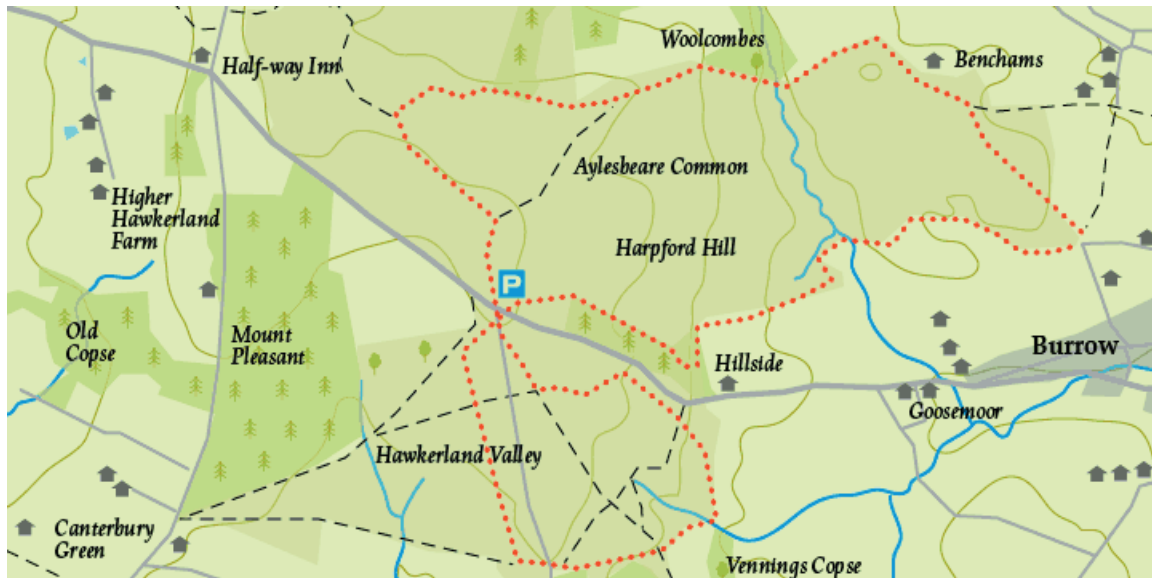




East Devon

Aylesbeare



Ever heard of the East Devon Pebble Beds? Don't worry, not many people have - but they are well worth visiting tucked away in their beautiful but strange and ancient looking corner of the kingdom.

The East Devon Pebble Beds are nationally famous due to the fact they provide a home for all sorts of rare flora and fauna - and you can find a prime example of the genre by travelling along the A3052 from Exeter towards the village of Newton Poppleford.

When you reach the Halfway Inn you will know you have entered the demesne of the elusive Dartford Warbler. This brown little fellow with a long tail is just one of the reasons why the RSPB runs a reserve at Aylesbeare Common. There are other reasons, but apart from the warblers, nightjars and stonechats, this is a rare chunk of ancient heathland that plays home to the largest number of butterfly species to be found in any RSPB reserve. Incredible really, to be just a few miles outside Exeter and into such a great swathe of nature-rich wilderness. The fields of South Devon suddenly give way to heath and somehow the countryside is reminiscent of the landscape explored by Winnie the Pooh and his friend Christopher Robin, and the other denizens of that friendly forest including all Rabbit's friends and relations.

Aylesbeare Common has that look about it and because it is well endowed with paths it is easy to embark on your own

How to get there: A3052 east from Exeter, you'll recognise the heath just before Newton Poppleford.

Basic Hike: a figure-of-eight around north and south Aylesbeare Common with a bit of Harpford Common thrown in for good measure, but you could just do the RSPB Reserve Visitor's Trail.

Recommended map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 115.

Distance and Going: Six miles for the longer hike, three for the Visitor Trail. Good level going.

exploration. Not knowing anything about the place, we started by turning our backs on the RSPB reserve and heading south from the car park towards the distant sea.

We could see its blue horizon glimmering way out past Budleigh Salterton. Having crossed the lane a footpath swung left and off we went across the heath, and after a mile or so we came to a sort of border of this magic land. But that was all right because we were able to follow another path east, back across the lane and into a particularly picturesque corner of the Common.

This is where you begin to realise how high up you are, because a valley opens up below the heath to your right, and in it is the pretty village of Newton Pophole, looking like a collection of doll's houses far below. Why Newton should be suffixed with wonderful sounding Pophole, I do not know. In fact I have very little knowledge of the place save for one rather trivial fact. And that is that long ago I interviewed a man who lived there who was responsible for setting all the questions to be found in the first editions of Trivial Pursuit. While we are meandering our way aimlessly up the eastern edge of the Common, allow me to furnish you with a few details about heathland in general. You wouldn't know it to look at them, but this is a man-made environment which has been with us since Neolithic times.

Low intensive agriculture. That's the phrase. The gist of it was (no pun intended: 'gist' also means right to graze) that the well-to-do snapped up the fertile valley land, while the poor old paupers were told they could put a few mangy cattle and sheep up on the common where nothing much would grow.

These higher areas developed a very special mix of plants, thanks to this low intensive agriculture, which in turn became the favoured home of many birds, animals and insects. Of course, modern agricultural techniques, not to mention quarrying and housing, have bitten into the heathlands causing them to shrink at an alarming rate. That's why the RSPB has a reserve, so that at least 184 hectares can remain traditionally heathy without threat. The Society takes an active role in maintaining this delicate environment by allowing non-intensive grazing and occasionally cutting back the gorse.

But we haven't reached the reserve yet, so far we've only got you back to the A3052 - so find the path that leads back up towards the car park. Make your way across the road and you will be introduced to an excellent visitor's trail around the reserve. Actually there are two - a short one and a longer one.

By following the painted posts we were able to enjoy a three mile circular tour of the more northerly corners of Aylesbeare Common, and a good deal of Harpford Common too.

As it was a mild day we were lucky enough to spot a couple of the famous Dartford Warblers - apparently they make themselves scarce when it gets cold. We didn't see, or hear, the nightjars as they were away in Africa or somewhere.

Nor did we see any of the 38 species of butterfly which have been spotted in the reserve since 1997. These, by-the-way,

include the brimstone, silver washed fritillary, grayling and silver-studded blue.

There are also 23 species of dragonflies and damselflies which merrily haunt the pools around the reserve and 450 species of plants have been recorded hereabouts.

We saw the ling heather and the bell heather, but did not examine their rarer crossed-leaved heath cousin because, to tell the truth, we couldn't find it. Nor were we able to spot the sundew, bog asphodel, dodder, heath milkwort and heath dog violets that all live hereabouts.

However, it's an excellent hike and we can happily recommend it not only because it is packed with nature, but because it is an exceedingly pleasant tract of Old England.