



Cornwall's South East Corner

Caradon Hill Circular

Caradon Hill is one of the great cornerstones of the West-country. It rises like a great bold, bald, dome out of the soft lowlands of southeast Cornwall and does a fine job of introducing the world to the rocky rigours of Bodmin Moor.

So conspicuous are its bastions, that the hill has given its name to the local district authority. And thanks to the hill's lofty heights and its even loftier transmitter, half the West-country gets a reasonable television picture.

This hikes column has been to the village Minions before and described it as the roof of the Westcountry - but Minions is only 1,000 feet above sea-level - neighbouring Caradon, just to the south east, rises another 230 feet.

And it is around the great dome that we walk today. I approached the hill from a somewhat unusual angle - at least, I imagine I did given the number of people walking around the Minions side of things. Pensilva is a mining village through and through, and you will find it tucked just under the eastern ramparts of the hill. There's a car park near a place called Tokenbury Corner on the Liskeard-Launceston road, and that's where I stopped to gain entry to the big moor that is now public access land.

A track swings due west of this car park across the lower fringes of the moor and this I followed until I found myself above the small village and wonderfully named village of Crow's Nest. As I'd never been there before, I strolled down into what is, or was, so obviously another miner's roost, then (finding the place completely and utterly empty) sought out the footpath that leads up through the much-ravaged valley to Minions.

When I say ravaged, I mean that no other area in the region is quite so torn about, save for the mining areas around Redruth and Camborne and, perhaps, West Penwith.

In the mid-1800's, the writer Wilkie Collins described the area his book «Rambles Beyond Railways» as one of «monstrous wheels, clanking machinery, bewildering noise - steam pumps puffing and gasping and copper coloured mud and water». It's not like that now - especially not on a winter's day when the only sound at all is made by the odd raven barking.

However, as there is certainly plenty of evidence of all this industry. Just about every step of the way up the valley towards Minions, you are surrounded by the waste tips of South



Basic hike: a circumnavigation of Caradon Hill in South East Cornwall, starting at Tokenbury Corner car park near Pensilva and travelling in a clockwise direction past Crow's Nest, up to Minions and from there to the summit.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey's Explorer 109 - Bodmin Moor. Distance and going: five miles, easy going.

Caradon and West Caradon mines. Gaunt old engine houses, with weird names like Jope's, Clymo's and Holman's, haunt the place like buildings from some pre-Armageddon era.

Up to the left there's Rikard's Shaft, below Menadue. Halfway up the shallow valley there's a place called Gonamena and after that we get to Ponton's Piece. It is a fascinating place with a fascinating story to tell - so eerily empty now, and yet once so incredibly busy.

There were entire shanty-towns up here with names like Darite, Upton Cross, Common Moor - not to mention Crow's Nest and Pensilva (once known as Bodminland). Minions was originally called Cheesewring Railway (after the extraordinary rock outcrop that dominates the moors a mile north of the village) and it was the highest point and epicentre of a coppery Cornish equivalent to an American gold rush

The great temptation at Minions is to plunge north towards the Cheesewring into the great rock-strewn hinterland of south-eastern Bodmin Moor, but as we've been to see the Hurler standing stones and the celebrated rock outcrop before in this column, I took the road right past the pub and walked the mile up to the very top of Caradon Hill.

As most readers will know, it is topped by the region's biggest transmitter mast. After I asked Western Morning News readers if anyone had any details on the mast, Colin Pooley emailed me to me to say: "I have a copy of a publication called 'A Guide to Independent Television' dated 1966 (in fact, I worked on it). It gives the height above sea level of Caradon Hill as 1,211 feet and the mean height of the mast as 1,936 feet. The mast therefore is about 725 feet although they say in the text that they required a mast of 750 feet."

The wind howls most dissonantly through the mast's big securing cables. Lights were on in the buildings below, and the thought struck me that this must be one of the oddest, certainly most windswept, places to work in the entire peninsula.

Needless to say, the views from the top of the hill are spectacular - there's the whole of Dartmoor's Tamar edge to the east, bits of Plymouth nudge their way onto the skyline down to the southeast, while the big black dangerous finer of the Dodman seals the sea-borne horizon to the south west. To the northwest lie the wild a fabulous nether regions of Bodmin Moor.

Turning north from the summit I walked down across the moor to the old dismantled Minions-Liskeard railway, passing some freezing flying men as I went. They weren't flying, but they were controlling models gliders that were. It looked great fun, and they told me the flanks of Caradon are a favourite haunt for flyers of radio-controlled planes.

The old railway loops right around the eastern skirts of the hill and takes you without effort past its junction with the dismantled tramway, all the way back to the car park at Tokenbury Corner. After that it becomes the small highway that leads to Crow's Nest, but the fascinating, and highly walkable, hinterlands that lie directly beneath South East Cornwall's alpine world will have to wait for another day.