

**VENFORD AND A WALK ALONG THE SOUTHERN SIDE OF THE DART
GORGE WITH A LOOK AT HOLNE MOOR**
START POINT: VENFORD RESERVOIR CAR PARK GRID REF: 685712,
DISTANCE 8.5 M

Sunday 5th September was one of the sunniest and warmest days on Dartmoor in 2004, the temperature rising steadily from the 20 degrees at 10 AM up to over 25 degrees C by early afternoon.

The 15 walkers who arrived at Venford Reservoir, a popular spot for visitors with the Dart Gorge vistas easily accessible incidentally, knew it could be a hot walk. Luckily, although warm, certainly, quite a bit of the walk was sheltered from the sun on the south side of the Dart Gorge under a canopy of trees. There was also a light but cooling welcome breeze. The walk turned out to be an easy to moderate walk of about 8.5 miles and for many of the walkers, including myself, much of the route was new, a change indeed and the views, dramatic and magnificent, indeed they were.



An outline of the route is given above the the route along the southern side of the Dart Gorge is clear to see. To better appreciate the route, the outline should be studied in conjunction with a 1:25000 OS map of Dartmoor such as the OS leisure map of Dartmoor no 28.



There is a toilet a few metres down the hill from the car park and beyond that, a few more metres down the hill, is the lovely Venford Reservoir, with a few trees surrounding the man made lake. It is nowhere near as large a reservoir as many of the others on Dartmoor and was built to provide an enhanced water

supply for Paignton.

Unlike Fernworthy and Burrator, there isn't a mass planting of trees all round it, and in my view the reservoir area is better for the lack of them.

Having taken our first look at the reservoir, we were back to the car park for the briefing from our leader of the day and then we were off, heading west for a couple of hundred metres for our first climb of the day. As we were to find out, there wasn't another one encountered for the next two hours of the walk, at least.

We soon came upon an ugly manhole cover at the end of a leat, from that point the water flowing in the leat is ducted down to the reservoir via an underground pipe.



The leat, as I subsequently found out, is called Holne Leat and has a take off point at O Brook, about 1.5 km to the NW as the crow flies but a much further along the leat as it winds its way around the contours.

Just above it, on the other side of the road is Wheel Emma leat, which was built at least 100 years before, to provide water for the mines in the area. Wheel Emma Leat had a take off point at Foxtor Mire from the Swincombe, a much longer leat and one, long disused.



The leader had told us that once we had reached the leat, we would be walking along the edge of it all the way round to under Combestone Tor and that the views would be excellent across to the Tors on the north side of the Dart Gorge, and so it proved to be.

The leat meandered around the contours and we could see several Tors on the other side, including Mel Tor, Sharp Tor (shown in the photo to the left incidentally), Bel Tor, Yar Tor and from time to time, close to the Dart, the splendid and isolated, Luckey Tor, difficult to visit but well worth the descent.

We could see all those Tors but we wouldn't be visiting any of them on this walk though, as we were not going to cross the Dart, but to keep to the south side.



Progress was rapid and easy as we followed the leat, stopping only to savour the lovely views that we had below and ahead of us.

The photo to the right shows Mel Tor sitting high above the Dart, called by some the Double Dart since the East and the West merge together at Dartmeet, just a little further up the valley. The gorge can also be seen in the photo, and very dramatic it is at times.



Although the leat was relatively level, now and then it cut corners where it was ducted over a depression, usually wet which we had to negotiate. We passed by an old bronze age settlement with a stone circle, one of many on Dartmoor and gradually being swallowed up by the bracken which was all over the place in this area. Ahead of us we could see Combestone

Tor across the valley

As we approached the tor, it disappeared off to our left from our view and we didn't see it again on the walk, although we drove within a few metres of it and the return to Plymouth.

Although we couldn't see it, the outline map shows we were quite close to it but below it.

Very soon we were to leave the leat, we arrived at a gate and just beyond it a track, heading downhill, which if we had followed it all the way down would have led us directly down to Dartmeet and all that it has to offer.



We walked down the track for a few hundred metres until we came to another path, and footpath sign, directing us off to the right in an easterly direction and down to the very old Combestone Farm and lovely old farmhouse.

Whether it is still a working farm, I know not, but there were curtains at the windows and other evidence of habitation.



What caught our eye, on the way down was the view across to Yar Tor which we could see beyond the Dart.

As we reached the farm at Combestone, just beyond the farmhouse with its new rood, we came to the farm buildings and some of them looked very old indeed.

I have found out that the farm dates from the 16th Century, what a pity they have replaced the thatching of some of the very old buildings with an ugly, rusting corrugated roof. In front of one of the old outbuildings there was a very old standing stone. It looked like it might have been some part of an entrance but what it really was for might now be lost in the depths of time.

