

# Loughside walk – 2½ miles

## Castle Ward, Northern Ireland

Overlooking the south shores of Strangford Lough, Castle Ward is one of Northern Ireland's finest demesnes or country estates. At its heart lies an unusual Georgian mansion, but there is a lot more to discover here... This walk explores the waterside, a ruined castle, woodland, an ornamental lake and follies. Visit in winter for a chance to see a fantastic range of migrating birds and the resident seals.

**Start:** Old Castle Ward farmyard – grid ref: J753498 – OS NI Discoverer map 21

### Getting there and facilities:

1 mile west of Strangford on Downpatrick Road (A25). Buses from Downpatrick to Strangford and a boat between Strangford and Portaferry on the Ards Peninsula. WCs, car park, tea room, shop, adventure playground, Wildlife Centre and Victorian Past Times Centre at Castle Ward. Trails leaflet available. Contact us: 028 44881204.

### Points of interest

- **Castle Ward demesne:** Viscount Bangor spent a lot of money in the 18<sup>th</sup> century on perfecting his country seat at Castle Ward. His family, the Wards, had lived here for several hundred years, but in order to keep up with the latest aristocratic fashions, he built a large mansion with sweeping views down to Strangford Lough.
- **Old Castle Ward farmyard:** built around 1610, this the oldest group of buildings on the estate. See farm animals, a saw mill and a working corn mill (every summer Sunday).
- **Audley's Castle:** now a picturesque ruin, this was the home of the Audley family from the 1550s. Nearby is the site of Audley's Town which was cleared by the Wards in the Georgian era to improve the views within their new landscape park.
- **Strangford Lough:** the UK's largest sea inlet covering 150 square km with over 350 islands. Millions of litres of water flow in and out of Strangford Lough twice daily, bringing vast quantities of plankton and nutrients for wildlife to feed on.
  - ⇒ **Marine life:** underwater reefs and kelp forests provide a habitat for 2000 marine species like anemones, sea-squirts, starfish, sponges and urchins. Mussel beds are also an important habitat here but in recent years, trawling has done real damage to them.
  - ⇒ **Bird life:** 75000 wildfowl and waders spend the autumn and winter at Strangford Lough, including 75% of the world's light-bellied brent goose. The Ards Peninsula-side of the lough is the best place to spot them.



As part of improving the Castle Ward estate, the Ward family completely removed a village that had sat down at the shore called Audley's Town as it was felt this would spoil the 'naturalistic' panoramas across his parkland from the mansion.

NTPL/Mike Williams



Strangford Lough is home to Ireland's largest colony of breeding common seals. They raise their pups on islands in the lough further north of Castle Ward but can often be spotted here basking on rocks or bobbing in the water.

NTPL / Joe Cornish



Winter is an excellent time to watch wading birds such as oystercatcher (left) dunlin, curlew and knot in Castle Ward Bay. Some species perform spectacular aerial displays in the evening as they prepare to roost. Jerry Gilham

