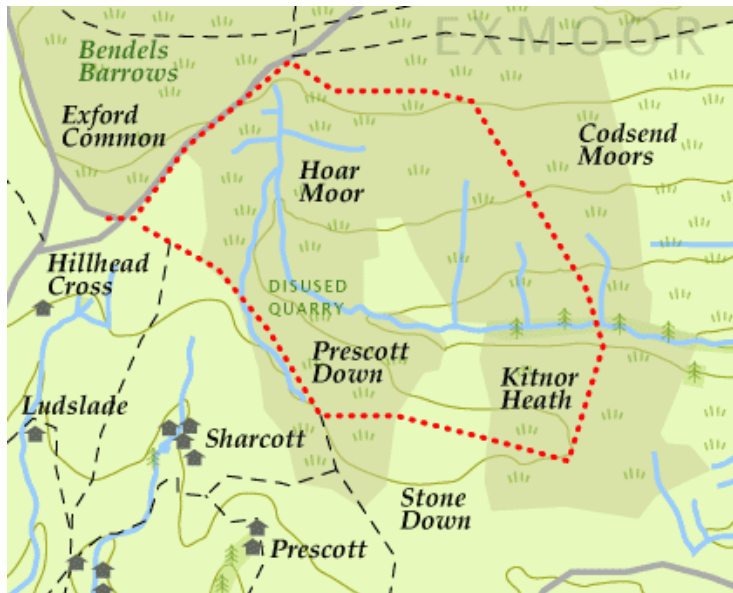




Region

Title



*Basic Hike: from Exford Common along ridge towards Dunkery and then down over Codsend Moor to the River Quarme. South up onto Kitnor Heath and then west over Prescott Down back to start.*

*Recommended map: Ordnance Survey OL9 Exmoor.*

*Distance and going: four miles – can be very boggy in wet weather – be warned.*

This is a walk around one of the loneliest and spookiest places in the Westcountry – it is indeed, very close to the location of this year's annual Western Morning News ghost story which will appear in the paper next week. And, just to add to the dark mood it is the place where a hapless local girl who was found dead in a bog 78 long and lonely years ago.

All of which is why I ventured into Exmoor's most empty corner this week – to soak up the wonderful sense of bleakness and mystery which, come rain or shine, the environs of Codsend Moor never fail to evoke.

The vista of the Dunkery range - the highest set of hills anywhere in the south of England outside Dartmoor – affords one of the finest panoramas in this peninsula in any weather save for fog. Skirted to the south by vast and empty Codsend Moors, the great range protrudes skywards quite unlike anything else you'll ever see.

"Very interesting," is what an environmental scientist once commented to me about the place. "Codsend is a unique place. There are plants that grow in the bogs there that you won't find in many other locations in the world."

Codsend Moor has haunted me ever since my dad took me there to look for the secret sheep-stealer's cave 40 long years ago. It has also haunted me since my first newspaper boss,

the late and inimitable Jack Hurley of the West Somerset Free Press, told me the tale of the two lost Huguenot ladies who died of poverty and starvation somewhere on Dunkery's great empty flanks...

So I returned to its lonely acres one wintry day this week to see if I could still locate the black hole on the side of the River Quarme where the sheep stealers once hid their meaty loot, and to sense some of the desperation of those two withered old spinsters out there on the heath.

The great ravine created by the Quarme between Kitnor Heath and Codsand Moors is as lonesome a place as you'll find anywhere in this region. No human ever goes there. Or they don't much, anyway. Ravens do though. There are a lot of ravens, and deer.

I watched a group of hinds grazing on the great emptiness of Codsand Moor as I entered the airy demesne. Then there were the partridges making their strange, almost exotic, chirring noises in the riverine abyss deep below, and a few sheep bleating. No sound of man. Just the deer moving imperceptibly through the bracken, a group of Exmoor ponies way on the horizon, a few cattle minding their own business. And me – breathing, and not much else.

To find the beginning of this Exmoor stroll you must take yourselves high above the village of Exford on the Porlock road, turn right at Hillhead Cross and park somewhere near Porlock Post. Now it's a matter of walking due east along the bridleway that climbs the ridge to Dunkery Beacon.

Not that we're going that far. Directly south of the eminence known as Great Rowbarrow, we turn right and head down over Codsand Moors. At least, that's what I did. You might not want to, as there are no official footpaths there but it is all 'open access' moorland.

All there is at Codsand is a great deal of nothing, save for the aforementioned deer, ponies, sheep and a few cattle. Otherwise you could encamp the entire British Army there and still have room to spare.

I looked Codsand Moors up in my dusty files and found that this featureless plain was once the centre of national attention. It was all to do with the gruesome end of Mollie Phillips, an Exford girl who was found dead in a bog on this very moor. In 1930 – some 18 months after her disappearance – a Minehead coroner's jury put the death down to misadventure. The poor girl drowned after being swallowed by the bog.

"Nonsense!" cried the local folk. And "Nonsense!" cries me.

Mollie disappeared on September 8th 1929 - a dry September that followed a long dry summer. The locals back then reckoned the bog in question was not dangerous after such a long period of drought. 78 years later, having walked in wet conditions, I agree. There were a few quagmires around this week, but nothing that threatened to swallow me or even my dog. Perhaps they've drained the place since then.

We'll never know what really happened to poor Mollie Phillips, but I continued to ponder her fate as I proceeded down into the great coombe of the Quarme.

Earlier I mentioned the sheep-stealers' cave. We did find it when I was a boy - a long low tunnel hacked into the shillet rock on the north bank of the stream. Blow me if I could locate it, though - no matter how much I walked up and down. I'm going to make my dad take me back there so we can find it again and video it for the website.

I gave up and ascended the near-vertical southern flank of the abyss and climbed through near-vertical stand of larches at Down Cleave Plantation. Now I was on Kitnor Heath and a little exploration of the place revealed a number of huge 10 foot deep, 20 foot wide, ruts that must have been made by man. But which men and why? The remains had the look of tin-streaming to me - but there is no tin on Exmoor. My dusty files and comprehensive collection of Exmoor books fail me on this one.

I left the holes to their lonesomeness, and proceeded west over Prescott Down then swung north-west to meet up with the paved road just south of Exford Common. Crossing the lane I walked over to Bendels Barrows before turning sharp right to walk the half mile to find my car.

An excellent Exmoor ramble, full of a good deal of nothing and a great deal of mystery - one of which I've adapted for our annual WMN ghost story which you can read next week.