



Dartmoor

River Avon Dam

The white water rush of the river - the vast, dark encroaching moors - what more could a man ask for after a day spent in Plymouth? Within minutes of leaving Shipley Bridge, upstream from South Brent, you will find yourself walking past the ruined naphtha works up the paved lane beside the river and into real wilderness country.

The writer William Crossing refers to the old naphtha ruins at Shipley Bridge in his Guide to Dartmoor and says peat was once conveyed to the works by tramway from Shipley. But what is naphtha?

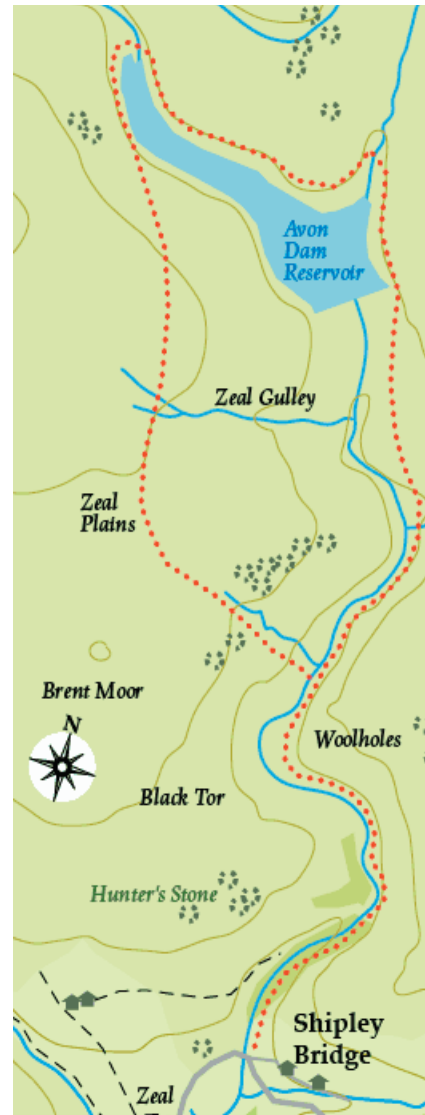
"A name applied to an inflammable volatile liquid issuing from the earth in certain localities," says the dictionary. Apparently it was also used in the manufacture of mothballs.

On up the track we go. It's the private road to the Avon Dam Reservoir and a padlocked gate at the bottom keeps cars out, but it is designated as a public footpath so it's okay to walk it. In fact it offers an ideal route for wheelchairs - affording disabled folk a wonderful opportunity to get away from their vehicles and explore right into the heart of the moors. The path weaves as it heads north towards the dam, so that the sensation of entering the wilderness is heightened by the big bends that seem to close the valley from the rest of the world. Under Shipley Tor we go, around the woods under Black Tor, and then we swerve again under Brent Tor to head up past Small Brook past the big disused quarry opposite Zeal Gully. Only now can we see the big dark dam with its overflow whittened by the falling, escaping, Avon.

It's not particularly high as dams go. If you keep to the right of it, a track offers a short cut to the top past the back end of a quarry, and suddenly you find yourself standing at the edge of the dam on the shores of the lake. It looked strangely sepulchral when we were there - all silver and mercurial.

Maybe that had something to do with the ghosts of the monks that shimmer may or may not down there in the dark depths. Buckfast Abbey had an outpost up here, a mediaeval homestead run by a handful of lay-brothers who were in charge of brining cattle and sheep onto the moor for summer pasture. The settlement was deserted around the time of the Black Death.

The long thin reservoir runs from in a southeasterly direction from headwater to dam and we walked along its northerly shore to the top end. There, we crossed the diminutive



Basic hike: From Shipley Bridge (two miles north of South Brent) up the riverside track to the Avon Dam Reservoir - around the shores and back over Zeal Plains to regain the track halfway down the valley.

Recommended Map: Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure 28 Dartmoor.

Distance and going: four miles easy going - especially on the dam's private approach road, which would be ideal for wheelchair users.

River Avon, turned our backs on the central moors and struck off south to Zeal Plains followed by Brent Moor.

Between these two places there are the rocky remains of an ancient settlement, marked on the map as Rider's Rings. Crossing called it: «One of the most interesting of the pounds to be found on Dartmoor.»

Shortly after Brent Moor we drop down past Black Tor, past the Hunter's Stone, to reach our car at Shipley Bridge.