

TAVY CLEAVE AND DARTMOOR SNOWFIELDS
START POINT LANE END CAR PARK GRID REF SX 537824

Pat Milton had planned an 8 to 9 mile walk up through Tavy Cleave, along the Rattlebrook valley up to Bleak House returning via Chat, Sharp, Hare, Ger and Nat Tor. It was graded as moderate to strenuous and listening to those who reccied the walk, a week earlier in dry and relatively benign conditions, it merited that grading.

During the week leading up to the walk on Sunday 26th February 06, Dartmoor weather had turned to arctic conditions with snow falling from Tuesday onwards. Hopefully the cold snap would have gone by the weekend but in the event that was not to be the case.

Reports that up to 12 inches of snow had fallen on the high moors were received but nothing like that at the lower levels. The problem I thought we would have was getting along the minor roads to the start point up at Lane End, near to Tavy Cleave. As it turned out, the lanes were almost clear of snow and getting to the start was not a problem. There was a small amount of snow in the car park but really very little. The 11 of us who arrived at the start were lulled into the feeling that perhaps there wouldn't be very much snow on the walk and it would be hard but not that difficult.



The route of that we took is shown above. We didn't reach Bleak House, read on to find out why. If you want to follow the route in detail you are advised to have at your side a 1:25000 OS map of Dartmoor. The only way to really appreciate the walk of course was to have been there yourselves.



We set off as we have done many times before by following the track from the car park heading diagonally up to reach the Mine Leat (as it is named on OS maps).

There was maybe three inches of snow in places but much of it blown away.

We soon reached the leat and followed it as it swung north to enter the majestic Tavy Cleave.

We kept to the river side of the leat where there is a relatively good path leading into the cleave and soon we were enjoying views of Nat Tor and Ger Tor off to our left and Standon Hill, looking fairly snowy on our right. The Tavy itself was surprisingly low for the time of year, there was plenty of water in the leat however and it was certainly flowing fast.

After about a kilometre of easy leatside walking we reached the leat take off point from the Tavy under Ger Tor which towered above us.

Beyond the take off point the path along the Cleave deteriorates and we knew it would vary from easy walking, to bog hopping to rock scrambling for significant periods for the remaining 1500 metre section of the Cleave, until we reached the Rattlebrook foot where it merged in with the Tavy.



So it proved to be, it was increasingly hard going as we progressed up through the Cleave, in places virtually in the river and at other time a few metres above it.

As we made our way up through the snaking Cleave, the amount of laying snow increased a little but luckily most of the rocks we had to scramble over were not snow covered, the gaps between them were however and there was much judicious prodding with trekking poles to make sure the going was as safe as we could make it in the circumstances.



We passed under Tavy Sharp and then Tavy Tors and by the lovely Tavy pools which in the high summer we had sat besides, watching people swimming and relaxing there.

As you can see from the photograph to the left it was fairly quiet there on a Sunday in

February. The only animals you might see there enjoying the waters would probably be of the polar bear genus.

In fact apart from one or two sheep, the whole area was completely devoid of livestock.

Obviously the moorland farmers take the animals to lower pastures during the winter months.

Seventy five minutes after leaving the car park we approached the Rattlebrook and Watern Oke beyond looked ominously white, perhaps there really was a fair amount of snow on the higher ground. We had been relatively sheltered in the Cleave and the wind chill was minimal down beside the Tavy.



When we reached the Rattlebrook, we turned north and headed up it until we found a relatively sheltered spot where we enjoyed our morning coffee and watched the first of many runners running down hill from Watern Oke approaching the Tavy Cleave. Was it really their intention to run down through the Cleave, good luck to them!!

After morning coffee Pat told me that she would be walking up through part of Dead Lake rather than staying relatively near to the Rattlebrook up to Bleak House as she had been told that the going was difficult close to the Rattlebrook.

Accordingly, we swung left and climbed up away from the Rattlebrook, up though Dead Lake and its mines. As we left the shelter of the Cleave so we began to feel the full force of the North Easterly wind and we soon found ourselves walking in up to a foot of snow or more, as I soon found out to my cost. As we climbed I crossed pristine snow, only to find that the pristine snow had filled a four feet deep or more mini gully.



From walking across snow, I suddenly found myself up to my waist in snow, ever had that sinking feeling? Getting out was quite difficult, I ended up laying on my front and thrashing around to literally pull myself out. I decided not to wait for members of the group to get their cameras out to record the moment!! No harm done but a salutary warning

to test every step for depth of snow.

