

## **AROUND CROWNHILL DOWN, SOUTH OF LEE MOOR START POINT: WHITEHILL TOR CAR PARK GRID REF: 576616**

Crownhill Down lies just below the southern boundary of the Dartmoor National Park. It sits in the middle of a number of clay pits, with Headon Down Clay Pits to the East of it, Lee Moor to the north and a large clay processing plant to the west.

Part of it could well end up as yet another clay pit working before too long as the mining companies seek to exercise their rights to mine on the down.

On 21st March 03, I reccied the area with another Rambler, to see what the down was like before access to it is lost to the mining companies, if they get their way.

The loop I walked round the down was of the order of 6 miles.



An outline of the route I walked is given above and as can be seen from the map I effectively walked right round the area of the down. To best appreciate the route the outlined should be followed in conjunction with a 1:25000 map of the area such as the OS map no 28 of Dartmoor.



We parked in the large car park close to the main road linking Cornwood to Shaugh Prior about a mile west of Wotter. Leaving the car park we made our way along the side of the main road, off the road though as there is a wide swathe of grass to walk along.

After a short distance, no more than 100 metres from the car park we turned left and walked up to the first of two Tors we would visit on the walk. Whitehill Tor afforded great views down across valleys to the large man made lakes and beyond.

We made our way back to the road and followed the wide green verge for another 100 metres or so until we came to a road turning off the main road which led down to a large clay processing area.

Once across this road we endeavoured to locate a public footpath clearly shown on the map. No signpost here to indicate where it started. As I have found out, in this clay mining area there are quite a number of unsigned paths.

We found a track, in fact there are quite a few and followed it along roughly parallel to but below the main road. We were just above a terrace of houses sitting quite alone, nothing but an access road to them.

We speculated that these must have been built as cottages for the mine workers, there are two hamlets just to the north where there are rather more houses, Lee Moor and Wotter.



Just beyond the cottages there were steps set into a granite blocked wall which gave us access into the woods just beyond.

The footpath runs through these woods, parallel to the road above but finding the path was pure guesswork. We found a sort of track and followed it, looking for another public right of way which ran down to the clay processing plant down the hill.



Once again there was no signpost to be seen, neither was there any sign of a track running down. I had pre entered the grid reference of the theoretical location of the junction between the two footpaths into my GPS and when I reached this point, as indicated on the GPS, I headed down through the woods towards the tanks and

processing plant below. I assume I was somewhere near the PROW and I emerged at about the right point, I think!!

We reached a road running down through the plant, no footpath signs but our map indicated that we were on a public right of way so we followed it. Evidently the company operating this plant didn't feel it incumbent upon themselves to give directions for walkers through their premises.

About a mile down the road at Headon Mine the company operating it has given very clear guidance indeed; a different company policy there, obviously.

I was surprised that there was no signpost anywhere there as I thought there was a legal requirement on the part of the local councils to sign public rights of way from roads. Not in this area evidently.



Before long we emerged on the public road again.

There were quite a few large lorries carrying clay and other materials along this road and we were pleased that we could walk along the grass verges and so keep off the road for most of the time.

We made out way along the side of the road, with man made pools just off to the left and a huge dam further off to our left with a white lake just obscured above us. We had seen it clearly from Whitehill Tor at the start of the walk so we knew it was there.



We then made our way up hill for a few hundred metres between some woods and at the top of the hill just where the road swung to the right we were at the start of Crownhill Down. There were four bridleways ahead of us going in four different directions across Crownhill Down and each clearly signposted. What was lacking nearer the works was

certainly compensated for here.

We went through a gate onto the down and took the rightmost bridleway of the four, this one I happened to know from my footpath audit work was Shaugh Prior bridleway no 61.

It might once have been a clear down area but now Crownhill Down seemed to have masses of large ugly gorse bushes gradually taking over the whole of the down.

Following the bridleway was almost impossible, it was a case of knowing the general direction the bridleway was heading in and following that using a compass or GPS. I had chosen to take this path since I was planning to skirt the edge of the down to get a feeling for the size of the down.



The bridleway we were on headed due south for about 0.75 km before emerging again onto the B3417, cutting off the large loop in the B road. Nearer the southern end of the prow the gorse grew in even greater profusion and finding the end of the track was quite difficult.

As we got to the road though just a few yards further along we found the clear bridleway sign from the road, pointing directly into a mass of gorse bushes.

I now wanted to make my way across to the start of the second of the three bridleways, this time to the southern end of it.



To reach this point we had to go uphill trying to find a way through the very large and invasive gorse bushes. We meandered our way uphill on about 160 degrees until we could see the top of an old chimney which I knew the path ran by.

Less than half a kilometre from the end of the first bridleway we located a gate and a white lane which took us off the down and onto a country road.

We followed the track along to have a look at the old chimney, now completely overgrown with ivy.

The lane we were following was very muddy indeed and even after a good dry spell it was just about hard enough mud to get through, I could well imagine that in wet conditions this track would be a complete quagmire.

Having seen the chimney, we didn't go down to the road to see if there was a signpost to the path but retraced our steps back through the gate and onto the gorse plagued Crownhill Down once more.

We were carrying out a perambulation of the down and we walked uphill with the a wall boundary to our right with fields beyond that.

After about 300 metres the track swung off to the right and we went through a gate and stile and down a rough track to a small hamlet called Drakeland Corner. Looking across the valley we could see the old buildings of Hemerdon Mine workings, not clay pits this one but an unusual mineral which was once mined there.



Sure enough down at the bottom of the track there was a clear signpost indicated the bridleway which runs for 1.5 km NNW right across Crownhill Down to the point where we had first left the road to go onto the down.

Continuing our perambulation, we headed north up a track climbing up onto one of the highest points of Crownhill Down.



We kept to the down, hardly any gorse in this area with the large Headon Clay pit workings just off to the right side of the track.

As we made our way up to the high points we had excellent views of the area and the clay pit workings and plant which abounds here.

Headon Mine pit is a huge hole in the ground and is still being worked. It is only when you are close to a pit that the immense size of it becomes truly apparent.

After getting on for 2 km from Drakeland Corner we came to the second of the two Tors on route. Crownhill Tor is relatively unimpressive compared with the Tors right up on Dartmoor itself, but the 1:25000 map clearly indicated it was a Tor.



Once again the views across the valley were excellent and below unto the North West we could see the valley carrying the Tory Brook.

The 1:25000 map indicated there was a waterfall in the Torybrook valley but it wasn't visible from our vantage point. It seems to be within the mining company land and I suspect it is out of bounds to the public



We stopped in the area for an afternoon break and then continued on NNE and made our way

through a gate and dry stone wall now getting towards the northern most point of Crownhill Down.

We picked up the eastern end of the fourth bridleway running northeast from the point where we had gone onto the down and followed an easy to follow track north through another gate for the final 0.5 km back to the Cornwood to Wotter road.

Reaching the road, we turned left and made our way back along the wide verge of the road for the final few hundred metres back to Whitehill Car Park and our cars.

We had walked right around Crownhill Down, well it certainly is open country but it could do with a little swaling to burn off the very invasive gorse bushes which are permeating the western side of the Down.



We now wait to see whether the china clay companies will be allowed to mine the area and create yet another huge pit in the area. It will be one way of getting rid of the gorse bushes but I for one can think of rather less devastating ways of doing so.

After the 6 mile recce on what was there left to do but to pay a visit to the Moorland Hotel to slake our thirst and sample their excellent ales.