NTPL / Joe Cornish

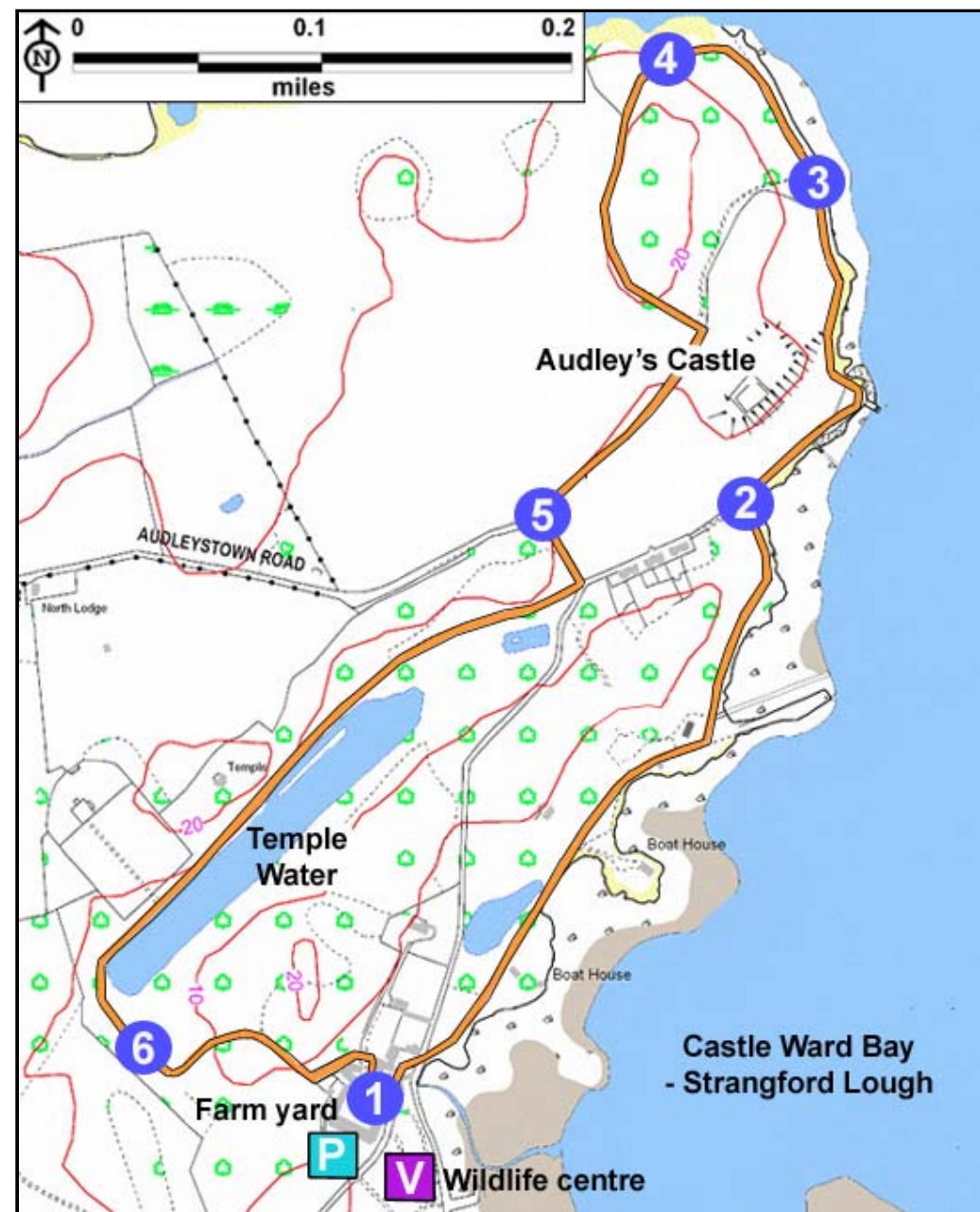
### Distance, terrain and accessibility

A moderate 2½ mile (4km) walk that can be extended slightly by climbing to Audley's Castle. Trails are gravelled in places with some woodland tracks. Several short sections are steep.

### Route and directions

Start at the old farmyard. Note the tower house, a fortified home built in 1610. It was the Castle Ward estate's main residence before the mansion was built.

1. Follow the blue trail down towards the water and boathouse through a large stone gateway. The name Strangford comes from the Old Norse for "strong fjord" and probably describes the powerful currents where the Irish Sea enters the lough.
2. The path leads along the water front, passing boat houses and small quays, before reaching Audley's Wood. Enjoy beautiful views across to Portaferry. You may see seals bobbing about in the water and, in autumn and winter, birds such as redshank and oystercatcher.
3. At the edge of the wood, a path on the left takes you on a short detour up the 16th century Audley's Castle. Climb to the top for a great panorama across the estate and Castle Ward Bay. Look out for pine marten and a long-eared owl that are sometimes seen here at dusk. Close to the castle is a Neolithic cairn where around thirty skeletons were found.
4. Continue walking along the loughside then turn left away from the water and through Audley's Wood. It is home to badgers and lots of small birds.
5. When the path exits the woodland, head right on a track, which soon leads to a gate in a stone wall. Emerge through this gate in to the parkland surrounding Temple Water. The temple itself is perched up on your right. You pass a Victorian walled garden currently used to grow wildflowers.
6. Follow the path away from the lake along a tree-lined avenue back to the farmyard. In summer, note the wildflower meadow on your left. A series of paths lead to the mansion house, woodland and playgrounds. To find out more about wildlife on the estate and lough, visit the Strangford Lough Wildlife Centre, adjacent to the farmyard.



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