

POSTBRIDGE TO FERNWORTHY VIA GREY WETHERS

START GRID REF: 647 789

In the year 2000 we have had two circular walks from Postbridge to Fernworthy Reservoir. The first circular walk on Wednesday 19th Jan 2000 was from Postbridge National Trust Car Park to Fernworthy Reservoir. The first walk was led by John Skinner, a very experienced Dartmoor walker and walks leader and was graded as a strenuous walk, at times, of 12 miles. There were 13 walkers in all.

The second venture out was on Sunday 23rd April 2000 and it was graded as a moderate walk. The walk was led by Margaret Hancock, very experienced on Dartmoor, ably assisted by Karen as joint leaders. The distance was of the order of 12 to 13 miles and it attracted over 20 walkers. As the two routes shown on the map below clearly show, the Sunday walk was for once longer than the more strenuous Wednesday walk.

The red dotted line shows the April route as as can be clearly seen followed the same initial route as the January walk for the first two miles.



Using this outline together with the OS 1:25000 map of Dartmoor and the description below you should be able to get a good overview of the routes taken.

Both walks were full of interest and involved very varied walking. The longer one took place after three weeks of rain virtually every day in April and Dartmoor and areas of the walk were decidedly wet and muddy. It was less strenuous however because it followed the direct steady uphill walking route to Grey Wethers. It returned by looping down near the Warren House Inn and across the main road to the Soussons Down Forest land thereby avoiding the very steep climb from the East Dart up to Sittaford Tor and the equally demanding although less steep climb up to the top of Assycombe Hill which gave the first walk its strenuous in places grading.

On both days the trip to the car park was in some mist on the high moors and heavy showers but again on both days the rain stopped and the skies cleared by the time the walks started.

Both were excellent days for walking with little wind, temperatures between 10 and 13 degrees and good visibility.



The photograph above of the Wednesday group was taken at the end of Fernworthy reservoir and includes all but those who got slightly behind as we made our way around this remote but accessible by car South West Water Reservoir.

Both walks started from the Postbridge main car park, both times there was another guided walk starting led by one of the Dartmoor National Park's contracted leaders.



At 10 AM John gave his customary briefing and we were off. Margaret's walk started later at 10.30 AM and there were plenty of other people around as we set off

We left the car park and followed the road through Postbridge and over the bridge, not the old footbridge shown below but the much newer vehicle carrying

bridge just upstream of the old bridge.

Having crossed over the East Dart River we turned left and followed a track for three hundred yards before turning left and making our way down to the river.

This whole section, keeping to the edge of the open area, was very muddy indeed and on the April walk, Helen who had come out to try her ankle again after the break in February wisely decided that enough was enough as we ploughed through the mud.



It was interesting to note that whilst we were ploughing around the edge, following the approved route, others were cutting diagonally across the field across relatively dry ground to the gate in the corner down by the river.

We eventually reached the gate and turned right through the gate. After passing the gate we were soon walking close to the east Dart on the eastern bank of the river. Very unusual on Dartmoor down near the river we passed by a small bamboo plantation, bamboos up on Dartmoor, climatic changes are here, obviously.

We followed the path of the river upstream for a mile and then gradually moved further away from the marshy ground close to the river slightly higher up the side of the valley.



The area was very boggy in places and the path had several deviations to avoid the wetter areas, particularly so on the second walk when it was very wet indeed underfoot. It really was a case of finding a path through the marshy ground rather than following any distinct path.

Having made our way through the first boggy areas we made our way through a gate in a dry stone wall and continued on roughly parallel to the East Dart. Ahead of us we could see a brook running down to the East Dart. In January we had experienced no difficulty with fording the brook, there were problems in doing so in April after the rains however with some assistance needed to make sure that no one fell in.

The area around the brook was obviously some form of old open cast mining area and there was plenty of evidence of the mining in the vicinity.

On the uphill side of the brook was an old, now collapsed, beehive style mining hut, shown in the picture on the right.



So far the uphill section had been relatively easy going, despite the wetness of the ground and the mud. With the next section that certainly changed for both walks. The river swung left and its direction upstream changed from North to East.

It was at this point that the two walks diverted. On the blue walk (Johns), we followed a path following the river, climbed over a stile over a wall and then immediately turned almost due north up a very steep and rough hillside.

With the red route we carried on up the hillside heading more or less north, we soon found that this route would lead us through a mini bowl with plenty of bog to test our navigational skills.

The blue route deviation will be covered first.

It led us up out of the valley, very steeply for a half a mile, following a dry stone wall on our right. This section certainly tested the legs and the lungs of the group and we naturally became quite spread out as the leader and a couple of others demonstrated that some were fitter than others!



After the half a mile of very steep walking, the climb settled down to a more moderate one but continued for a further mile uphill, all the time getting ever closer to the Tor which marked the local high point.

