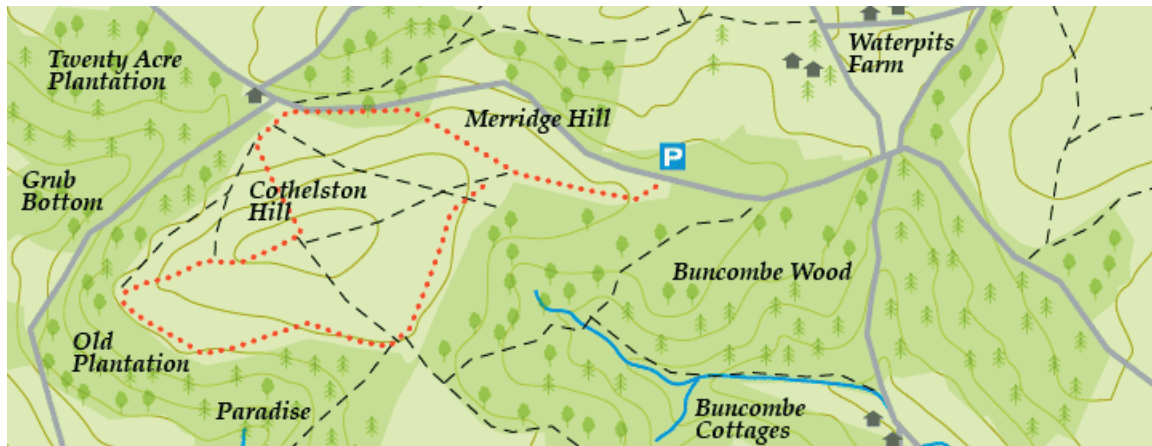




The Quantocks

Cothelstone



Here's a little secret concerning a certain magic portal on the M5. Junction 24 to be exact, the one that effortlessly introduces motorists to fabulous hikes in the heart of the Somerset Levels with no more than a quick gear change or two.

Well now this humble yet intriguing motorway junction has another trick up its sleeve. Within a mile of its roundabout a small lane leaves the old A38 Bridgwater to Taunton road and heads up into the foothills of the Quantocks. You'll see it if you have your wits about you - on the right hand side of the road as it enters the village of North Pertherton. The lane is sign-posted Goathurst and Broomfield and it takes you ever upward along the Quantocks' most southerly ridge. And before you know it you're on top of the hills that were designated Britain's first ever Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

In other words you are transported from motorway to rural idyll in just a few turns of your steering wheel... But things are about to get better still as our little lane joins the Enmore to Bishops Lydeard road because, in these southerly hills, there is a short walk that boasts the best views in the county of Somerset.

All right, I know have a habit of making such grandiose claims, but it's my job to sound enthusiastic - and this time it happens to be true. Imagine a peninsula of highlands that needles its way into a massive swathe of flatlands and vales. That's what the Quantock Hills do as they make their way down from the Bristol Channel into the very heart of the shire.

Basic hike: circular around the Cothelstone Hill access land.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 140.

Distance and going: two-and-a-half miles easy going.

At 332 metres Cothelstone Hill is the highest peak at the southern end of the escarpment and so it, indisputably, has the best views. They stretch in a great arc that includes the Mendips, the Poldens, the Levels, the West Dorset Downs, the Blackdowns, Tone Vale, and the lowlands of East Devon, Dartmoor, the Brendons and Exmoor. I could mention a few Welsh mountains for good measure - and the Forest of Dean - but I'm too exhausted.

And here's another little fact to back up my claim: «From this delightful spot,» wrote the Somerset historian Collinson more than 200 years ago, «the eye commands 14 counties and, with a glass on a clear day, 150 churches...»

To find this little lot all you have to do is locate the car park a mile from the crossroads where there's a cafe called The Pines. You have a choice: you can follow the Quantock Ranger Service way-marked route that circumnavigates Cothelstone Hill in a clockwise sweep, or you can amble anticlockwise like me in the belief that this direction allows the walker to face slightly better views.

The rangers' route is marked by a series of three foot high wooden posts topped by green discs with white arrows, so you won't even need a map.

I kept the woods close to my right hand as I began my hike over to the corner of Merridge Hill known as Park End. The paths are easy to follow and the lay of the land ushers you comfortably around this area of public access land.

I was walking with friends and pointed out a field just across the way informing them that it was once the location of a local film-maker's most embarrassing shoot. Peter Sealy, the well-known postman-come-wildlife-cinematographer, was panning his camera along the distant hedgerow near Birches Corner when he did what can only be described as a double take. Pete once showed me the footage that he dare not use in his popular film-shows - the smooth pan jerks suddenly back and zooms into a wildlife scene of x-rated content. The camera is then switched off, but not before we catch a glimpse of the normally private mating act of two naked Homo sapiens.

It was far too draughty for such things the day we were there, but the sun was out and the chill wind was keeping the atmosphere swept clean and clear, so we meandered due south to the very top of Cothelstone Hill.

Here we met the 14 purebred Exmoor Ponies, which the Quantock Rangers have imported in an effort to keep the hill clear of the inevitable scrub that begins to choke such places if they're not regularly grazed.

«We bought them in seven years ago as an experiment, but it worked so well it's got way beyond experimental stage now,» says Quantock Ranger Andy Harris. «We wanted to keep the hill clear not only so that people could have access to the area and enjoy the incredible views, but also for birds like skylarks, redstarts, stonechats and yellowhammers as well as other creatures such as snakes.

«The point was that we couldn't use sheep as this is a place where people like to come with their dogs,» he added. «The

ponies keep themselves to themselves and don't take much notice. We don't run them with a stallion though as it might cause problems with the people who ride their horses here.»

I am a great admirer of the Exmoor Pony, which is reckoned to be the closest thing we've got to the original wild-horse, and I love to see them roaming free on Westcountry moors. This herd looked every bit as indigenous and happy here on the Quantocks as their cousins do on Winsford and Withypool Commons in the heart of Exmoor.

We found the ponies at the very top of the hill where there's a ring of beech trees called the Seven Sisters. There are six sisters left since one was toppled in a gale, and I happen to be all at sixes and sevens about the origin of the name. My guess is that they or their predecessors were originally named in honour of the seven daughters of Sir Matthew de Stawell who ruled the roost around here way back in the 14th century.

If you make your way south-west down from the trees towards the corner of the common you will catch a glimpse of Sir Matthew's old home at Cothelstone Manor far, far below. His effigy is still to be seen in the little church which sits adjacent to the big house (which itself is not open to the public) and if you think the old squire was well endowed with daughters it might surprise you to learn that he had twice as many sons...

Once you've reached the trees turn sharp left and head east along the side of the woods until you reach the wooden pens above a coombe called Paradise. Through a gate there's a path that leads across the contours through Buncombe Wood to eventually bring you back to the car park.

All this magic and all those views - just ten minutes off the motorway. So fantastic is the secret lane that transports you up from the Westcountry's main thoroughfare, that it puts me in mind of another tale told by the historian Collinson.

He says a gentleman once came to the hill to test several telescopes and focused one on the clock face of a Taunton church seven miles away. A passing rustic asked him for a peep and was amazed to be able to see the time. It was just coming up to 12 o'clock so the gent asked if he would like to hear the church chimes as well and secretly held up his repeater watch while the yokel gazed down through the optics.

«Blessed me if Ole Nick 'isself ain't in thick 'fernal pipe,» cried the old fellow fleeing down our magic lane toward the vale...