



Exmoor & West Somerset

Brendon Common Circular

This walk begins in one of the windiest, wettest, coldest places in the entire Westcountry and if you go in winter, like I did, you may be extremely loathe to get out of your car. But I promise, this walk is worth a little discomfort at the start.

The uncomfortable corner is to be found on the high road that wends north over the top of Exmoor from Simonsbath to Lynmouth. Anyone who knows his or her regional geography will realise that we're talking about an area not far from the infamous Chains – one of the most exposed places in the whole of southern Britain.

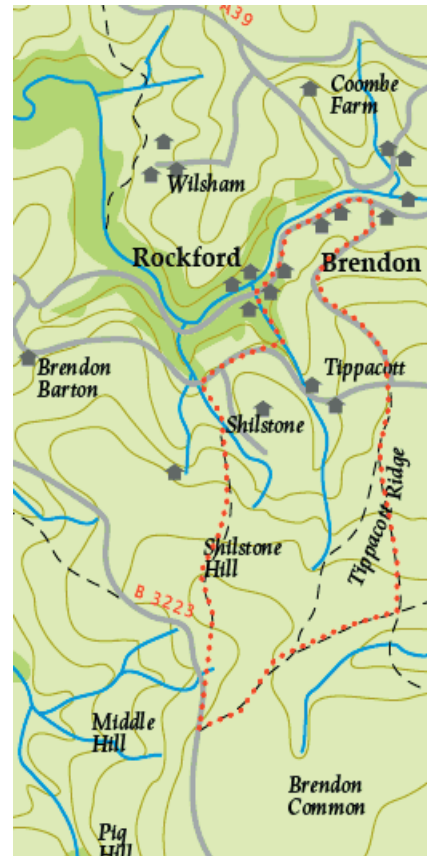
We head in the opposite direction by looking for the easily overlooked track that leaves the road to head northeast over Brendon Common. You can find this on Ordnance Survey's Explorer OL9 map by locating the corner known as Dry Bridge, about a mile and three quarters north of Brendon Two Gates on the Somerset-Devon border.

The hike is a fairly simple one and it gives you the best of Exmoor walking: basically we are heading north to the village of Brendon, situated deep in the Oare Valley, some three miles distant from the heights of the common. The route is a circular one – we will return via other footpaths a mile or so to the west.

We followed the track just under a mile across the high more to a four-way fingerpost which is situated just above a place called Larkcombe Ford, then took the left turning which heads directly north across Tippacott Ridge.

As we descended down over the gentle slopes of the great hill, we came across one of the biggest herds of wild Exmoor ponies I've ever seen. When, I say wild, I mean that these extraordinary animals live quite happily in these inhospitable climes without any help whatsoever from mankind. Indeed, I've heard a story from these parts which tells of a farmer who took pity on the ponies in the particularly harsh winter of 1963 – he brought some bales of hay out to a herd that was struggling between giant drifts, only to watch as they turned up their noses at the dried grass and continued to claw at the snow in order to find their favoured mosses and sedges.

The ponies watched us walk by and one or two of last year's foals stomped and galloped as they played between the gorse. The ponies are indeed wild, but traditionally they were rounded twice a year – once to be counted, with the new foals being inspected and branded – and then later when some of



Basic hike: from the B3223 on Brendon Common, east to Larkcombe Ford then north to the village of Brendon – returning via the Rockford road then south to Shilstone and over Shilstone Hill to Dry Bridge.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey OL9 – Exmoor.

Distance and going: Seven miles, fairly easy going, with one steep climb.

their number are sold at the ancient Brendon Pony Fair in the village far below.

We continued north and soon fields were appearing on either side of the ridge, but the moorland continues to escort the track all the way to the place where Gratton Lane meets with Cross Lane. It is the latter which will take us north again, down the hill to Brendon. This is an ancient community – there is a record somewhere noting how, in the 12th century, the area belonged to the Pomeroy family who gave to the Brethren of the Hospital of Jerusalem “the church of Brendon with its appendages and the land of the hermits of Bagawordia”.

On a bitter winter’s day, you can almost feel the company of the hermits of Bagawordia as you descend into Brendon – but thoughts of such reclusive souls are soon banished once you enter the warm and friendly confines of the Staghunters’ Inn.

In order to return to the car we turned left out of the pub’s front door and walked down the road towards Rockford. Halfway between the two communities – in the depths of the valley opposite the rushing East Lyn – a public right of way climbs to the south, up a steep goyle that I think is called Deercombe. It’s a steep track and it takes you through a small wood more criss-crossed with the carcasses of fallen trees than any I have seen since the great gale of whenever it was, but the track eventually brings you back out onto Gratton half a mile west of where you crossed it before.

This time we turn right and follow it to where the drive up to Shilstone Farm departs to the left. You are supposed to continue down the road a bit to find the public footpath which goes up through the fields to Shilstone, but I must admit to having cheated - we walked up the drive, and I can’t see that anyone would mind.

Shilstone has the look of ages about it: three houses cluster around the farmyard in a little coombe, and you can imagine the likes of Heathcliff strutting about here being moody. This is a true moorland farm and as romantic and remote as any other homestead I know in the peninsula.

Now it’s simply a matter of climbing the track out of Shilstone that leads due south over the moor. It is such a featureless plain that someone has planted posts to show you the way – and these help you to find the trig’ point at the top of Shilstone Hill, from where you will see your vehicle parked where you left it beyond Dry Bridge.