



Exmoor

Pinkery Pond

If there's one thing this column is fond of, it's wilderness. And places don't get much wilder than Exmoor's Chains - the high boggy plateau on the westerly moors which is birthplace to many rivers including the Exe, Barle and West Lyn.

These peat bogs were the ones that became overwhelmed by the rains of August 1952 when they were forced to give up the job of soaking up water like a giant sponge - millions of gallons raced down all three rivers, and many more streams besides, causing the death and destruction now known as the Lynmouth Flood Disaster. The bogs that lie between Exe Plain and Rowley Down are deluged by more precipitation than anywhere else in the region - and it was their overflow which killed 36 people in the disaster.

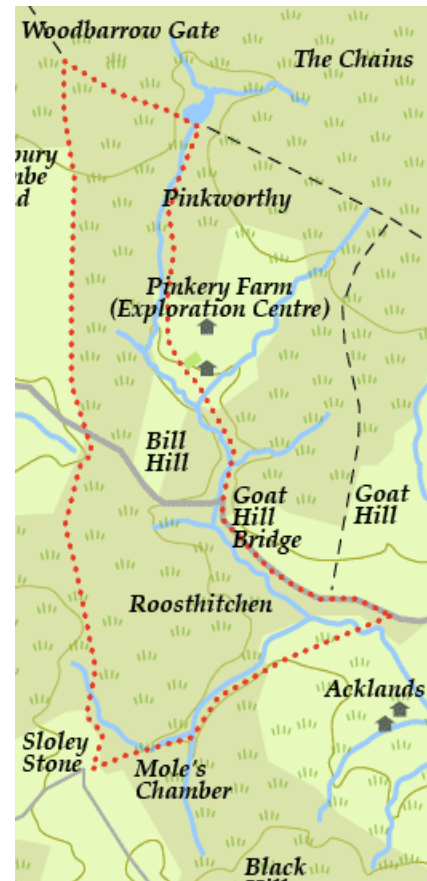
Most people don't go to The Chains unless they have to, but there are those among us who are addicted to spending time in big open wet windy places under even bigger wetter windier skies.

If you like the idea - but don't want too much of a sojourn in such an uncomfortable zone - then this is the walk for you. You get sweeping moorland views and an old and sinister man-made lake thrown in for good measure. I'm talking of course about Pinkery Pond.

To find all this wilderness take the B3358 west out of Simonsbath on the Devon-Somerset border and travel about three miles until you see the little sign for Pinkery Farm Exploration Centre. It's on a sharp bend between Goat and Bill Hills - who Bill was I have no idea, nor do I know where the goats have gone - but I do know that there's a wide grassy space on which to park where they've widened the road, just before you get to the corner in question.

Next to Goat Hill Bridge there's a private road with a "no entry" sign - which refers to vehicles, not to walkers. We stroll up this paved road toward the exploration centre, enjoying the increasing feeling of wilderness every step of the way.

Both my children have benefited from adventurous stays in this Exmoor National Park Authority run centre, and well worthwhile the experience was too. They may have come home muddy and wet, but they learned a thing or two about being far out in the middle of nowhere which they'll never forget.



Basic walk: from B3358 under Goat Hill to past Pinkery Educational Centre to Pinkery Pond, then west to Woodbarrow Gate, then south back across main road to the Sloley Stone to return past Moles Chamber to road.

Distance and going: four and half miles - can be very boggy.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey OL 09 - Exmoor.

It's believed to be the highest education establishment in the country - and offers a wealth of opportunities for work in a wide range of subjects, with groups of all ages.

The centre began life as one of the farmsteads created in the 19th century by the tireless Knight family whose mission it was to tame the high acres of Exmoor - and it remained a farm until 1969, when it was purchased by Somerset County Council.

We walk past the centre which hugs its low hill with only a few trees for protection. Passing to the left of the trees you can see how windy it gets up here - the park authority has installed a wind generator which runs the centre's electrical needs.

Continuing along the footpath to the north, up the side of the valley contour, we begin to enter serious wilderness country. Gone is the sound of the motor car - and even the laughter of children at the centre - only the lonesome sound of wind in the dry grasses and the occasional piping of a solitary ring ouzel and a bleating of a sheep.

A field gives way to the moor proper, and we pass through an aperture in an old dry stone wall to enter the real untamed wilderness. At the top of the valley in front of you, you'll see the earthen dam which keeps Pinkery Pond where it is - and this we must reach and climb to gain the Westcountry's highest, most lonely lake.

It was built by the Knights to supply water for some madcap canal scheme which would have seen the exporting copper ore from high moor to coast. Needless to say, it never came to fruition, but you can still see traces of this unfinished waterway now. It is the lake, though, that provides the most obvious evidence of all this misguided industrial optimism.

I can never come here without thinking sombre thoughts of poor Richard Gammin whose body was found in the peaty depths 106 years ago.

This respected farmer was left a widower with 10 children to raise and after six years, the loss of his dear departed wife was obviously beginning to cut deep. So he sought the attentions of a young Parracombe girl - and it was her letter, refusing his offers of love, which was found in his jacket by the side of the lake.

Lynmouth Lifeboat sent up a small boat so that the depths could be dragged, a diver from Wales was brought in - all to no avail. There was only one thing for it - Pinkery Pond had to be drained.

The Knight family had equipped the dam with two plug holes, but nothing could budge the bungs. Teams of horses were attached to chains, but the iron rings on the plugs simply broke off. Eventually brilliant Bob Jones, the man who built the Lynton-Lynmouth Cliff Railway, was brought in and he devised an elaborate system of rams to push the bungs out from the other side of the dam.

And so Pinkery Pond was drained on the first of just two occasions in its long history. The remains of heart-broken Mr

Gammin were duly found and apparently herons came from miles around in great flocks and ate all the stranded fish.

But what I find curious and not a little disturbing is that upwards of a thousand people turned up to watch the morbid scene unfold. They must have marched miles to get to one of the most remote corners of the region - just to see a body hauled from the mud.

We turned left, walked along the top of the earthen dam and continued west up the low gradient to Woodbarrow Gate - from where you can look north and see the distant Exmoor coast, or the hills above it anyway, around the area west of Lynmouth.

Having taken in the view, we began our return by striking due south along the track which is part of the Tarka Trail. This passes Yarbury Combe Head and crosses Broad Mead before gaining the road - which we crossed so we could continue south to the Sloley Standing Stone at the head of Lew Combe.

A bridleway joins the paved lane at its corner here and branches off north east towards the main road along the east side of the shallow boggy valley, past the mysterious Mole's Chamber where the writer SH Burton was once overtaken by an "overwhelming sense of antiquity". His sense of time became confused and he realised he was no longer alone - shadowy figures moved down the track with him, their backs bent beneath great bundles...

Perhaps because of this story - more probably because of the onslaught of a heavy April shower - I decided not to go along the bridleway but cut directly across Roostitchen Moor instead. It was a mistake and I'd advise you not to follow my example - keep to the bridleway and you will not end up knee-deep in bog... It isn't much of a dog leg left, back to your car when you reach the main road.