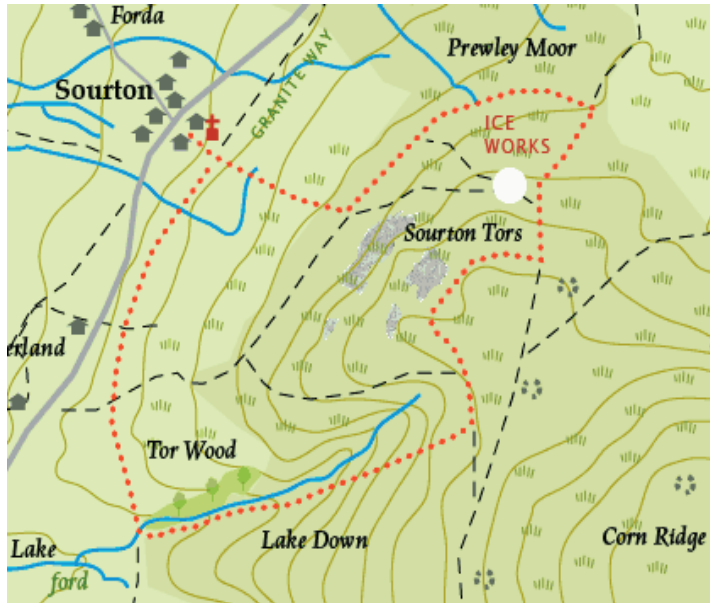




Dartmoor

Sourton Tors



Basic hike: from Sourton (just south of Okehampton on the Tavistock road) up onto the moors, heading north east to the Ice Works and then south onto Sourton Tors. Back via the path opposite Lake Down.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey OL28, Dartmoor.

Distance and going: Two and a half miles - easy going.

Years ago, long before electric refrigeration, someone came up with the bright idea of «capturing» the ice which formed up on the hills high above Sourton Down. They cut a series of huge rectangular troughs running, ladder-fashion, across the hill underneath a spring.

Around December time the water from this spring would be allowed, via a series of gates and runnels, to fill each of the shallow basins. The inevitable cold - guaranteed on this high part of northern Dartmoor before the advent of global warming - would soon turn the imprisoned water to ice, and this would then be covered over by protective layers of peat and fern for use in spring and summer.

Since I learned about the Ice Works during the writing of a WMN series called *Delve Into Dartmoor*, I'd wanted to visit the place - but wasn't quite sure where to find it. The area around Sourton Tors is pretty extensive and the modern OS map (Explorer OL28) doesn't show anything in the way of rectangular remains.

I managed to find the place though. All you do is come off the A30 on the Sourton Down junction above Okehampton-west, drive a mile south along the Tavistock road, and you come to the hamlet of Sourton. Turn left into what passes for a village green, below the village hall and church, and there's plenty of room to park.

Now it's simply a matter of heading for the high moors which lurk immediately above the graveyard. Take the foot-path which crosses the old railway line (now the Granite Way cycle-path) and you will find yourself in one of the old Dartmoor drifts - a sort of stone walled funnel down which farmers and shepherds once used to herd their sheep and ponies.

By the way, the old WMN journalist William Crossing, wrote 100 years ago that the «new» railway looked set to spoil lonesome Sourton. It didn't, but one can look back now with amusement over his fears. Crossing said the railway had «robbed» the place of its moorland character. He needn't have worried - the Iron Road came and went without leaving too much of a mark upon the local charm.

At the upper, moorland, end of the funnel the walker is confronted by a number of choices. A path called the Dartmoor Way swings away immediately to the left and another proceeds in the opposite direction - south west. But there's a middle option - a grassy path that curves up around the base of the steep incline that rises in front of you - first north-east, then east.

Up this I went, for no other reason than it looked like the best bet as far as gaining the top of the rocks was concerned. The geology here is a trifle strange - the Sourton Tors are ranged along a very steep ridge, but as you ascend the track around the gentler northern end, so you realise that there's a second lot of much higher rocks. Between the two there's a shallow moorland basin - it's almost as if Mother Nature decided where she'd end the north-western limit of Dartmoor, then changed her mind and had a second shot.

Anyway, it is to the north of all this - on the slopes leading up from the Okehampton side - that you find the Ice Works. The first thing you come across is a stone-walled pit (goodness knows what this was for) and, above, you reach the rectangular grid of long thin depressions. Each is about four feet deep and about 75 metres long, but you can see that erosion must have both raised the level of the actual beds and decreased the height of their retaining walls.

Things don't get that warm up on Sourton Down even now - and somehow you can imagine how the ice-men would start coming back up from Okehampton in springtime to reap their chilly harvest. The ice would be packed in fern and transported by cart all over South and Mid Devon.

It would even make it as far as Plymouth where trawler captains took to using it as a way of keeping the fish fresh. Apparently, this marked the very beginning of the era when fishermen were able to go of to sea for days rather than being forced home each night with their catch.

Having found the strange old place, I marched on up to the top of the Sourton Tors, before returning to the hamlet down the little coombe slightly to the east - opposite the great sweep of hill known as Lake Down.

Before I did, I sat there in the evening light absorbing the vast panorama that lay before me. When it comes to sunsets,

Sourton Tors offers one of the finest vantage points in the region - you get to see half of Devon and half of Cornwall darken in the golden gloaming. And you are just ten minutes walk and a couple of minutes drive away from the busiest main road in the region.