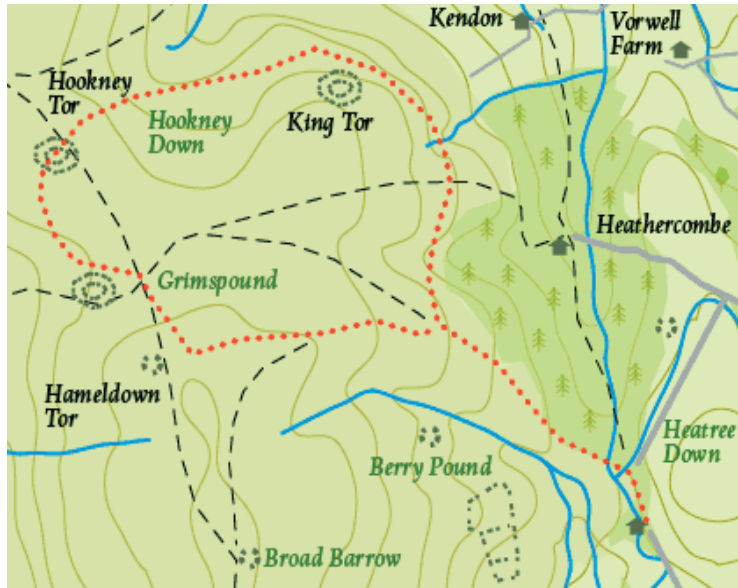




South Devon

Grimspound - Hookney Tor Circular



Basic hike: from lane near Natsworthy Manor north east around Hameldown Tor to Grimspound, returning via Hookney Tor and King's Barrow.

Recommended map and map reference for start point: Ordnance Survey OL 28 SX 721 802

Distance and going: four miles, easy going.

One of the many Hound of the Baskervilles movies was aired again on television but the more computer generated special effects the filmmakers throw at it, the more they miss then point. The clever graphics will never beat the real thing - and the real thing in this case happens to be Dartmoor.

In Conan Doyle's book Dr Watson observes: "Over the green squares of the fields and the low curve of a wood there rose in the distance a grey, melancholy hill, with a strange jagged summit, dim and vague, like some fantastic landscape in a dream..."

This walk introduces you to the strange jagged summits and to fantastic, dream-like, landscapes

The Hound of the Baskervilles is one of my favourite yarns. It was first published in The Strand Magazine in August 1901 - and, from that day to this, the book has been elevating the wilds of Dartmoor to a world-wide stage.

Even the Western Morning News gets a mention in what is reckoned to be Sherlock Holmes's most thrilling adventure. Not that Holmes hogs the limelight in the tale - he sends the indefatigable Dr Watson down to the Westcountry to do much of the sleuthing, and only steps in to steal the show.

One of central locations in the book is the frightful Grimspound Mire which Conan Doyle paints as a sort of hell on earth - full of bogs capable of swallowing a pony.

There is no Grimspound Mire on Dartmoor, but there is a Grimspound. And it strikes me that Sir Arthur must have passed this lonely place while on the trip that inspired him to write the story. He was staying at the Duchy Hotel, Princetown, with his friend Fletcher Robinson at the beginning of June 1901, and the pair went on long walks so that Sir Arthur could soak up the atmosphere of the wide expanses.

“Robinson and I are exploring the Moor over our Sherlock Holmes book,” wrote Conan Doyle to his mother. “Holmes is at his very best, and it is a highly dramatic idea - which I owe to Robinson. We did 14 miles over the Moor and we are now pleasantly weary.”

In real life Grimspound is a lonesome but fantastically well-preserved Bronze Age enclosure tucked in a shallow defile between Hameldown and Hookney Tors. You can reach this enigmatic circle by taking the small lane which runs from Challacombe Cross (on the Moretonhampstead-Princetown road) due south toward Widecombe in the Moor. All you have to do is stop at Firth Bridge and wander a couple of hundred yards up the hill.

But you can make more of a hike of it if you approach from the other side. This means finding the parallel lane which runs north from the centre of Widecombe, past Natsworthy Manor to eventually hit the Moreton road at Beetor Cross. Halfway along, not far from Natsworthy Manor, just under Heatree Down, there's a kink in the road and just room for a car or two to park.

From here we head north west up along the tiny East Webburn River around the big wide spur of Hameldown Tor. The bridleway enters the low pass between this tor and Hookney Tor just to the north, and we are ushered 'twixt the two until we come across Grimspound.

Conan Doyle must have been taken by the bleak sounding name. And he may have known that the word 'Grim' used to have a link with the Devil.

But there's nothing devilish there now - indeed, Grimspound is a pleasant place on a fine spring day. The hut circles are in a superb state of preservation - given their age - and you can see how they were designed with a little bent porch that faces east rather than west, so that the prevailing wind can be kept out of doors.

The folk back then must have been awfully small. A couple of six-footers lying down would more than fill one of these humble abodes. There would, however, have been to stand up - the metre or so high walls we see today would once have supported quite a tall structure centred upon a single post. This would in turn have supported a roof of woven wood covered in turf, heather and bracken.

After admiring this once busy, but now empty place, we turned north, hopped over the tiny stream and climbed to the peak of Hookney Tor. This is well worth doing because the

views from the top are tremendous. You can see for miles into the great vastness of central Dartmoor to the west and further still out over Hookney Down and into lowland Devon to the north.

Now we meandered over to King Tor to take a look at the King's Barrow. Which king was buried here - and just how much of a monarch he was - no one knows. The tomb has been torn asunder and presumably the remains of its lordly occupant have long gone.

Thoughts of grave-robbers may send a chill down your spine as you walk around the hill to Heathercombe Brake. Here you can either follow the path into the woods or make your way along the edge of the moor. The woodland way takes you down past the farm at Heathercombe and then along the footpath south through the trees to the place where you parked.

But we kept to the hill and talked of Squire Baskerville and the dreadful hound and, looking at the atmospheric scenery about us, wondered just how the makers of the recent films could miss the point by so much.