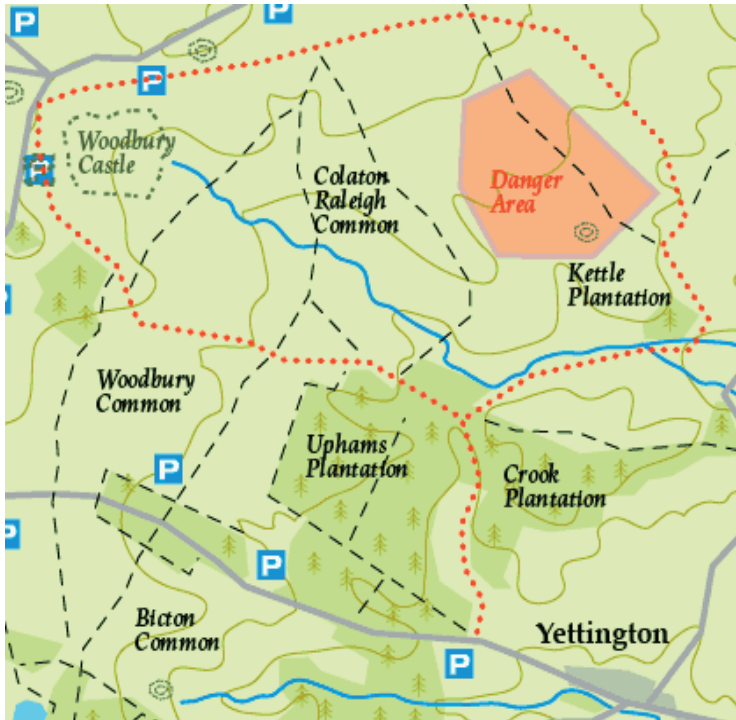




South Devon

Woodbury Common



Basic hike: up track just west of Yettington onto Woodbury Common, up to Woodbury Castle and returning via Colaton Raleigh Common.

Recommended Map: Ordnance Survey 115 Exmouth and Sidmouth.

Distance and going: four and a half miles, easy going.

Woodbury Common offers some of the finest inland walking to be found in the southeast Devon area. Paths criss-cross the various commons and it's easy to make up your own route as you go. This is an easy going stroll through the southerly limits of the area's fascinating Triassic pebblebeds - to give them their official title.

A few hundred yards east of the hamlet of Yettington, not far from East Budleigh and close to the Bicton College of Agriculture, there's a small stony track that leads up into some mysterious, alluring hills. There is somehow a sylvan and ancient feel about them. To help you find the exact start location for this walk, the map reference is SY047 859.

You'll see the lane in question on the map, running just past the B that says BICTON CP. At first it runs alongside a wood and then begins to climb. We're in a place called Crook Plantation and, all at once we leave agriculture behind.

The woods close in and we find ourselves ascending up the side of a little coombe. The climb is no more than 200 feet, but it can feel more than that in the heat of that sultry day. It's also made more tiring by the fact that the path here is made

entirely of the sort of cobbles you normally find on a beach.
The sort that roll.

At the top of the ascent we find ourselves on the verges of a vast heath. A heath of such majesty that, in the beating sun, it can look a bit like a Devonshire version of the Serengeti Plain.

This is Woodbury Common. The great empty expanse held me fascinated and I decided to carry on up the hill along the track to my left so that I could see all there was to see.

The commons around Woodbury have all sorts of areas of historical and general interest, including hill forts and the best part of 20 burial mounds. There's also Fire Beacon, which is a well-known local landmark.

The Commons are formed on Triassic pebblebeds that were once part of an area of desert that extended over the English Channel to France. Huge rivers flowed across this basin depositing layers of stone known as pebblebeds - which is undoubtedly the reason for the round stones we see on the track up to the plateau.

Apparently the area was situated on the edge of the great ice sheet of the last ice age, and so was once a place of Arctic tundra. After the ice went away the area became a huge forest and then Man arrived. He built a hill for here around 500-300 B.C. and Woodbury Castle - as it's now known - is the place which this hike meanders towards. Later in the long history of this extraordinary area, local manors were established and the land was divided into parishes. The various Lords of the Manor allowed commoners grazing right as well as permission to cut turf and take of bracken for bedding. Commoners were also able to take trees of a certain size trees for fuel.

All this went on for centuries until eventually the locals became richer and stopped using their common rights.

The Commons then fell into a kind of environmental limbo which saw the heather being overtaken by gorse. Trees also began to invade the barren uplands and, had this had been allowed to go on unchecked, one of the most valuable lowland heaths in the country would have been lost.

Fortunately, that didn't happen. The whole place is now a Site of Special Scientific Interest - the area of the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths covers all of Woodbury and the adjacent Commons. It's owned by Clinton Devon Estates and is part of the East Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

There's wide variety of different vegetation associated with dry heath, wet heath and mire, and woodland. There are 24 different species of dragonflies and damselflies and a host of butterflies, including the rare High Brown Fritillary and Silver Studded Blue. As for reptiles there are adders, grass snakes, common lizards and slow worms. 70 breeding bird species have been recorded, including the Hobby, Dartford Warbler and Nightjar.

The various commons are delightful and interesting places - and it is easy to make up your own walking route by wandering wherever you will across the airy downs. I rounded off this hike by walking east along the northern rim of Collaton

Raleigh Common before joining the footpath that took me south-east down to Kettle Plantation where I turned right on the path that took me back to the sultry coombe I mentioned earlier. Then it was simply a case of retracing my tracks to the car.