

CHALLACOMBE DOWN AND HEATHERCOMBE FROM BENNETS CROSS START POINT: BENNETS CROSS CAR PARK 682 818

The day of the walk proved a real reminder that Winter is with us up on Dartmoor in December. The walk was on 12 Dec 99, scheduled to start at 10.00 AM and was led by an experienced moorland walker, Ivan Meads. The start point for the walk was a car park high up on the moor at a place called Bennet's Cross, about three miles north east of Postbridge on the Mortonhampstead road.



At about 9.45 AM, there were fourteen of us sitting in our cars in the car park, waiting hopefully for the hailstorm and snow flurries driven along on a 30 knt NW wind to ease. 10 AM came and we held for ten minutes in the hope the conditions would ease. It appeared to be doing so and we emerged from the relative warmth of the vehicles, to be blasted by the cold wind and hail. Nevertheless, we decided to go for it and we were off heading south west down a relatively well defined path down off the high moor towards Challacombe Down, about 2 miles south.

We left the very exposed car park and headed down towards the side of a wooded area about 1.5m to the south west and down in a valley. Although it was still hailing, we were out of the wind and it felt almost mild compared with the temperature in the car park.



The wind was on our backs and so going was relatively easy. After a few minutes the hail stopped and there was some weak sunshine.

The path we were following was by this time a free flowing stream, the pools had become somewhat deeper than they had been an hour ago. Luckily, there were no major rivers to cross on this walk but lots of very wet paths to walk along.



Ivan was setting quite a quick pace to warm us up and to get down to the shelter of the Challacombe valley below.

The wooded area was getting ever closer as we descended.

All around us there was evidence of the tin mining, which had been a major industry in the area until the late 30s.



We walked right by the site of the ruined buildings of the Gordon Dagger mine, with the open cast worked out seams around us. We were soon down in the Challacombe valley and we turned north east and stopped just before Challacombe Farm for the morning coffee break.

The respite from the hail was soon gone and we were walking north up a valley towards a farm house at the top of the valley, with the hail now in our faces.

En route to a farmhouse, called Headland Warren Farm, we disturbed a lone heron, which flew ahead of us and then landed by a brook on two or three times before giving up and flying away from us.



It was not the only bird around. Guarding the farm were a flock of geese and they adopted good threatening postures as we passed by the farm.

Leaving the farm, we had a short stiff uphill section, heading north east to a road. This was the only steep uphill section of the morning, and then only for a couple of hundred yards.

Above us stood Hookney Tor, looking quite menacing against the grey sky.



We left the road and followed the contour around the Tor as we swung south easterly around it.

We could see the outline of a very large pound ahead of us. Ivan told me that this was one of the largest prehistoric pounds to be found on

The place is known as Grimspound and the lower photograph shows the relative size of the surrounding wall.



Inside we could see lots of evidence of the ruins of the rough granite buildings which were in the pound.

Dartmoor.

We made our way straight towards it and entered this mystical and mysterious place.



After a mile of walking south east, we left the path and entered a wood and headed due north through the trees, until we emerged after half a mile at Heathercombe.



Heathercombe is a small hamlet out in the wilds with a cluster of beautiful thatched houses, the one in the picture is North Heathercombe House. We passed by the house and the path took us north into a wood where we had a good sheltered spot to stop for lunch under the trees.

After lunch we followed the path through the wood and emerged into some fields, yes, low enough for cultivated land.

We walked north, passing Kendon Farm and Lower Hookner Farm. The footpaths had been very recently diverted away from the farm buildings and there were some very unusual stiles. One even had an unusual dog flap.



As the picture shows, the rain had done nothing to dampen the sense of fun of the group and Fran, Joan and John enjoyed the posing opportunity one of the stiles offered.

Leaving the farms, we swung west through plenty of mud in the relatively low lying fields until we reached a small stream, easy to ford despite the prolonged rain.

Outside West Combe Farm they had preserved an old water wheel.

Leaving the farm we headed south west and up a very steep track/road out of the farm.

It was so steep that to improve the grip for the vehicles getting to and from the farm the twin tracks had been gouged across the concrete. Even with that, it was still slippery and I can imagine the occupants of the farm must be very used to being iced up in the depths of the winter.



Although we had passed many water wheel pits, this was the first actual wheel which I had seen up on Dartmoor.

Now the physical exercise really began in earnest. Ivan had promised us a steep climb after lunch had he was as good as his word.



After a quarter of a mile or so, the steep incline was behind us and we were now left with a steady uphill climb, still heading south west uphill for a mile or more.

As we continued to climb we passed Kings Tor on our left and a strange looking reservoir, just off the path; it was quite small and I guess it served the houses below in the valley.



After a mile or so of steady climbing and a few stops to gather breath, we eventually came to the crest of the hill and the full force of the wind and hail was once again felt. Only a mile or so to go following the Two Moors Way virtually due west.

Again going was quite quick after the uphill section as we skirted Birch Tor due south of us. We could see the Mortonhamstead Road to our right and the end of the walk was very definitely in sight.



We headed downhill for the last section passing the cross, Bennets' Cross, which gave the car park its name.

The cars were still there and most, just about started in the cold conditions.

We had been walking for about four and a half miles and had covered between 9 and 10 miles.

We were soon heading our way back down to Plymouth but for some strange reason the car kept wanting to stop by pubs. We had gathered two extra for the return trip and in the end we gave in to the demands of the car to stop and called in to the pub at Two Bridges for a seat by a roaring log fire for a touch of the amber nectar, well white and red wine for some.

Suitably warmed and refreshed, we returned to Plymouth at nightfall at just gone 4 PM.

Another good walk, thanks Ivan, perhaps it could be repeated in the warmth of the summer to get more of a chance to view the beauty of the high moors, than we had today with the slightly inclement conditions.