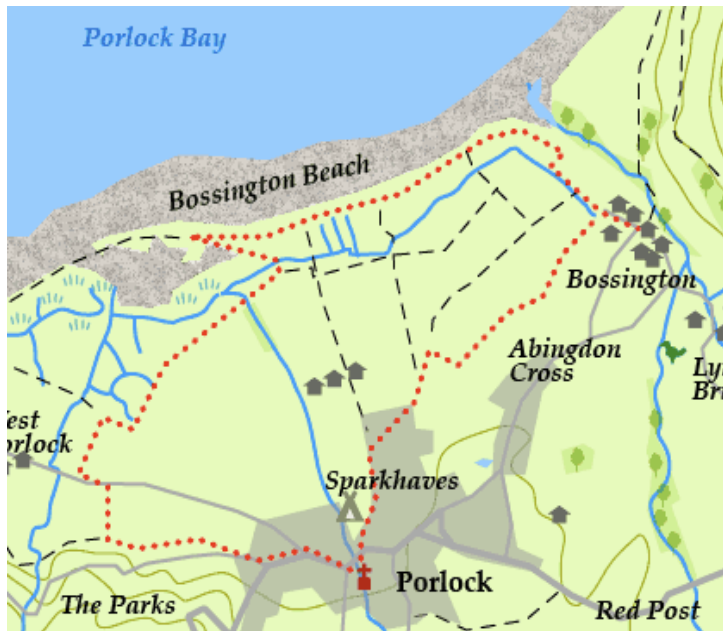




Exmoor National Park

Porlock Marshes



Basic Hike: circular route from car park in Bossington around Porlock Marsh following new permissive path to West Porlock - and back along the woodland paths to the village of Porlock and beyond via Sparkhayes Lane.

Recommended Map: Ordnance Survey OL 9.

Distance and going: five miles easy going.

Food and drink: plenty of choice in Porlock - excellent pint in Ship Inn.

After writing a couple of Poppy Appeal related articles for the WMN in the past week the whole subject of the great conflicts of the last century seemed to loom large and loud for me, so I thought it might be a good idea to adapt a walk into a kind of personal act of remembrance.

There are opportunities to do this all around our peninsula. Just the briefest of trawls through my website – www.westcountrywalks.com - reveals half a dozen war related hikes. There's the remarkable Mullion to Kynance Cove walk that passes the "helicopter graveyard" at the old WW2 Predannack airfield, and the even more remarkable Hope Cove to Salcombe route which takes in another airfield at Bolt Head, to name but two.

But I thought I'd revisit Porlock Marshes to see how, and if, a small WW2 memorial stone has been coping with life in the newly flooded zone which has been described as England's fastest changing environment.

We parked in the National Trust car park at the centre of Bossington and walked down the main village street which, after a quarter of a mile, turns into a dirt track and leads to the sea. The area that stretches to the west is Britain's newest large expanse of wetland since the shingle barrier, which has protec-

ted the lower part of Porlock Vale for centuries, was breached some years ago.

In a storm it is a wild and somewhat hazardous place - and I advise anyone who wants to explore the shingle ridge to be careful, especially at spring tide.

If you want a circular walk then the old line of the coast path is no good. The breach is dangerous. You can cross at low tide, but it's not really advisable. The coast path, however, has been realigned to avoid the marsh on an inland route - and this is the one we ended up following.

But not before we'd walked out to the breach anyway because right out there in the middle of all the primeval wilderness there used to be a small memorial commemorating the courage of man. Eight men to be exact - the crew of an American bomber that crashed in thick fog somewhere hereabouts in 1942. It used to be the most forlorn memorial imaginable, stuck out there on the muddy edge of the brackish lake - but on our visit last weekend we were bemused to find it had vanished.

I'm happy to report though that we later found it relocated further inland - someone has sensibly moved the stone and saved it from being swept out to sea.

The bomber wasn't the only WW2 aircraft to have come to grief in Porlock Bay. A German Junkers 88 was intercepted by three Spitfires out over the Bristol Channel and shot down. The Junker's pilot, Helmut "Acky" Ackenhausen, managed to crash-land his machine on the beach and, 30 years after the war, he returned to Porlock to visit the grave of his gunner Wilhelm Reuhl who died in the crash.

A local couple had tended the grave in the intervening years and Mr Ackenhausen thanked them and described to a journalist how he'd ditched the plane and climbed out to be confronted by the Home Guard. Some of the men were armed but he was more worried about the man with the pitchfork. He also said he'd like to meet the Spitfire pilot who'd shot him down, and was genuinely saddened to learn that Pilot Officer Eric Marrs had lost his life over Brest in 1941.

This lonely, desolate, location - where the waves never cease to rattle a million stones, where the curlew cries its melancholic call - may seem like an odd place to remember the calamity of human conflict. And yet it as good as any - at least you are left alone to ponder the violence that man bestows upon his brother.

The tide was out when we were hunting the stone down at the breach, which meant that the huge tidal lake which now stretches across the meadows was temporarily out at sea. This allowed us to splash our way south between the grazing lapwing and curlew to the line of dead, saline-poisoned, trees which mark part of the route of the newly aligned path.

From here we proceeded west along the new footpath towards Porlock Weir, passing the newly located memorial stone on the way. This is a permissive path allowed under a new management agreement that Exmoor National Park has with the owner, and it takes walkers around the southerly limits of

the salt marsh to meet an existing right-of-way just north of a place called Allerpark Combe.

This was our next destination. Up the old drover's road we went - across the Porlock Weir road - and on up track until we reached Allerpark. Here we turned left along a footpath that follows the bottom edge of the woods all the way to Porlock.

Time for a much deserved pint in the wonderful old pub known locally as the Top Ship. The poet Robert Southey sat here by the fireside 204 years ago and wrote: "This place is called in the neighbourhood 'The End of the World'. All beyond is inaccessible to carriage or even cart. A sort of sledge is used by the country people, resting upon two poles like cart-shafts."

He went on to describe the delights of the old inn - where he was so favourably impressed by the local seaweed delicacy laverbread that he became almost addicted to the stuff. He was forever writing to his friend, the poet Coleridge, to see if he could glean supplies.

We marched east down Porlock's main street to the place where Sparkhayes Lane departs to the left. Now the boom of surf grew louder and we could sniff the scent of its salt as it pounded through the breach.

From the end of Sparkhayes Lane we turned east again and made our way along the public footpath to Bossington in the gloaming light of a November afternoon. The place was so fantastically beautiful I thought for a moment of those who'd paid the ultimate price fighting for a cause out there on the lonesome skerries. Cut off in their prime, there were to be no more beautiful afternoon walks for them.