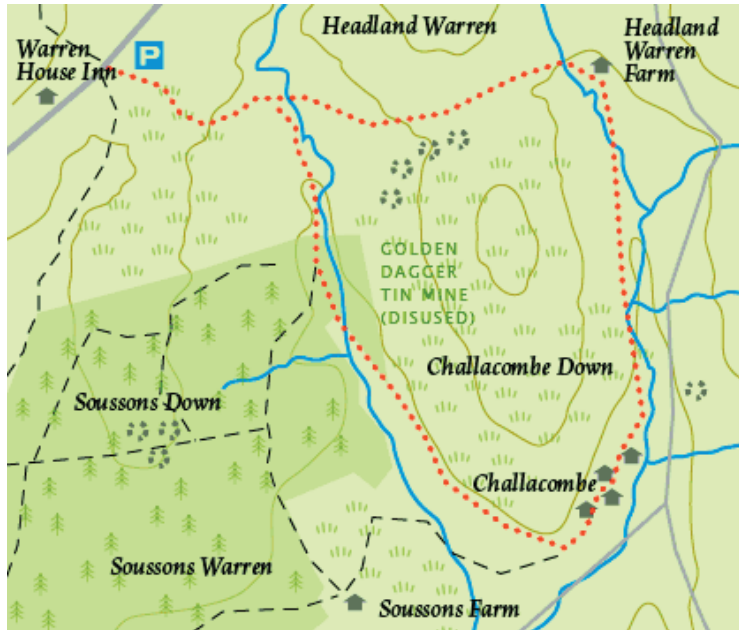




## Dartmoor

### Warren House Inn circular



*Basic Hike: Warren House Inn east to Headland Warren Farm, then south around Challacombe Down before returning back up to the road past the pine woods.*

*Recommended Map: Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure 28 Dartmoor.*

*Distance & Going: About five miles, easy going.*

The area around Warren House Inn is an almost unbeatable location when it comes to high altitude walking routes - as far as the Westcountry is concerned at least - you wander in almost any direction and find a good hike.

Stop at the small road-side car-park just up from the pub and you are spoilt for choice, as is so often the case on Dartmoor. Recently my ITV Westcountry walking series featured this quick five mile circular hike east over Headland Warren then south around Challacombe Down.

Not another human was in sight as we trundled down into the empty valley east of the Postbridge-Moretonhampstead road, though there was plenty of evidence to show that mankind was once very busy in these lonesome acres. As you walk into the shallow valley under Birch Tor you will see more and more mine ruins and workings as you go. Indeed back in the 19th Century there were any number of tin mines up here 1,400 feet above sea level - the two main workings being at Birch Tor and Vitifer Mines but with the Golden Dagger, East Vitifer, Headland, Bushdown, King's Oven, Water Hill and West Vitifer all burrowing away somewhere in the vicinity. All that remains now are a few low walls where once the miners' humble cottages stood, and other lowly ruins advertising the

whereabouts of various buildings linked to this damp and backbreaking industry.

There are also some walled enclosures built by the mining community for rabbiting and vegetable growing and legend has it that they're set out in the shape of playing card symbols - indeed they're locally referred to as 'Jan Reynold's Cards'.

The story goes that Reynolds was carried off by the devil for playing cards in Widecombe Church. Carried where, we do not know, but passing this lonesome corner he dropped his cards, which turned to stone. In the damp evening sunshine, climbing up the deeply rutted flanks of Headland Warren to pass across the watershed between Birch Tor and Challacombe Down, the old tale provided a somewhat eerie and gruesome backdrop to proceedings.

Look back across the valley at Warren House Inn from this viewpoint nowadays and it is difficult to picture the days when it was the hub of this remote mining community - home to a thousand brawls and celebrations, witness to laughter and tears and to the sad reality borne upon hard-working, hard-playing men that tomorrow is just another awful, muscle-wrenching day.

At least there's no record of any death occurring in the mines, although there was one lucky escape. It happened when men working in one of the deepest tunnels were concerned about water backing up somewhere close in the rock. They decided to come up for their «crib», or morning snack, and no sooner had they done so the wall burst under the weight of the flood. Had they still been down there they would certainly have drowned.

Now we cross the watershed, which allows us to enter the upper reaches of another lonely valley. Directly east we see Hookney and Hameldown Tors with the famous walled hut cluster at Grimspound lying directly between them. Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle did much to highlight the name as Grimspound Mire, the awful home of the Hound of the Baskervilles.

A few hundred feet below is one of the finest, loneliest and most beautifully situated homes on Dartmoor. It is thatched and ancient Headland Warren Farm which, may or may not have been known as the Birch Tor Inn some 200 years ago. If it was it might, according to legend, have been adorned with the following jovial sign to advertise its wares:

Jan Roberts lives here,  
Sells cider and beer,  
Your hearts for to cheer;  
And if you want meat  
To make up a treat  
Here be rabbits to eat.

The Dartmoor historian William Crossing recorded an adventure that befell one James Hannaford as he walked home to Headland from this inn. It was dark and the poor old fellow

fell into a mine only to be caught by timbers, which saved him from certain death.

His dog whined all night at the edge of the hole and eventually kicked up such a fuss that a team of miners came over in the morning to discover Hannaford dangling from his draughty perch. They rescued him and he lived many years to tell the tale.

We walk, avoiding old mine openings, down past the farm and along the valley floor to Challacombe. This hamlet now has two occupied houses, but one of the residents told me that there used to be 16 - three of them pubs... The atmosphere of busy days gone by continued as traversed the southern end of Challacombe Down to turn the corner up to the pine woods where the remains of Golden Dagger Mine are now brought to the attention of walkers by an informative interpretation board.

From here it's only ten minutes walk back up to Warren House Inn where we stopped for a touch of warmth from the fire that so famously has never gone out, and a pint.