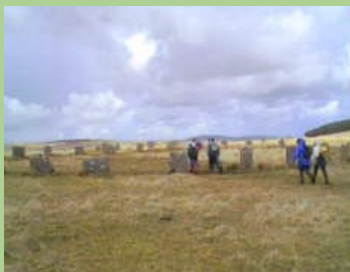
We were heading up to Sittaford Tor shown on the OS map as 538 metres high. We had just climbed from 400 metres, an ascent of getting on for 500 feet in 'old money'. It is good for the soul I am told! A quick stop at the top to allow us to regroup and we were off again, over a stile and now descending on a bearing of about 75 degrees.

As we descended down to the valley below we passed The Grey Wethers on our right about two hundred yards away. This is the name given to two old stone circles.

There are many such individual circles on Dartmoor, On the January walk we kept to the right of the dry stone wall until we came to a gate .

The two routes rejoined at this point.

The Red Route Variant to Grey Wethers



We continued up the hill, through the boggy bowl and just beyond that we stopped for a break. Soon on our way again we continued to walk north along a well defined path, although rising all the time, it was an easy climb and after a mile we could see the magnificent Grey Wethers Stone circles ahead of us.

This is quite unusual in that there are two next to each other and that they are very well preserved.

In the photograph you can clearly see the first bigger stone circle with the smaller one just beyond.

It certainly is one of the best stone circle examples I've seen and well worth a visit in its own right.

In the distance we could see Fernworthy Forest.

A couple of hundred yards beyond the stone circles the two routes recombined by the gate leading through yet another dry stone wall.

Through the gate we followed the well defined track which led us for a half a mile to the edge of Fernworthy Forest. As we walked, just across the valley we could see an old copse and some old now ruined buildings. This was Teignhead Farm and for the blue walk was to be the lunch break spot.



In the photograph on the right the path leading to the forest in the distance can clearly be seen and with the much less boggy ground the walking was reasonably quick.



Both routes took us to the side of the forest and again for both routes we came to a wide gate leading into the forest itself.

As can be seen from the map on the red route we turned into the forest at this point and headed across towards the reservoir

The walk through the forest is along a rough stony track first up a reasonable hill and then over the brow and down towards the reservoir.

Not so with the blue route.

The aim there was to add in a little spur to visit Teignhead farm and to take lunch by the derelict farm. we turned down into the valley below and could see a brook ahead that we had to cross.

Long ago the local farmer must have had the same problem and we could see an old stone bridge over the stream to make the crossing easy.

We swung left made our way down and across an old clapper bridge and followed the track up to the farm.

Across this substantial clapper bridge it was only a short walk along a clearly defined track until we reached the ruins of the derelict Teignhead Farm set amongst the small copse.



It never ceases to amaze me that farmers would live out here in the wilds of the moors with no obvious farm track back to civilisation. I also wondered when the area stopped being farmed and indeed why.



We settled down for our short lunch break enjoying the weak rays of the winter sun just by the entrance to the farm.

After 15 minutes we made our way back across the bridge and retraced our steps back to the gate leading into the Fernworthy Forest and the reservoir beyond.

we were soon entering a very well defined track which took us into Fernworthy Forest.

For this section through the forest the two routes recombined until we came to a road junction with the reservoir below and ahead.

I was surprised at how large this forest plantation was.



The map shows it is a fairly large area but it is not until you walk through it that you really realise just how large the forest actually is.

We followed the track up over a hill and then down again for at least a mile with pine trees everywhere. In a small clearing there was yet another small stone circle to our left but much less conspicuous than the Grey Wethers circle.

The forest is at least two miles from north to south and we were crossing it at its narrowest east west point.

As we dropped down we had our first glimpse of the Fernworthy Reservoir below us.

Down by the road, the two routes diverted for the last time, the blue route taking us around the north of the reservoir and the red route to the south side of this beautiful reservoir and bird sanctuary.

Blue Route Back to Postbridge.

We turned left through a gate welcoming walkers but not horses and cyclists and made our way along the northern side of the reservoir towards the dam at the eastern end.



On such a still day the tranquility of the area was splendid.

The lake is about a mile long but only two or three hundred yards wide at its widest point.

The group once again got well spread out as some stopped to take in the views whilst others pressed on.

We were soon at the dam at the eastern end where we waited for a few minutes for the 13 of us to regroup.

We made our way down to the bottom of the dam up the other side and then had the return to Postbridge across open moorland. Although we had done a good deal of uphill walking in reaching Fernworthy, it certainly wasn't all downhill from here in getting back to Postbridge for either of the walks.



We left the plantation turned due south and were faced with a 2 mile uphill moderate climb across rough moorland to the top of Assycombe Hill at just under 500 metres. The rough moorland and the long uphill section again tested our fitness and we stopped at the high point for a well earned afternoon tea break to recover from our exertions.

