



South Devon

Ivybridge - Hangershell Rock Circular

The hymn says there is a green hill far away without a city wall... And, as far as Plymouth is concerned, the hymn is right, although Butterdon Hill is not really that far away. Butterdon, and its smaller neighbour Western Beacon, both lord it over South Devon in a style worthy of hymn-like praise. They are Dartmoor's last stand in its unsuccessful march to the sea, a mighty shoulder of bleak upland offering something almost biblical and otherworldly in their aloof suggestion of the wilds beyond.

That's if you compare the twin peaks to the cosy lowland patchwork of the South Hams, or if you gaze at their airy vastness from the streets of Ivybridge or Plymouth. Then these most southerly bastions of Dartmoor are indeed ambassadors of a great wilderness.

This is what makes them so alluring and so eminently climbable. The good news is that there is a circular route that will take you right around these highland headlands - and throw in a clutter of ancient hut circles and a rock stack for good measure.

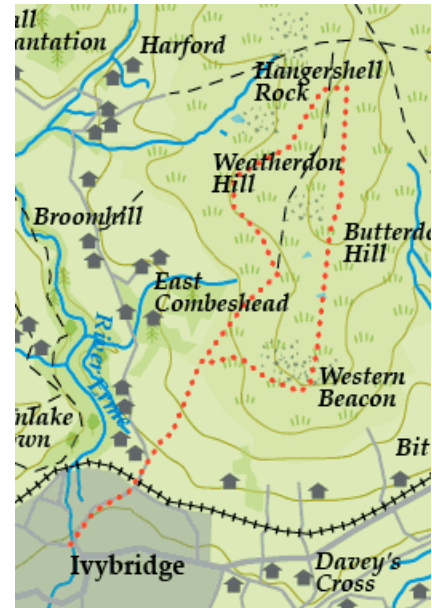
The bad news is that you have to earn your views. By which I mean that you are in for a long, long climb.

Our excursion starts in the pleasant little town of Ivybridge, squeezed between South Devon A38 Expressway and the hills. Describing the location in 1912 William Crossing, the supreme authority on Dartmoor, wrote:

«Ivybridge is placed amid scenery of a charming character. The Erme, with its deep pools and cascades, the wooded valley of Stowford Cleave, the moor hills that look down upon it, the pleasant pastures on the south and east and west, all make up a picture that will delight the rambler who fixes upon this village as a base whence to explore the southern part of Dartmoor.»

Indeed Crossing, in his famous Guide to Dartmoor, then proceeds upon a walk similar to the one we're following today, although I adapted the hike from a 'self-guided walk' leaflet published by the South Hams Coast and Countryside Service (one of several, available at Ivybridge Tourist Information Centre).

So we're in good company as we set out from the town's central car park, taking the path that leads into Costly Street,



Basic Hike: Up to the moors surrounding Western Beacon and Butterdon Hill north of Ivybridge and then a circular route via Hangershell Rock.

Recommended Map: Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure 28 Dartmoor.

Distance and going: six miles - lengthy climb for first third of hike.

before crossing the road to the riverside car park which runs alongside the tumbling Erme to Harford Road.

A few hundred yards up this road we are confronted by a large, rather venerable looking paper-mill, which is worth a mention because it's every bit as historic as it looks. For many of its 213 years Stowford Mill produced paper for the nation's postage stamps; it ceased this trade in 1929 but still turns out the stuff our passports and driving licences are printed on.

Up the hill we go to eventually cross the main Exeter - Penzance railway before making our way into the lane that leads to the hamlet of Stowford.

Crossing tells us this was where a poor couple by the name of Prideaux had a son called John who was eventually to shake off his poverty-stricken start in life by becoming Bishop of Worcester.

After a few yards a track branches right off the lane, immediately swinging sharp left to begin an ascent to the high moors. For countless centuries this old drovers' road was used by shepherds to bring the moorland sheep down to market. Old England was full of such paths and it is always a joy to find one intact. This is a fine example - a leafy tunnel that links noisy modern Britain down in the valley to the ancient, empty solitude of the hill. When it comes to a sense of history the track has as much clout as a castle or a throne.

Suddenly it ceases at a gate which opens onto a wide, ascending plain. In front of the gate the earth has been torn about and in the middle of the workings a still pond looks for all the world like a window on a subterranean sky. Clouds scurry past your feet in a perfect mirror image of what's above your head and, when I was there, a sparrow hawk screamed past 100 feet down in the inverted abyss.

The walk continues alongside the trees until, at Addicombe, it passes a forlorn ruin which was once a tinner's cottage. Here you'll see a stream criss-crossed by a myriad of small channels where tin ore used to be washed from the hillside.

Once you've jumped the stream, head over the open moor towards a small outcrop of rocks. It doesn't take long to reach a low ridge that reveals the dark and rather ominous tree-line of Butterbrook Reservoir.

You have a choice of either passing to the left of this wooded lake to join the path from Harford Moor Gate, or turning right and climbing the hillside towards Hangershell Rock which you'll see dominating the high ridge to the east. Both routes end up in more-or-less the same place: the former offers a chance to see some well preserved hut circles, the latter knocks about half-a-mile off the hike.

William Crossing watched horse races somewhere here in these great empty tracts of moor and says a large number of people from neighbouring parishes attended the event, though it was quite beyond my imagination to think of such a gathering in this most lonesome of spots.

Hangershell Rock is a good place to be - in anything but a lightning storm. You get a roof-of-the-world sensation up here

and enough fresh air in ten minutes to last you a week. Cast about as you might though, you won't find the gravestone that Crossing recalls. Erected for a terrier called Tiny, it bore the inscription:

«My little dog lies buried here,
Stranger stop and drop a fear;
And as you pass this little grave,
One small request I of you crave
Let no hand nor foot of thine
Despoil this little Tiny's shrine.»

The terrier now lies utterly forgotten, as no doubt does his sentimental master, but somehow up here thoughts of eternity are not particularly bothersome. Sit on this desolate crag and time will seem as vast as the endless horizons that stretch before you – a sense that is helped by the prehistoric hut circles and the stone rows that adorn the hill.

As you head due south for Butterdon Hill so the great views increase until you can look down upon the Tamar's distant estuary and further still - on across the ever shrinking hills of Cornwall until the mighty Dodman draws a curtain over the west.

As gloaming begins and, as the lights of Ivybridge begin to twinkle far, far below, it is time to descend before night makes this a lonelier place than it already is. Down across the old Red Lake tramway where a train called Puffing Billy used to ply its trade and down again to the old drovers' road.

Re-enter the old drovers' road and leave the darkening moor to the unhallowed sounds of the night and the eerie ancient things. Don't look back, for you are still a long way without the city wall...