



Exmoor

Mineral Line (part 2)

One of the reasons this 12-mile linear walk is so rewarding is because it represents a microcosm of much that is best about the Westcountry.

Following the old West Somerset Mineral Line takes you from the high windswept Brendon Hills, down through deep tranquil forests that are one of the least visited parts of the peninsula, before issuing forth through pleasant river valleys and across airy ridges to reach the sea.

Last week we followed the upper sections of the old iron ore railway, now we venture into the luxuriant lower end that traverses the fertile coastal vale of West Somerset.

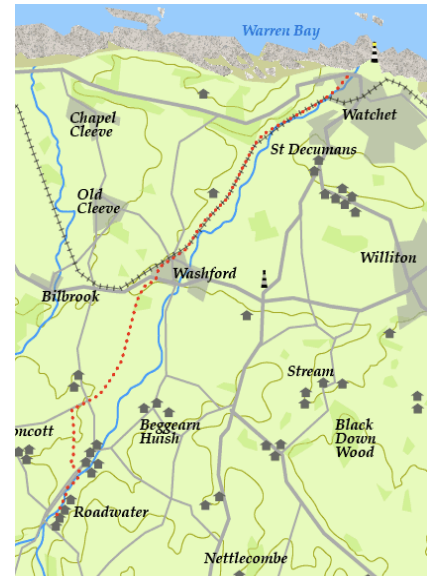
As the Mineral Line reaches Roadwater, tucked deep in its narrow valley, so it finds itself being somewhat privatised. By which I mean it has, over the past 90 years, been annexed as part of people's gardens.

Indeed, one of the first buildings you'll see upon entering the village down the line – which is now a quiet cul-de-sac of a country lane – is the old station. The railway bridge across the river leading to it has, for the most part, been stripped away, but you can still see the old platform which now makes what must be an agreeable terrace for the present occupier of the station-house.

Further down the village I know of a home that literally grew out of one of the old railway carriages that had been left on the line when it was finally and officially abandoned in 1932. I recall the parents of a friend living there and inside the living room you could still see the roof vents and other features of the original carriage. I'm glad to say the new owners have made an architectural feature of this railway relic.

Thanks to all this annexation, our bid to follow the line must take a parallel route down the village main street. To do this simply turn left when you see the old station situated directly ahead, then right into the thoroughfare that passes for a main street. This will take you north past the village shop and recreation ground and down through the long thin village.

In order to avoid any further road walking our route now leaves the Mineral Line entirely for a couple of miles until it, and we, meet again at the village of Washford. Halfway through Roadwater there's a sharp right-hand bend with a farm gate on the left-hand apex – it is, in fact, the entrance to



Basic route: from village of Roadwater along ridge-way to Washford and from there to Watchet along the old Mineral Line.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Exmoor OL9

Distance and going: four miles, easy going.

a farm but it also introduces us to a footpath that climbs west out of the village in the direction of Golsoncott and Rodhuish.

After passing a few farm buildings the path enters a large field, which it ascends to eventually meet the Golsoncott lane. We turn right into this quiet thoroughfare and walk a couple hundred metres along it to the crossroads. Directly opposite, a gate opens onto what looks like an old carriageway, and this takes us north along the top of the ridge all the way to Washford.

The route along the crest of the ridge affords pleasant sweeping views of West Somerset's coastal vale – from the Quantock which border it to the east – to the bold bluff of North Hill which is Minehead's famous headland.

Halfway along the ridge the carriageway peters out, but a footpath continues north across the fields until it brings you down past a wood to the outskirts of Washford. Cross the main Minehead road as soon as you meet it and walk a few metres to your left to the Washford Inn where another footpath on your right will take you away from the busy noisy highway.

In a couple of minutes you will find yourself in the altogether quieter northern part of Washford – take the lane directly ahead, walk just past the village school looking out for the turning that leads to the recreation ground on your left. At the opposite end of the rec' you will see a gate and this brings us back onto the Mineral Line.

From here the mile and a half to Watchet the bed of the old railway has been converted into a public footpath and makes for pleasant easy walking. On one side the Washford Stream burbles merrily seawards, on the other a remarkable survivor from the days of steam runs in a direct parallel with our route.

The West Somerset Railway – as most readers will know – still hosts steam loco's on a daily basis and is in fact the nation's longest (and one of its most successful) privately run railway.

It must have been an odd sight back in the old days when trains would run alongside each other on entirely different lines belonging to totally different companies.

Past the ancient farm at Kentsford, the path eventually issues out onto one of Watchet's back-streets, which we walk a few hundred metres along until we see a footpath on the left, running down by the side of the river. Within two minutes of following this we find ourselves passing the Star Inn and the curious old inner harbour basin to finally reach the Mineral Line's ultimate destination.

The West Quay at Watchet Harbour was the place where the iron ore was delivered to the awaiting ships after its dozen-mile journey down through some of the region's loveliest valleys.

The last load was brought down just under a century ago – cheap ore imported from Spain eventually spelled the end of West Somerset's glorious Mineral Line - much to the relief of local lovers of peace and tranquillity.

Had the industry continued, the lonely Brendons may have come to resemble their ravaged cousins just across the Bristol Channel in South Wales. The downside is that we will never be able to enjoy that remarkable train ride unless someone does invent a time-machine – but, as we have discovered, we can at least walk its wonderful route down from the hills.