

BELSTONE TO HANGINGSTONE HILL IN THE SNOW IN APRIL 00
REPEATED IN JULY 00 IN THE SUMMER THUNDERSTORMS
START POINT GRID REFERENCE: 621938



John Skinner offered a walk on the Plymouth Ramblers Walks List for a ramble in the Okehampton firing area on Dartmoor for the 5th April 00. He had graded it as a strenuous 12 mile walk and had added a rider that it was 'not for wimps'. This had been changed as 'not for the fainthearted' on the list but those who knew John realised it might indeed be slightly heavy going.

The walk started from the car park in the hamlet of Belstone. This village is located just under two miles south east of Okehampton and is approached via the A30 trunk road by following the signs to the village and the car park.

The map on the left outlines the route taken but it should of course be used in conjunction with a 1:25000 ordnance survey map of North Dartmoor plus this write up to follow the route in detail.

As it turned out it most certainly was 'not for the fainthearted', probably a better description would have been 'only for those who are mad'. North Dartmoor had been on the receiving end of unseasonably heavy snow and as we were to find out there was at least a foot of snow up on the moors with drifts to 4 feet, and at times you didn't know you were in a drift until too late. Yes it was on the high side of strenuous and quite exhausting at times.

As the title of this description shows John put on the walk again in the summer in July 00 to enable us to see the landscape without snow. He also added a section onto the end from Cosdon Beacon by descending into the valley of the River Taw and returning up through Belstone Cleave to the car park.

Photographs and a brief description of the latter section of the summer walk are included at the end of the snow walk description.

However, despite the weather and the warning from John, 7 ramblers turned up at the Belstone car park in the village, all male, plus of course Sophie to keep us on the right track.

We were off by before 10.30 AM heading out of the village and then heading up to the moors and more or less due South.

Upon our return at just before 4PM we passed the village stocks and as you can see Eric tested them, perhaps John Skinner could have



tried them and we could have all thrown snowballs at him in thanks for the entertaining walk.

There was snow in the village and of course the depth of snow increased quickly with altitude.



Leaving the village, heading south we soon picked up the outline of the track which led up to the danger area of Okehampton Firing range between Belstone Common and the river Taw.

After passing Belstone Common just to our west, we swung off the snowy track and climbed up and over the snowy tussocks to the first of the Tors we

would pass by during the day.

The first small unnamed Tor was about 500 yards south of Higher Tor and passing it we turned south again and headed up to Oke Tor, a further half a mile south.

From time to time we met the snowdrifts and some of us ended up to our waists in snow, still it was dry snow!!

From Oke Tor we could see the outline of another army track which we followed, ploughing through some 18 inches of snow. Inevitably there was the occasional oath as someone fell into the snow or found themselves struggling to extricate a leg (or two).



With these little mishaps, we were still making good time as it was John S who was leading after all and he had planned timings to reach various landmarks.

The picture on the left was taken just after John had taken a little tumble into a drift and the snow on the main path here was now up to 2 feet at times, as my walking stick come depth gauge showed. It is quite a strange sensation to lean on the stick and to find it

disappearing up to the handle.

After the impromptu posed balancing act shown on the left, we continued on down the snowy track to the next landmark.

We followed the track as it descended into a valley and we forded the River Taw near the disused Knack Mine.



It was cold but the wind wasn't too strong and therefore the wind chill wasn't freezing us still more. We stopped by the mine for our morning refreshments. No whisky, at least none that I could smell so we weren't in survival mode... yet.

After a ten minute break we were on our way again, still climbing up and heading due south to the highest point of the walk at Hangingstone Hill, at least a mile further on.



The climb was made more difficult naturally by the thick layer of snow we were walking through. It was rather like walking up a long steepish hill practicing step aerobics en route.

From time to time we stopped to enjoy the brilliant snowy panorama all around us.

There was no link between the increasing frequency of stops and the need for rests, after all we were not wimps!

Above us and getting slowly closer was Hangingstone Hill. On a ridge to the west we could see a couple of other walkers, we were not the only ones out on the moor.

There was plenty of evidence that we were on a military range and the in the picture says no military vehicles beyond this point.



There were none to be seen today.

Yes we really are visitors to this part of the moor and only allowed here during the week in April and August when there is no live firing on the range.



Approaching 12.30 PM we reached the apex of the hill and the shelter atop of it and this was to be our lunch stop. Hangingstone Hill is just over 5 miles due south of Belstone, at an altitude of about 2000 ft and Belstone at 950 ft and we had been walking uphill for virtually the whole morning

We found the least windy side of the hut and took lunch at just over 2000 ft, it was rather colder up here than lower down, so we needed the shelter.

