



Somerset Levels

Aller & the Rhynes

West Sedgemoor is a designated «Ramsar» site (after the Iranian city of Ramsar where the convention was signed 34 years ago) because of its importance as a wildlife habitat. Birds like lapwings fly about in great profusion and often The Levels becomes nothing more than a huge seething skyscape, with just a thin horizontal band of earth and water to remind you that this really is one of the loneliest and loveliest places in the Westcountry.

For this walk, we cross the small lane near the RSPB owned Dewlands Farm and follow the public footpath around the side of Red Hill to find the junction where a northerly right-of-way takes us over the summit of lowly Oath Hill and down to the Oath Farm.

From here you can look north-east out across Aller Moor to Aller Court Farm and its church. A footbridge allows walkers to cross the River Parrett and onto the plain, then another bridge (which crosses the River Sowy - actually a flood relief channel) places you on the path that heads dead straight across the meadows to the church.

Terrible things went on in these low polders in 1645. The English Civil War was in full swing and the high ground to the rear of Aller and Langport was the scene of a huge battle between 7,000 Royalist soldiers and 10,000 Parliamentarians. After a brave and hard fought initial stance by the former, the rout was on and soon panic was spreading through Royalist ranks. Groups of men fled down into these low-lying marshes as they attempted to make for Burrowbridge and Bridgwater beyond. Rout and skirmish is the official military term for it - hard-pressed soldiers would regroup and make a stand to fight, only to give way and take to their heels again. No one knows how many people died out here on the 10th of July that year, but it is likely that all the rhynes ran red.

Only swans rout and skirmish today - or at least they did when we were there. A surprising number of swans - more than 30 of the great white birds took to their wings as we approached, only to land, make a stand and fly again as we came on towards them.

After crossing various tiny footbridges over drainage ditches we eventually reach a track adjacent to Aller Court Farm - a handsome old place built upon a slight eminence. It was very likely to have been an island in the middle of the impenetrable swamps which once dominated the Levels before they were



Basic Hike: from RSPB's Dewlands Farm on the Somerset Levels, north to Oath on bank of River Parret, across the river to Aller Church, then north-west along Aller Drove to Pathe Bridge, taking footpath on the left to return along Sowy River to Oath.

Recommended Maps: Explorer 140 (Quantock) and 128 (Taunton).

Distance and going: four miles, easy going (specially when it's dry).

drained. The map says the footpath should continue in front of the farm and so we continued - though we had to duck under several electric fences in order to reach the lovely old churchyard.

After musing a while in this most peaceful of places, we found our way across to Aller Drove which took us away to the north of the village. Eventually the road crosses the Sowy River and, just on the other side we found the gate that took us onto the public footpath which, in turn, took us in a great arc back along the waterside to join the Parrett at Stathe. This is where the humble path becomes the grander River Parrett Trail and it was simply a matter of continuing along better-known right-of-way to Oath. From there we retrace our tracks to Dewlands.