



Dartmoor

Merrivale - Walkham Valley

And the sunset can be almost unbeatable when you are up on the western flanks of Dartmoor. We witnessed one on this walk - it was draped across Bodmin Moor making it look like a place condemned to burn in a beautiful hell. Between where we stood and the rough peaks of the west was the great wide Tamar borderland where the lights began to twinkle and the evening chimney smoke was smeared down a hundred riverine coombes. Dark, haunting, lovely and lonely. That is what we thought about that great abyss as I went our weary way.

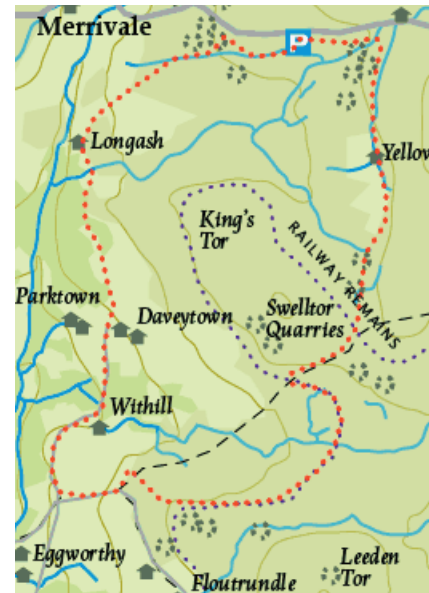
The walk begins on the B3357 Tavistock to Two Bridge road which takes you up and up, out of the Tamar vale and onto the western plateau of the moor. At Merrivale the road dips to pass the quarries and the pub, then climbs on eastwards past the famous old hut circles. On the right you'll see a small car park set amid the walls of what must have been an old cattle keep - and this is where we parked. For one thing, we wanted to take a closer look at the two extraordinary stone rows that run across the hill in parallel just a few yards from here. You'll see them on the Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure Map 28 - and you will not fail to spot them on the ground.

They look like the markings for some primeval runway. Set about 150 feet apart, each row of stones continues for about a quarter of a mile. The stones range between a few inches and several feet in height, and the general impression you get from the twin alignments is one of mystery. I don't suppose anyone will ever know what the ancient people thought they were doing dragging huge heavy stones across the moor to make two lines.

The stone rows on Exmoor tend to run from some old chieftain's barrow down to a nearby spring - perhaps something to do with water spirits, naiads and dryads and the like. But up here on barren Dartmoor, these two lines seem to have been placed for some other mysterious reason. A landing strip for aliens? As good an answer as any...

The weather was tremendous and, having studied the stone rows, we decided to make a walk of it before the sun went down. The route makes a superb two-hour ramble on a winter's afternoon.

Just west of the alignments there are some stone-walls and, at the southern extremity of these, we passed through a gate and walked down over the moor to join the footpath that continues south to the farm at Longash. Here we were greeted



Basic walk: from car park just east of Merrivale, west past stone rows to footpath in Walkham Valley, then south past Daveytor to take track up to Ingra Tor where we follow old Princetown railway line east then north to Foggintor Quarries. Then north again past Yellowmeade Farm to return along Grimstone and Sortridge Leat.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure 28.

Distance and going: just over six miles - easy going for the most part.

by a dog who seemed friendly enough to begin with, but who became absolutely furious as we tried to leave. One of our party only just escaped his snapping jaws as he finally shut the far gate, and we could only assume the dog had a violent desire for our company.

Now the path enters a rather magical, moss-and-lichen-covered wood just under Hucken Tor, which the writer William Crossing called Okel Tor, describing it as: «One of the most beautiful rock piles of Dartmoor.» In fact, Crossing seemed to be rather enamoured with this neighbourhood altogether. He says: «The masses (of rocks) are so delightfully shrouded in dwarf oaks and mountain ash, tufts of heather and patches of the bright green whortleberry plants, that they present an appearance that cannot fail to enchant the beholder.»

After a few twists and turns our path crosses a cascading stream and eventually issues out into rough fields through we stroll until we reach a place called Daveytown. Not a town, just a farm, but here we join the paved lane that takes us south again, through the pretty countryside of the Walkham Valley, until we reach a crossroads on a spur of hill just above Ward Bridge.

We turn left up the hill and begin the short but scenic ascent to Ingra Tor - and this is where we catch the train.

Not really, but that's what we told one of my companions who had moaned that the walk looked too damned far. Railways mean easy gradients that require very little effort on the part of the walker.

We followed the permanent way - as railway people optimistically call their beloved tracks. But the tracks here disappeared half-a-century ago. Our reluctant walker soon saw the sense in following the old track as it swerved effortlessly around the contours, on its way up to Princetown, and even agreed to take the short-cut which ascends the hill below Swelltor Quarries. It's only a few hundred yards of steepish climbing, but it saves a mile or more of railway walking out around King's Tor.

At the point where the footpath rejoins the track, we are able to cross directly to the bed of the old tramway, which heads north past the ruins at Foggintor Quarry to pass lonely Yellowmeade Farm. Yellowmeade by name - yellow by nature thanks to a bright coat of paint. This must be one of the most isolated, windswept farmsteads in the Westcountry, but its grandstand view of the sunset is second to none.

Shortly after the farm we cut across the heath to the Grimsstone and Sortridge Leat which runs - like a thread of glimmering gold during sunset hours - back to the car.