



North Dartmoor

Sharpitor & Burrator Reservoir

A dozen miles. That is the distance from the wretchedness of the Westcountry's ugliest place to one of its most scenic viewpoints. Plymouth's Bretonside bus station is well known as one of the most awful places in the region - but it is just 12 short miles to the top of one of the nearest bits of windswept wilderness.

On the side of the Yelverton-Princetown road there is the ancient marker - the milestone called the Goad Stone - showing the traveller that he or she is 12 miles from Plymouth.

The area near the Goad Stone appears to be a high featureless tableland, but of course there are always tors punctuating the landscape on Dartmoor and if you walk up to the nearest of these, you are in for a delightful surprise.

Sharpitor, high on Walkhampton Common, is only half a mile from the road and is perhaps, one of the easiest crags to climb on the moor, but it offers the most stupendous views.

Directly beneath you to the southeast is the craggy and dramatic pyramid of Leather Tor, and below this lies the great curve of wood-lined Burrator Reservoir. You can see one of the dams and its bridge at the far end and beyond there are the foothills that descend slowly down to the Westcountry's largest city.

It being a bright afternoon, we decided to march down and around the marvellous manmade lake - and nearly came a cropper, as you shall hear. It's one of those routes that turns out to be a little longer than the map suggests.

First we walked down to Leather Tor because it's one of those exciting heights that cries out to be climbed. Be careful, the left side of the pyramid is a good deal steeper than you think - if you slipped on the damp lichen covered rocks you'd be in trouble.

By descending to our right beneath the tor we were able to gain the lane that runs west over to Dousland Plantation, though we turned the other way and went down the hill to join the reservoir's perimeter road. This is a quiet lane at this time of the year and we had no worries about traffic as we were about to make our way over Norsworthy Bridge at the north-east end of the lake.

But by now a thick fog had come out nowhere to obscure what had been icy cold clear skies. So we decided on a shorter



Basic hike: up to Sharpitor (just south of the Yelverton-Princetown road above Dousland), down over Leather Tor to circumnavigate Burrator Reservoir. Back via Peek Hill.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey OL 28.

Distance and going: Five miles, easy going.

route and turned west to walk along the land to around about the middle section of the lake.

Despite being manmade, the environs around Burrator Reservoir allow for an exhilarating feeling of isolation - you could, with the merest hint of imagination, be somewhere in the depths of the Canadian north.

This has probably got something to do with the fact that Burrator was Dartmoor's first reservoir, built more than a hundred years ago (and subsequently enlarged in 1928). It has somehow settled into the landscape and now looks as if it has always been there.

It was a grand day in September of 1898 when the Mayor of Plymouth, Mr J.T. Bond, came up onto the moors to officially open his city's new water supply. The irrepressible William Crossing described it as Dartmoor's premier engineering feat of the century - which was saying something in those days when the moor was covered by extensive scrapings and burrowings of mining men.

Anyway, the reservoir flooded a leat that had already, for centuries, been supplying Plymouth with its water. It was built by one Sir Francis Drake.

A few hundred yards along here a track bears north up the hill to a place called Lower Lowery.

It might seem that you couldn't get much lower than that, but we were aiming higher. The track continues onto open moor on the other side of the made-up road, and this we took in order to climb Peek Hill.

By now the mists had closed in to an alarming degree and up on the 400 metre high summit you could barely see the end of your own outstretched arm. By climbing straight up the hill we knew that neighbouring Sharpitor would be somewhere on our right and that, to reach it, we'd have to walk across more-or-less level ground.

We were glad to find the crags of Sharpitor and were then required to find the exact downhill path in order to reach my car. This should have been easy enough, but every direction from Sharpitor is downhill. What we needed to do was make a right-angle turn left, but it's not that easy to judge right-angles in thick fog and we managed to get it slightly wrong.

There was no panic because we knew we'd eventually hit the Princetown road, but then which way would we turn in that fog?

As it happened an eddy in the mist gave us the merest glimpse of the reflective surface of the shallow pond near which we'd parked. Had we gone on, we'd have ended up a good half mile from the car and then argued over whether to turn right or left.

Which all goes to show, no matter how experienced a walker you are, it's a good idea to take a compass onto the heights of Dartmoor, Exmoor or Bodmin Moor, especially in winter.