In the distance we could see a small group of walkers approaching from the South, carrying heavy rucksacks. They turned out to be paras on a moor exercise. As they reached us we exchanged pleasantries. One comment from us "you are paid to be here, we are here for fun" brought the typical military response "yes, you must be f..... mad too", which brings me back to my opening paragraphs.

Over lunch, John reviewed the planned route and decided it was a little dangerous to make our way across to Cranmere Pool, less than a half a mile to our west; it was boggy and there were plenty of peat holes to disappear into. Of course we all wholeheartedly agreed with his decision.

We left the hill and headed off across rough and very snowy moor heading on 025 degrees towards Wild Tor, very aptly named in the circumstances.

This Tor was about a mile from Hangingstone Hill and was about 200 ft below the hill. It was quite pleasant to have a downhill section, after the almost continuous climb up from Belstone during the morning. There was naturally an uphill section as we approached the tor but only a short section.



After the briefest of stops for the view we found the outline of the track leading us on a bearing of 025 degrees to Hound Tor a mile further on and still mainly downhill, had all our heavy uphill sections ended, some of us hoped so.

As we descended, there were once again spectacular views of the snow fields all around us, how I wished I had been wearing cross country skis, the going would have been very much easier.

We reached Hound Tor and continued on 030 degrees along the track, making our way along the thick snow carpet heading along a wide ridge leading to Little Hound Tor.

Just before Little Hound Tor we stopped to admire a snow covered Stone Circle, these are all over the moors and give the evidence of habitation thousands of years earlier. Not much signs of people today though.



After a short rest break we were off again, surely downhill now. No, John pointed to the hill a mile to the South and announced we would be going over the top of the hill, Cosdon Beacon. Another 200 feet or so to climb, wonderful!



In normal conditions a strain after 10 miles, today very strenuous and very tiring. Still we are strong non wimps, even Sophie got stuck from time to time but the only lady present was more than keeping up with us.

We arrived at the hilltop and the beacon and Cairn at Cosdon Hill where we had a well deserved break for afternoon tea.

We could see the green fields of the low ground miles north of us and the descent soon began in earnest.

We followed the snow covered path downhill to the north for a couple of hundred yards and then swung onto 330 degrees and headed down across rough scree covered ground, snow covered of course, but at least it was downhill.



We could see the fields and some of the houses at Belstone a few hundred feet below. Before reaching the village there was still a lot of work to do, after the snow fields, we had to traverse the marshy area between us and the bottom of the valley.

It was up to us to avoid the wetter sections and most of us managed this one way or the other.



I followed Sophie since she seemed to know what to do and got across relatively unscathed.

We had to drop down into a valley and more water before crossing a bridge over the Taw and then a stiff walk up a rough stone track and so into the village again.

The track was virtually snow free, very unlike the tracks up on the high moors.

After a stop to admire the stocks and think who should be in them we were back to the cars in the car park.

Thanks all round and to John in particular for giving us such an exhilarating day and we were on our way back to Plymouth some 25 to 30 miles to the South of Belstone.

As we drove south the Tors were snow free, we had experienced some very snowy ones.

Finally why no pictures of Sophie, there is one here, Sophie is John's dog who always comes on walks with him to keep him on the straight and narrow.

If you look carefully at the fourth picture Sophie can just be seen on the path watching John demonstrating how not to fall in the snow.

THE SUMMER VARIANT OF THE WALK

Although July it wasn't a sunny day but one with ominous thunder clouds around. Whilst we were up on Hangingstone Hill we could see a huge thundercloud over Fernworthy Forest only a mile or so away. We could see the lightning and hear the thunder and the black clouds looked really ominous. Luckily for us the thunderstorm remained about a mile from us for most of the walk.

The following photographs give the non snow view of the walk to Hangingstone Hill and Cosden Beacon with a separate map showing the route back viw Belstone Cleave.



Belstone Cleave and the green valley of the River Taw below Belstone.

Oke Tor, the first Tor we visited.



A view down the valley, which was once considered as the site for a large reservoir, flanked by Belstone Common to the left and Corndon Hill to the right.

Crossing the River Taw at the Knack Mine Ford



Reaching the top of Hangingstone Hill at just about 2000 ft, wonder why it is so called, it is one of the highest points on Dartmoor.

Looking across from Hangingstone Hill to Fernworthy where the sky was black and thunder and lightning abounded.



A cairn on the route from Hangingstone Hill to Wild Tor.

Wild Tor, is in fact a collection of large granite outcrops, many of them larger than other Tors with only one outcrop.



At the top of Cosden Beacon, which is a very large broad hill with good views in all directions.

The route we took from Cosden Beacon back to Belstone is shown below.

As can be seen we descended the hill towards the valley bottom and eventually found the path to the river Taw. We then made our way along the left side of the Taw before crossing to the right side and continuing up and along until we reached Belstone.