth's role in defeating the Spanish Armada and other more recent wars – stands on the Hoe. Another memorial commemorates the last Viking raid on the Tamar valley in 997AD.

A more visible statement is Smeaton's Tower. Painted in red and white candy stripes, it started life as the Eddystone Lighthouse, warning of ship-wrecking rocks some dozen miles south of Plymouth for almost 120 years from 1759. Rebuilt on the Hoe, it is now a landmark for shipping entering Plymouth Sound as well as a visitor attraction providing superb views.

Just below the tower is Plymouth Dome, where celebrity chef Gary Rhodes has his new flagship restaurant – Rhodes @ The



Plymouth harbour

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Dome. Across the road, the waterside Tinside Lido is a wonderful summer attraction. Built in 1935, its popularity declined until closure came in 1992, but following restoration to its original Art Deco glory, it reopened in 2005.

At Devil's Point, the Royal William Yard supplied victuals to Royal Navy ships from 1835. It closed in 1992 but its buildings have been put to good use, adding a broad selection of restaurants and bars, including TV chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall's River Cottage Canteen and Deli, providing victuals for flagging tourists. Some have excellent al fresco facilities, too. A tasty end to a fascinating city.

INFORMATION

SITES

For your visit to Plymouth, stay at Plymouth Sound Club site – details can be found on p48 of the *Sites Directory & Handbook 2013/14*. To book, call 01342 327490 or see caravanclub.co.uk/searchhandbook.



Plymouth Sound Club site