



The Quantocks

Holford to Crowcombe

The poets Coleridge and Wordsworth liked to share this exquisite Quantock walk with their literary pals, and what was good enough for them is most certainly just the ticket for any Westcountry walker exactly 200 years later...

A delightful blend of hauntingly beautiful coombes best enjoyed with a sprinkling of Bohemian banter, followed by lofty ridges with an Ancient Mariner's view of the sea, and all washed down with a few pints of best bitter in the cosy nook of a flag-stone floored English pub - what could be better?

The hike starts at Holford, the village which is at the foot of one of the most beautiful wooded valley systems to be found anywhere in England. It's easy to find both village green and car park and from here you simply head for the hills on the track which divides the two.

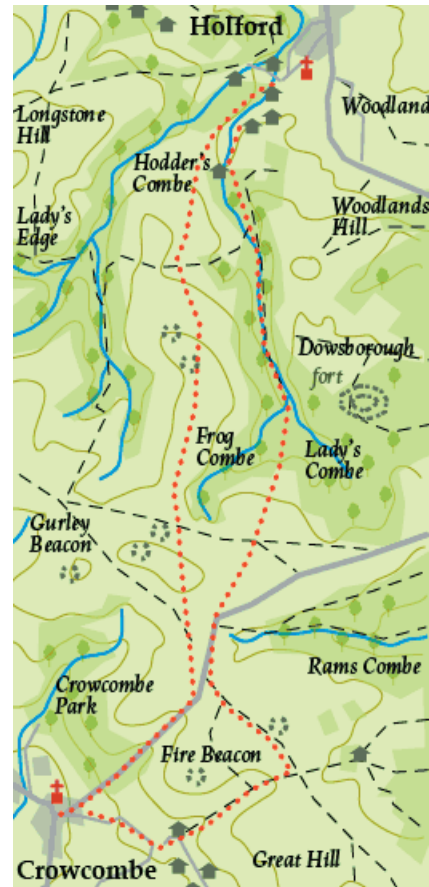
The aim of the walk is to cross the Quantocks from one side to the other, have a drink and some lunch over at Crowcombe, and return by a different route. The hike starts not half a mile away from where William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy lived for one memorable year between 1797 and 98 in the fine old house at Alfoxton.

Memorable because of the «immortal friendship», as it's often described, which they developed here with Samuel Taylor Coleridge. And what these three liked to do best was to go on long walks which, according to Dorothy, «extend for miles over the hilltops, the great beauty of which is their wild simplicity.» Nice work if you can get it - and you can, because by entering Hodder's Combe you'll be embarking on one of the main routes which took the three friends onto their beloved hills.

This is probably the very path imagined in Coleridge's excellent «This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison» in which he writes of friends enjoying a walk on The Quantocks while he must stay at home with a badly scolded foot.

He imagines his friends:

«On springy heath, along the hill-top edge,
Wander in gladness, and wind down, perchance,
To that still roaring dell, of which I told ;
The roaring dell, o'er wooded, narrow, deep,
And only speckled by the mid-day sun...»



Basic Walk: from Holford over the Quantock Ridge to Crowcombe, then back via alternative paths.

Recommended Map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 104 Quantock Hills.

Distance and Going: seven miles easy going, a few steep climbs.

Now we enter a terrain where it's wise to tuck your trousers into your socks. The top of The Quantocks are cloaked in bracken and with their population of wild red deer these the hills make an ideal breeding ground for the sort of ticks which can give you Lyme's Disease.

I know two wildlife photographers who search each other for these unwelcome parasites like a couple of chimpanzees after a visit to the hill. And indeed it's best to take no chances as some Westcountry moorlands have become seriously infested...

Whether or not Coleridge worried about such bugs it's hard to say. He was addicted to Black Drop, the most powerful opium mixture of time which may, of course, been partly responsible for strange and beautiful works such as «The Ancient Mariner.»

Up here, on the high Quantock ridge path, as the rain clouds part and you see before you a great vista of vale and sea stretching off toward Minehead, it's as good a place as any in which to read this or any of his other extraordinary works...

«Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,
With some fair bark, perhaps, whose sails light up
The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles
Of purple shadow!»

What a way to describe this memorable view, but you've time to stand and stare - you must be off down Crowcombe for lunch. To this turn left along the ridge top track and follow it south until you reach Crowcombe Park Gate then take a sharp right before you reach the metalled road. The idea is to get onto the footpath which descends around the northern limits to Crowcombe Park eventually entering the village near Grime's Farm.

From there it's just a few hundred metres to the excellent Carew Arms. After refreshment you can wander out the other side of the village alongside the road in the Taunton direction passing the preaching cross, gates to the manor, the church and the ancient church house. Just past the school a footpath climbs away to the left of the road and takes you up to the little lane that leads up to Quantock Coombe.

Now, I'm afraid, you are in for a steep climb. Up the coombe we go to reach the path that wends around Fire Beacon on your left. Eventually you will find yourself just across the bank from the ridge track. Turn left and walk back to Crowcombe Park Gate, cross the road and - instead of following the ridge-way back the way you came - head due north over Frog Hill and down the small ridge which divides Frog Coombe and Lady's Coombe.

These two become Holford Coombe once they have joined forces - and to finish this walk all you have to do is walk down it's lovely length back to the village which gave it a name.

Or, to put it in Coleridge's far more romantic words:

«But Oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!»