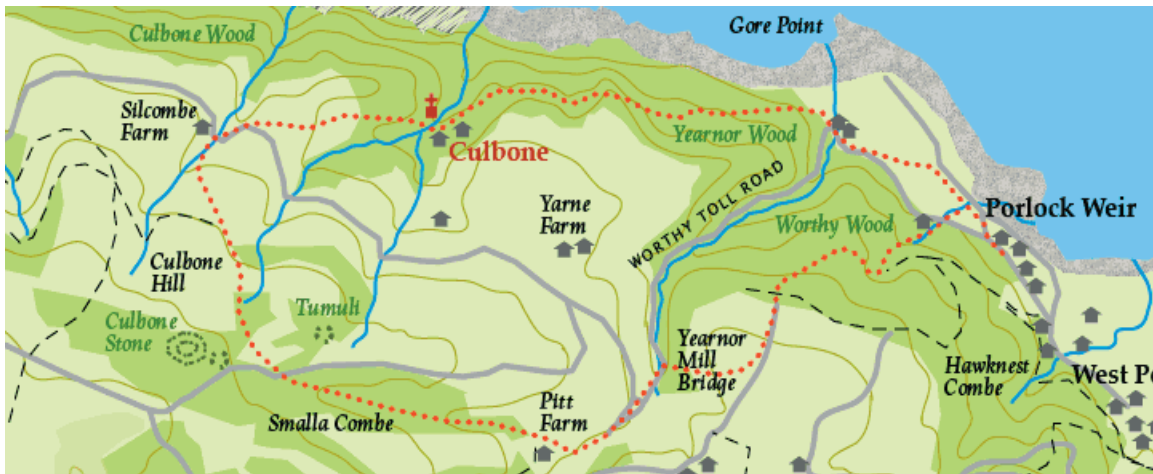




## West Somerset

### Culbone Circular



Despite not being a churchgoer I decided to go somewhere holy for Easter - and no other place in the Westcountry evokes quite such hallowed and spiritual sensations as remote, lonely, beautiful and arcane Culbone - home to the smallest complete church in England. You can't get there by car - and consequently the hamlet is one of the most peaceful and quiet in all the country. To visit you must walk.

It's always tempting to bide a while at the small harbour, where Turkey Island sits on a hump of shingle just across the footbridge from the Harbour Master's office.

You'll notice the big lock gates beneath the bridge looking as if they've been borrowed from some inland canal. They haven't, for here they find employment occasionally when they're closed to keep in the tide. When the following ebb is complete they are opened so that the water inside rushes off to sea, hopefully taking much of the mud and silt with it. This is a rare event so you'll probably have to content yourselves with the great picturesque sweep of Porlock Bay that curves north-east to Hurlestone Point instead.

Our walk takes us past the Anchor Hotel, through the alley between the buildings and - where we see a yellow Reliant Robin van bearing the witty logo Trotter's International Trading - we turn left up the easy-to-miss footpath. Steps take us up to the fields, which we cross to reach the hamlet of Worthy.

A few hundred metres along the lane we come to a curious thatched cottage - curious because it forms an arch where motorists pay to ply the Worthy Toll Road. We take the footpath

*Basic Hike: South West Coast Path from Porlock Weir to Culbone, returning over the top of Culbone Hill via Silcombe, Smalla Combe and Worthy Wood.*

*Distance & Going: six miles, steep in places.*

*Recommended Map: Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure 9.*

*Food & Drink: Watering holes at the Weir and in Porlock itself. This hike begins by taking the coast path west from Porlock Weir.*

that begins just to the right of the cottage. This takes up through magical Yearnor Wood. A fabulous fantasy-style mansion once stood here - fairy-like with minarets and cloisters and a clutter of other architectural features. For years the big house at Ashley Combe lay in ruins and eventually became so dangerous it was raised to the ground. Sadly they've even blocked up the little follies and tunnels situated here and there in the steep woods. You'll see one on the path to Culbone, looking like a miniature castle bridging the almost subterranean route. It was a Lady Lovelace who had this dreamland built and she even imported a team of Swiss mountaineers to lay a network of carriageways throughout her vertical demesne.

It was all kept very private and the tunnels were part of the design which allowed her to enjoy the ornate gardens and landscapes without the exasperating notion of being viewed by anyone else. There was only one problem with the place - it was back-sunned and in the winter not a single gleam finds its way across the high escarpment.

Lady Lovelace eventually despaired of the gloom and departed for the sunny side of the hill, but you can still see plenty of vestiges of her dreamscape and perhaps recall the yodelling mountaineers who made the paths and left behind them some excellent place names like Apple Dumpling Point and Cherry Tree Steep.

The path used to be a long, gradual climb from here to Culbone, but over the past 20 years massive landslides have dissected the hill so that now there's quite a bit of zig-zag climbing to be done.

While you're wending up and across, you can muse upon the antics of the erstwhile customs officer who used to patrol this section of the Exmoor beat keeping an eye out for smugglers. He was plagued by a ghost who used to follow him as he went about his night patrols.

At first the excise-man took to slashing at it with his swordstick, but as this proved a useless occupation he became resolved to the fellowship of the phantom, and eventually learned to value its company on his solitary walks. All at once the track turns away from the coast and into the hill, and within a few yards there is Culbone hanging high above the grey rocks and the grey sea in its enchanting glen.

A visit to the tiny church is compulsory - though it takes you a couple of hundred metres out of the way. The smallest complete church in England has a nave that is 21 feet by 12 feet, and a chancel that measures 13 feet by 10 - making a total length of 35 feet.

Regular services are still held - many of the congregation arrive by four-wheel drive down the steep track, which we must now climb. It's a long steep haul that takes us up to the small lane that terminates at Silcombe Farm. You'll see the farmstead on your right, but we turn left a few metres until we see a track ascending the hill on our right. This takes us up over Culbone Hill to the very top of the Worthy Toll Road.

Keep an eye out for some small standing stones in the bracken among the pine trees to your left - these are the remains of

a fascinating prehistoric stone row that runs east-west across the hill.

Turn left at the top and walk along the lane for just a few metres before branching right into Smalla Combe. The footpath runs down this delightful valley alongside the stream. We swing left at Pitt Farm to take the track that will reintroduce us to the toll road.

Once again, it's just a matter of a few metres before we're forsaking the road for a footpath. This time it's the right of way that climbs briefly around the shoulder of hill above Yearnor Mill. Now we are walking along the very upper limits of Worthy Wood, but after a quarter of a mile we come to a junction where a smaller path disappears down over the hill.

This is the path that will take us down through the woods back to Porlock Weir. It eventually spills onto the lane that runs inland around the rear of the tiny port - turn right and walk for a couple hundred metres until you reach the junction where another lane descends to the harbour and the car park.