



Somerset Levels

Langport to Muchelney Circular

Here's a hike which is as different and refreshing as any on this website; a walk where Rembrandt meets Constable with a bit of Renoir thrown in for good measure, a place where the English countryside seems to blend with lowland northern Europe to produce enormous, Flemish-inspired sky-scapes, dotted with churches and trees.

The vistas to be enjoyed on a stroll across the Somerset Levels are as dramatic and as beautiful as any to be found in the Westcountry, and yet most visitors on their way to our wonderful peninsula experience them only from the busy carriageways of an Atlantic-bound motorway.

So excellent and inspiring is a walk in the Wetlands that it should be a compulsory fixture on the days-out agenda of anyone who happens to live within the Westcountry. However, it might be an idea to take your Wellington boots in winter when the entire landscape is sometime flooded.

As it was the day we visited with the ITV Westcountry film crew. However, the old railway line that runs south of the town of Langport across the Levels is raised enough to remain dry - as are the built up banks of the River Parrett for the return journey.

This little four-and-a-half-mile meander is as good an introduction as any when it comes to hiking on the flat.

It's a stunningly beautiful circular walk that leads you across the moors from the Langport and Parrett Visitor Centre to the ancient hamlet of Muchelney, and back to the other side of the old trading town along the banks a lazy, winding river.

Notice that word 'moors' - it comes in useful when talking to folks in these parts. «You're not on the 'Levels' around here,» said the man who runs the bike hire place at the info centre. «The Levels cover a six-mile belt next to the coast. These are the 'Moors'.»

This is God's own cycling country - if you like pedalling rather than walking - and there are any number of intriguing routes which you can ride up and down without the tiresome notion of gradient slowing down your spokes.

But, true to the spirit of this website, we were on hoof - and easy hoofing it was too, thanks to the dead-flat path along the embankment of the aforementioned disused railway. The old Taunton to Yeovil branch-line to be exact...



Four-and-a-half miles easy going.

Visitor Centre/bike hire: 01458 250350

Muchelney Abbey: 01458 250664

Nearby, famous John Leach Pottery: 01458 250324

www.johnleachpottery.co.uk

I've done this walk both in winter and in summer and during the latter we were snowed under by flurries and drifts of butterflies. Gate-keepers, peacocks, fritillaries - you name it, the Taunton to Yeovil branch-line had it.

After a mile or two it's time to leave the line and instantly one finds oneself in deepest rural Somerset. You have been in it all the way of course, but if there's something frenetic about a dead railway mad with fluttering life, then there's something profoundly silent and Mediaeval about approaching lonely, lovely, Muchelney.

You almost expect the music of Thomas Tallis to come wafting across the moors from the ancient abbey, so enshrined in religious history does the hamlet seem. Whether it's the thatch sitting on top of just about every building bar the church, or simply the island-at-sea look of the place, Muchelney speaks of the past with the same permanent air as Stonehenge or the Acropolis.

The walls of Benedictine Abbey (run by English Heritage - open to the public seasonally) seemed unimpressed by the heat of the midday sun, having kept their occupants cool and holy for more than a 1,000 years. Men were praying inside before William the Conqueror was even a twinkle in a pair of Norman eyes. Since 950 to be precise, when King Athelsten had the place rebuilt - and some 300 years before that if you count the abbey which this replaced. Having visited the abbey once before I decided on a quick look around Muchelney Church before returning north to Langport, and have to report I was in for a bit of a shock. I knew the place had a rather famous painted ceiling, but didn't know why it had achieved acclaim. Now perhaps I do.

Inside the marvellous old church there is a mirror which has been placed on a table in the central aisle so that visitors can admire the ceiling without craning their necks.

The wood carver was what you might call a 'breast-man'. In other words the girls upstairs, or angels I suppose, are the 15th Century's answer to Page Three models. They bare not the biggest breasts in the world, nor are they the best painted bosoms I have ever seen. But breasts they certainly are and there are enough of them to convince you that the fellow was obviously obsessed.

Quite enough in fact to make you seek sanctuary, in the Sanctuary, and admire the Mediaeval tiles which adorn the floor. When these guys went shopping in Bridgwater it wasn't the cut-price big-sheds on the outskirts for them, but the chic little places selling exotica in town. Where else, back then, would you have found tiles depicting elephants? Come to that, how did the local tile-makers even know what elephants looked like?

So many puzzles in just one church. Enough to keep you pondering on the most beautiful part of the hike as you return to Langport along the west bank of the River Parrett. Bending reeds, parting to reveal herons, swans, ducks, curlews, buzzards, kingfishers and lapwing - all keep you company as you head for Somerset's answer to anything Dutch.

Having said that, Langport partly sits on a hill which, I admit isn't particularly Dutch, but it's the Flemish architecture which rears its gabled ends so frequently here, that puts one in mind of the Lowlands.

During our summer walk here the entire scene reminded us of Renoir, Constable and Rembrandt all in one - perhaps thanks to the many kids who were diving into the river. In winter, the entire place was cold and flooded, but no less beautiful for that.