



Exmoor

Mineral Line

If they ever invent a time-machine I'm promising myself a trip backwards to make a journey – to take a train from the West Somerset port of Watchet up the old Mineral Line to the 1200 foot high Brendon Hill escarpment. It's not much more than ten miles in length, but it passes through some of the most lovely and unspoilt views in the region.

The bed of the old line is still apparent in many stretches – in some sections it has been converted into a public right of way, in others it has been used as a road and in just a few places it runs through private property – but basically it is traceable and therefore follow-able for most of the way.

And that is the basis of the truly magnificent one-way hike which I'll be covering this week and next in honour of the fact that much of the line was completed exactly 150 years ago. We, you might be relieved to hear, are going to reverse my dream train ride and walk the easier route from the top to the bottom.

For a moment you may think you have become inexplicably lost and ended up in Cornwall – the old engine house standing lonely in the high fields of the Brendon escarpment is an exact copy of the ones you see dotted all over our most westerly county. Which shouldn't perhaps be surprising as it was built with help of Cornish experts.

It marks the beginning of this long linear walk from the high hills to the Severn Sea – a walk that follows a glorious and little known Westcountry railway line that puffed and panted a living for just a few short years back in the 1800's.

West Somerset's Mineral Line was built to convey iron ore from the Brendon Hill mines to the port of Watchet – a job which it did most effectively, if not miraculously, between 1865 and 1898. I say miraculously because it descended over 1200 feet in just ten or so miles – the biggest drop being down a dramatic section still known as The Incline.

We'll see this 1-in-4 engineering wonder – or what remains of it - in the first of our two walks, but first I wanted to locate the old engine house which stabs at the heavens like a salute to this long lost industry. You'll find it just south of the main Raleigh's Cross/Wheddon Cross road that traverses the ridge of the hills. Just a mile west of the place where the Bampton road peels off to the south there's a small terrace called Sminhayes that used to house iron miners, and next to this is strangely named Naked Boy Lane.



Basic walk – from the old engine house near Naked Boy Lane down The Incline past Comberow, Roadwater, Washford to Watchet and the sea.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Exmoor Explorer OL9.

Distance and going: ten miles easy going.

A few yards up this byway, on the crest of the hill, the lane crosses an old railway bridge and beneath this there's a cutting which you can follow to the west. Half a mile along that cutting you will come to the engine house.

Having paid a visit to this lonesome place, we must retrace our tracks to the lane and turn left down past the Naked Boy Stone – a large marlstone boulder that you'll see on the right. Legend has it that community elders from Old Cleeve would beat the bounds of their enormous parish once a year and carry out the rather painful business described by the name of the old fashioned practice – they would literally beat some hapless youth at every touch and turn so that the young of the parish would never forget the borders of the homeland to which they belonged.

The Naked Boy is said to refer to the habit of pulling a lad's trousers down so that he would feel every inch of his beating – and the stone marks the very southerly corner of a large parish that stretches all the way down to the sea.

A hundred metres north we cross the main road and turn right to follow its wide verge the half mile to the old winding house. This ruin marks the top of the Mineral Line's famous incline.

The lowland part of the railway, from Watchet to the village of Roadwater, was completed in just over a year in 1856 – and it was in 1857 that the engineers finished the section of to Comberow which was – and still is – one of the most remote communities in the Westcountry.

From this deep bowl in the hills there was only one way to go and that was up – quite literally three quarters of a mile up a 1-in-4 slope to the crest of the Brendons.

The basic idea was that the heavy trucks laden with iron ore at the top would be attached to the empty wagons down at Comberow by cable and be able to swap places with the aid of gravity and a large steam engine.

To my amazement someone has put a No Admittance sign up on the gate that allows an entrance to the Winding House – I don't know why – I've been walking through the place and down The Incline for decades. If you want to be law abiding then you must now take your life in your hands and continue along the narrow main road for 500 metres until you come to the bridleway on your left just past the entrance to Hill House.

This takes you north and downwards – into the vast amphitheatre of forests which surround lonely Comberow. After half a mile it crosses The Incline and you can look down its overgrown length and wonder at one of the region's greatest feats of Victorian engineering.

All the tracks around here lead down to the hamlet where there used to be a busy station. It is hard to believe in the silence of the place nowadays, but by 1872 this place was seeing 19,000 passengers a year passing through – not to mention thousands of tons of iron ore.

You are now deep in one of the best kept secrets in the entire Westcountry – a deep and forgotten valley system that wends

it way north out of the hills towards the sea. You walk down three miles of utter rural tranquillity until you reach the old railway's first real village.

And next week we'll continue the walk from Roadwater to Watchet and the coast.