The final downhill section was ahead of us, about two and a half miles away on a bearing of 210 degrees was Postbridge.

We made our way down and through some boggy areas until we reached a farm.

Turning right through the farm and left at the bottom of the lane, we soon saw the road bridge at Postbridge ahead of us.



As predicted by John, we were back at Postbridge before 4PM, just under 6 hrs after leaving it.

We had indeed covered just under 12 miles and had enjoyed an excellent days walking across some quite rough moorland in places. With the variation of moorland, forest and reservoir the views were varied and spectacular in places.

Thanks were given to John for his efforts and we were on our way back to Plymouth to reflect on the day.

Red Route Back to Postbridge

The remainder of this describes the route we took from the point the group saw the reservoir in Fernworthy Forest where the path through the wood emerges out onto the narrow road.

We turned right by the road and walked along it for a while until we saw a footpath sign taking us off the road and down closer to the reservoir itself.

Naturally the depth of the mud increased as we neared the reservoir. However with bridges over the low lying inlets and easy to follow paths, before long we had arrived at our lunch point at the Fernworthy picnic area / information centre. With access to this point from Chagford and the main road, there were many people out in their cars enjoying short walks around the reservoir.



With access for people so easy there were excellent toilets and of course ice cream vans and a range of picnic tables with very good views across the lake.

We had our lunch break with the unusual benefit of eating at a table before a visit to a proper toilet, civilisation is spoiling us.



After a half an hour break we made our way out past the toilet block up to the road where we turned left and made our way along to the edge of the forest.

Just beyond the forest there was a signpost indicating the route to Chagford some miles away.

At this point we swung right and headed onto rough moorland once again, trying to avoid the worst of the

churned mud near the road.

The map shows that the two routes briefly touched just beyond this point but not for long.

With the red route we soon headed off on an approximate bearing of 170 degrees to near a stone row we could just see on the skyline, and then on to just above Warren House Inn some 2 miles south of Fernworthy.

Once again we couldn't take a straight line path up the hill to the top because of the marshy areas so we made our way up, taking many minor diversions to avoid the worst of the wetter areas.

It was a steady climb up to just west of the stone row and then on to the top of the hill at about a height of 450 m, just above Warren House Inn on the main Mortonhampstead Road immediately below.

Fran's new GPS came into it's own on this cross country trek across the relatively featureless terrain we were walking as she strode on straight to the plotted in waymark. I offered to exchange my own Magellan for her newer Garmin but strangely she refused the offer!!!

These systems certainly are very reassuring to have up on Dartmoor but only when you have someone like Fran who knows how to use it.

I'm saying no more but I've decided I must read my own instruction manual more carefully.

Just before the inn there was a narrow steep gully which took us down to the road. We picked our way down the steepish descent down the gully to just above the road with an overspill car park for the pub ahead of us.



We crossed the main road and followed a clear but windy track for just under half a mile east down to into a valley and a stream below.

We crossed the stream over another clapper bridge and swung south and followed a clear wide track, somewhat wet in places, down towards a large forested area below us.

Just under a half a mile further on down the valley we left the main path and swung right up towards the wooded area. ahead.

We had an impromptu afternoon break and then followed the track up and into the woods, now heading more south west as we made our way uphill again into the woods called Soussons Down.

On this track we were forced off into the woods at times as the path became at least a 6 inch deep mud bath.



There were many criss crossing tracks through the woods but we generally tried to maintain our direction south west through the woods and down to the opposite corner of the downs.

It wouldn't have mattered had we swung more left as we would have still emerged on a road just earlier than we would have wished.

The leadership team got it spot on again, showing great navigational mastery through the woods and we emerged just on the road before Runnage Bridge.

We followed the road generally uphill heading north west for about half a mile until we saw a footpath sign down through a farm heading more or less west passing Lower Merripit.

Ivor hit major reminiscing time at this point as he had delivered papers to houses all round here a mere 50 years earlier as a boy living in Princetown, you know he hasn't changed one bit over the years!!!! Why no pictures of this last section, easy I had used all the available pictures and hadn't brought the second storage chip for the digital camera.

As we followed the lane back to the main road we swung left following a footpath sign upto the local cemetery, there was no sign of the church however. Passing the cemetery we continued along a permitted path which brought us down to the East Dart again.



We followed the track, muddy naturally along the side of the river up to the old 13th century bridge magnificent clapper bridge. Over the bridge it was but a few yards back to the main road and across it to the packed car park on the other side.

Yes since it was Easter Sunday the crowds were really out.

It was gone 4.30 PM when we arrived back at the cars and we had been out on the moors for a good six hours with some reasonably paced walking along the way, Margaret and Karen are no slouches.

It was certainly a good 12 to 13 mile walk and a most interesting one to boot. We passed on our thanks once again for their organisation, planning and leadership and we were on our way back to Plymouth, feeling tired but contented that we had seen yet more new sections of the moor.