I might have been the first to have had a snow bath but as it turned out I certainly wasn't the last. There were tumbles a plenty during this section of the walk.

A little further on from my escapade, we swung right to find the Dartmoor Path that would lead us down towards the Scad and the Rattlebrook. Our new direction caused a couple of problems, firstly we were now heading directly into the teeth of the thirty knot or more east north east wind from the Arctic and secondly we had some small mining gerts to cross, normally no problems but with the north side of the gert now a vertical wall of snow it made an interesting little ascent.

Luckily Martin had used his body to make the semblance of steps and with some little luck we all managed to reach the other side and into the deep, snow covered tussocks. After a few hundred metres of extremely difficult terrain with the snow and the wind, we were able to see Bleak House, about 1500 metres to the north of us across very exposed, tussocky and snow covered terrain.

With the 11 members of the group getting very spread out, all cold and and some tired, it became obvious that perhaps it might be sensible to cut the walk short before hypothermia took hold and make our way back onto the ridge and to a



track back to Hare Tor where the walking might be a little easier and consequently safer.

Consequently we turned our back on Bleak House and ploughed uphill heading east attempting to locate the track which links Chat Tor to Hare Tor.

It was far from obvious across with this difficult mix and tussocks, dips, rocks and other little difficulties which caused our " *snow falls*" to continue at a predictable rate.

One advantage was that the wind was now behind us.



After 500 metres of climbing, sinking and toppling across the 12 inch deep snow, and much deeper infills we could see Sharp Tor and then "the path" appeared in front of us.

No more snow covered tussocks and much of

the snow had blown away from the track.

We made relatively good progress along this ridge path heading south west, helped by the wind, and after 750 metres we reached the very large Hare Tor. We made our way up towards the Tor, the dark clouds slid away and the sun came out.

After what we had been through before, this section really was a relative stroll in the park!

We could see Sharp Tor, Brae Tor and Doe Tor looking back, bathed in cool winter sunshine. Maybe the temperature rose a degree, our spirits certainly did.

Once on the southwestern side of Hare Tor we were, relatively speaking, out of the wind, and the snow, wind carved contours were smooth and very attractive to see.

Luckily for most of the lunch break the sun remained out giving us the sight of blue sky, if not any real significant increase in temperature.



We could see Little Hare Tor not far below us to the west and Ger Tor and many others to the south.

Although we were out of the wind, compared with sitting on the north side of the tor, there were some entertaining gusts which picked up loose objects and deposited them many metres (or more) away.

Having had lunch and recovered some of the articles that were blown away, we were on our way again.



The descent from Hare Tor, heading south, was quite difficult, picking our way precariously

down snow covered scree as we descended down to get on the track linking across to Ger Tor.

More than once we found out to our cost that the smooth snow gave variable depth conditions and once the surface was broken, it could be up to a metre or so of snow until terra firma was reached.

Once on the track, again it was relatively easy going with the wind on our quarter as we made our way across to Ger Tor. From high above Tavy Cleave, near the summit of Ger Tor, the views of the Cleave were superb although the wind was really howling across this exposed local high spot.

A couple of minutes to enjoy the views and we were on our way again heading downhill, along barely discernable tracks heading for a Tor I had never visited before, Nat Tor.

I had walked under it many times but never been up to it.



It is one of the many low level tors on the moor but from the top there are some nice views looking up into Tavy Cleave. It is certainly dwarfed by the huge Standon Hill dome just across the Tavy.

From Nat Tor, we descended to Mine Leat, ignored the temptation to cross it, to walk along an easy path below the leat. Instead we walked along the upper side of the leat with various bogs, rocks and depressions to negotiate.

We were well used to that by now!



When we came to the first clapper over the leat we crossed it and descended more or less in a straight line across easy going downland moor back to the car.

11 of us had started the walk and we had all arrived back. One thing about falling in snow is that generally it is a soft landing,

providing the rocks are avoided.

On the day, we think we made the right decision in cutting the walk short, it would indeed have been seriously hard going against the wind and the incredible degree of wind chill, across the snow filled tussocks up to Bleak House.

It will be nice to repeat the walk on a nice Summers Day when we can see the paths and the various navigation points and compare it with our survival expedition of February 2006.

Thanks Pat, it is good to have a testing walk now and again and I normally manage to have one whenever we walk with you !! I always have some personal event to remember, either on coastal walks, falling off the edge of a path or in this case disappearing up to my waist in snow.