



Exmoor

Tarr Steps



Basic Hike: from Hawkridge (between Dulverton and Withypool) around Hawkridge Common and down to Tarr Steps to return via Great Cleave and up Marshclose Hill.

Recommended Map: Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure Map 9 Exmoor.

Distance and going: four miles fairly easy going, steep and muddy in on or two places.

It rained, and rained, and rained. Indoors, the internet beckoned with cheap, last-minute airline deals to the sunshine; digital TV offered 180 channels of easy, unchallenging tat; and a cosy log fire spoke of books that ones been meaning to read for years...

What better then than to turn your back on that lot and go to the highest, wildest, windiest place you know and feel the sting of the rain upon your cheeks, rather than the tears of self-pity. Villages don't come much higher, wilder or windier than lonely Hawkridge, perched 900 feet up in the vastness of Exmoor's ancient Forest. If Heathcliff hadn't haunted Bronte Country's Wuthering Heights, then this would have made an ideal location for his brooding shenanigans.

On a winter's day when the rain is coming off the Atlantic horizontally, nowhere is more grim. The car shook in the teeth of the gale that lashed its way down what passes for the hamlet's main-street. The camera refused to raise itself off its lowest setting: a 30th of a second at an aperture of 2.8. Darkness at midday.

But down the centuries Hawkridge has been famed for its tough hunting parsons - you can almost feel them mocking you across that forlorn, windswept churchyard. Parson Boyse, the Reverend Joseph Jekyll and the mellifluously named Rev. D.S. Sweetapple-Horlock - not one of them would have given a toss about a full-blown blizzard, let alone a dampish gale.

Putting on our stiffest upper lips we vacated the trembling car. Five minutes into the hike, we were glad to be out of doors - breathing the finest, purest, air in Europe - which, by the way, Exmoor can actually boast according to local lichen-experts.

We saw the gravestone of Ernest Bawden - a man who most certainly would have shrugged off this little hurricane with the merest contempt. Ernest was a legendary huntsman who would sometimes ride with his hounds until long after the moon had ascended into cold Exmoor skies.

Whether you agree with the sport or not, there is something swashbuckling about the art of venery - at least, the way it was practised in days of yore. On one memorable occasion Bawden's hounds followed a stag over the sea-cliffs at Culbone. They disappeared in the pale light of a new moon and the stag, and a handful of hounds, were never seen again.

Each of the parsons mentioned above was crazy about hunting - Sweetapple-Horlock even used to attend sermons wearing riding boots under his cassock - and so it is a little ironic that the church in this village of venery should be dedicated to the saint who saved a hind from hounds.

A hundred metres to the left of the church gate, a lane leads off north-west towards Hawkridge Cross, and this we follow for a minute until we see a footpath heading due north across the fields. This is part of the Two Moors Way and it leads around the flanks of Hawkridge Common above the upper margins of Great Cleave wood.

After a while the steep grove on our right turns into Row Down Wood and at this point the path crosses the terminus of a paved road. A track continues down through the trees, and you could take this track to Penny Bridge, but we continued straight ahead into the woods that took us around to Parsonage Farm.

Here there's a choice of paths, but we proceed due east around the hill before descending across fields to Exmoor's most famous bridge. The 180 foot long, 17 span, slab structure is believed to be of mediaeval construction. Occasionally the 'stone-planks' as the writer Richard Jeffries called them, are washed away by a flood, but each one is now numbered so that National Park workers can put them back again.

Tarr Farm, just across the bridge, is one of Exmoor's superior watering-holes and in winter the log fire there makes a welcome haven from the buffeting gale. As you sip your soup you can ponder upon the upwardly mobile life of a local farm-boy - George Williams (later Sir George), of Ashway Farm - who became renowned as the founder of the Young Men's Christian Association.

Now we must cross back to the west side of the clapper-bridge to complete our short, but exceedingly sweet, circular

walk. The paved lane - which enters the ford at Tarr Steps (do not attempt it in anything but a four-wheel-drive and even then don't do it in winter) - heads south-west past Tarr Steps Hotel before joining the river again on its way down to Penny Bridge.

Both water and road now curve south-east and the valley opens slightly before it reaches Marshclose Hill. This is a particularly beautiful part of the National Park and from here you can (or could - the footpath is closed for some reason) walk all the way down the riverside to Dulverton. But our hike takes us up the road the mile or so back to Hawkridge - and a pretty steep old climb it is too. Never mind. You regain your car with a feeling of great well-being and accomplishment.