



Exmoor

Simonsbath - Cow Castle Circular

A filthy barren ground – at least, that's what the writer Daniel Defoe called it 300 years ago. He was talking about Exmoor in general, but it's generally thought he was, in particular, referring to the land around lonesome Simonsbath on the Somerset-Devon border.

Simonsbath is sometimes said to be the most remote village in the Westcountry, and there seems to be no reason to quibble with that notion.

Defoe must have reached Simonsbath on one of Exmoor's less salubrious days – which wouldn't have been difficult, seeing the area has second highest rainfall in England.

But go on a sunlit day and you'll see this borderland at its very best. The River Barle curves down from the high, bleak, featureless plain known as The Chains and for a short while makes for itself a comely, sylvan, valley as it avoids Devon – preferring instead to remain within West Somerset until meeting its mighty running mate, the Exe, south of Dulverton.

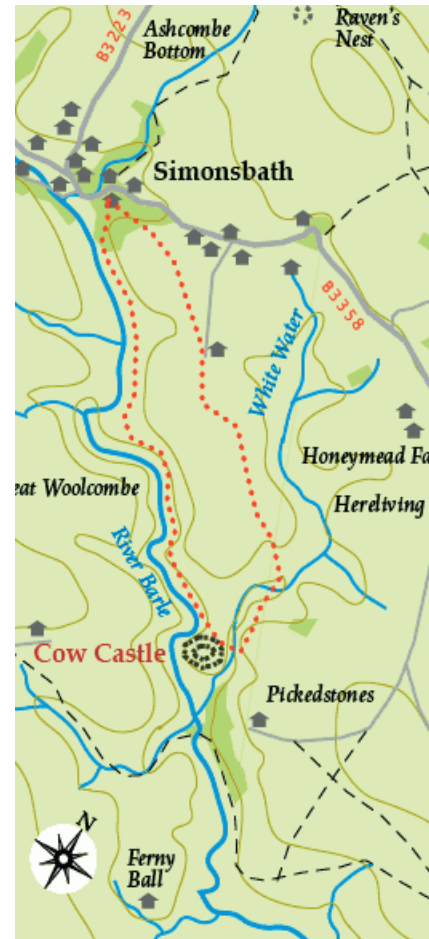
At Simonsbath it enjoys a luxuriant meander through trees which were planted two centuries ago in a bid to create a shelter zone. But once clear of the village, the river becomes a true moorland waterway – a strip of blue that forever reflects the curious Ocean-borne light that illuminates these westerly reaches of the plateau.

It is in the general direction this glorious riverine gulch that this hike meanders. The stretch between Simonsbath and the dramatic knoll known as Cow Castle is as wildly scenic as anywhere in the region. It is a clean cut landscape broken only by the curves of the hills as the stoop elegantly toward the stream.

It also a mournful one. At least it is if you are haunted by the gruesome tale of Anna Maria Burgess who was murdered by her father hereabouts 147 years ago. More of her and her wicked parent later, first we must find the beginning of this hike.

In a bid to make this a circular route, I took the high road and returned by the low road. Both roads, or paths, begin and end at the same place – in Birchcleave, the beautiful hangar of beeches (not birches) that looms above Simonsbath directly to the east.

Instead of taking the main river path, I followed the signpost to Pickedstones. The path climbs out through the hangar and soon we find ourselves in the airy fields north of the Barle, and



Basic hike: Simonsbath to Cow Castle via paths along ridge to the north of the Barle – returning along the riverside.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Explorer OL9.

Distance and going: four miles, fairly easy going.

proceed in a south easterly direction, following the river valley via its neighbouring ridge, passing the farm at Winstitchen to mount the big shoulder of hill that divides the Barle with its tributary, the small and secretive White Water.

As the spur falls away to allow for the meeting of the two waterways, I veered south descending the contours at the diagonal so that I could make directly for the extraordinary Cow Castle – said by many to be the most beautiful and interesting of all Exmoor’s hill-forts.

So extraordinary and fantastically situated is the location, that it’s little wonder that early man made use of it as a defensive site. You can still see the ramparts, but it is the unexpected steepness of the knoll that gives it an air of impregnability.

White Water would probably, long ago, have veered to the north of the knoll in order to join the Barle – then, after countless centuries of gnawing away at the softer shilletts to the east, it must have eventually broken through to the south after eroding its way past the little sister hill known as the Calf. Such isolated knolls are not a common feature on Exmoor, though you might be forgiven for thinking so on this walk as we will be passing a carbon copy a mile upstream.

For that is our route now: we turn right and follow the riverside path back towards Simonsbath, and just before we come to Flexbarrow (as the other knoll is known) we find ourselves looking at the stark old ruins of the Wheal Eliza. A century and a half ago this mine would have looked very different – test diggings had shown the ground contained copper and manganese as well as iron – and, despite the remote location, money was invested to extract the stuff.

For a decade this lonely corner was a hive of industry as miners sunk a 300 foot shaft and installed a large water wheel to run the pumps. For a while it even looked as though the area would become an Exmoor version of the Klondike - 60 percent metallic ore was found and the local landowner, Frederic Knight, was persuaded to start work on a ludicrously ambitious trans-moorland railway that would take the material to the sea at Porlock Weir.

It all ended in tears. The mining partnership broke up with mutual recriminations all round, and central Exmoor was saved from the indignity of having its bowels torn asunder by a mining rush.

The Wheal Eliza may have died a premature death but, as I mentioned before, it has its own gruesome footnote. It was in one of the shafts that the body of little Anna Maria Burgess was found months after her truly awful father had done her to death. The entire tragedy was recorded by the remarkable Rev William Thornton who was Simonsbath’s first curate. Indeed, without Thornton’s tireless efforts as self-appointed police officer and detective, it is likely that William Burgess would have ever been brought to justice.

Self appointed, by the way, because in those days the nearest high ranking police officer was located some 35 miles away the other side of Taunton.

Anyway, the intriguing and harrowing story of Anna Maria deserves fuller mention than we have time for here. Suffice to say, the father was hanged, but not before he told the curate why he killed his daughter: "The child was in the way, sir - in my way and in everybody else's way - and I thought she'd be better out of the way."

A stony-hearted mitigation if ever there was one. And one you can mull upon as you make your way back along this most beautiful of river valleys to the warmth and comfort of the inn at Simonsbath.