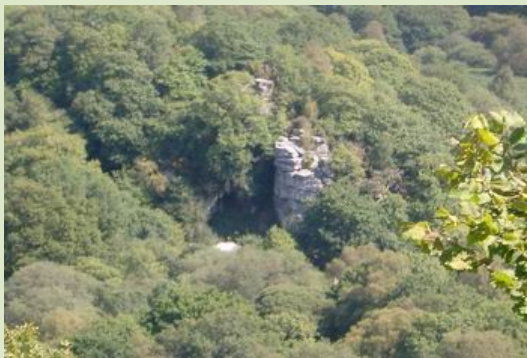
The track we were on was easy going and relatively flat, just minor inclines and descents and we enjoyed looking down on the gorge and catching glimpses of the river from time to time.

After a few hundred metres, we had to cross a brook and immediately beyond the right of way led uphill.

We took a narrower and more level track, to maintain our height above the gorge.

It was getting hotter as we made our way along and we were pleased to find that the track led us through the trees, populating the steeply sloping side of the Dart Gorge.

It limited the views across the steep valley but it certainly kept the sun off and the going remained generally very easy.



After a few hundred metres through the woods we came out onto more open land once again and we had some lovely views, both ahead to Bench Tor some distance away and down below us, on the other side of the river, we could see the lovely Luckey Tor.

As mentioned earlier, it isn't the easiest Tor to get to but its setting beside the Dart

and the steep sides on the southern side make it a lovely little Tor to visit.

When I last visited it, we had to call into the farm above it to ask permission to make our way down across their private land. I don't know whether this will change with "open access".

We continued along the track, sometimes under cover, at other times not and grew ever closer to the long cluster of rocks comprising Bench Tor. The track we were on had a large diameter pipe, under it and sometimes a part of it was visible. I thought it might be the pipe which carried water from the Swincombe water intake plant a kilometre downstream from Foxtor mire as I know that such a pipeline exists to top up Venford Reservoir with water from the Swincombe.

Between us and Bench Tor was a valley down through which runs Venford Brook.

To cross the brook we swung south and headed up the west side of the valley until we had almost reached Venford Reservoir, in fact we were well below the water level in the reservoir and we could see the many buildings, below the dam, which form the water works.



There was a steep descent down to Venford Brook and we had to cross the brook with care, as there was no footbridge.

Once across the brook, we made our way slightly up, only a few metres, until we met a track, and quite a wide one too which led away from the water treatment works.

Perhaps this wider track carried vehicles and also covered the water pipes which carry the water away from Venford and on down to supply Paington, all those miles away on the coast.



Whatever, it made for easy and sheltered walking under the tree canopy. We stopped for lunch in one of the shady glades and then continued to descend. We had not had any uphill sections to speak of on the whole walk so far.

We had some nice views from point to point nevertheless and enjoy some final glimpses of

Mel Tor framed above the Dart Gorge to enjoy.

Not long after lunch all that was to change, the path climbed fairly steeply up and after a few hundred metres came to a gate leading into a field.

It wasn't an access road to the water treatment works after all, unless we had missed a turning along the path.

We turned right and headed uphill, still fairly steeply and before long we could see the rocks of Bench Tor ahead. We made our way right up to the edge of Bench Tor and had some great close up views of the Tor itself.

The Tor is very close to Venford Reservoir so there were quite a few people there on the high points of the rocks making up the Tor.



We enjoyed one last look at the Dart Gorge and the Tors on the northern side and we were on our way again. We continued to make our way uphill along easy paths and soon we came to the Holne to Venford Res Road.

We crossed the road and walked down it for a few metres before taking a track off to our right.



We made our way across an area which had once been quite thick with gorse. Some clearance had taken place and we headed

across the cleared area, keeping to the left side of a leat which we came across after a couple of hundred metres.

After a few hundred metres we came to an old clapper bridge across the leat and a wide, slightly stony track leading up to Holne Moor.

We made our way along this easy path leading to Holne Moor. It was uphill the whole way, but not particularly steep.

When the terrain levelled out we could see Venford Reservoir below us away to the north and off to the left we could see the highest hills in Southern Dartmoor, about 2 km away and 400 feet higher than we were, at our highest point on this walk, which was 1150 feet incidentally.

After a brief stop for coffee, we were off again, descending again, heading down to Venford Reservoir.

Between us and Venford, there were the remains of old mine workings and the area was by far the roughest we had encountered on the walk.



We made our way down towards the reservoir and once beyond the mine workings we found our way barred by a fence which enclosed the whole of the southern end of the reservoir.

The fence is to keep the animals from wandering down to the side of the reservoir at will.



We followed a well worn track around the west side of the enclosed land, through thick bracken and gorse and a couple of minor brooks. Eventually, after two corners of the fenced in area, we came to a stile, the only one on the walk, which led us into the area close to the reservoir.

Once down to the side of the reservoir, the temptation was to take a dip, on such a warm and sunny day.

Since it was drinking water then we resisted the temptation. I wondered if anyone did ever take the opportunity of a quick swim though.

The water at the southern end was crystal clear in places and we could see the bottom shelving away from us. We could see no fish around and I imagine fishing may also be frowned upon.

Across the far end was the dam we had seen from below, over 2 hours earlier and the reservoir did look particularly attractive on such a nice day.

We followed a well worn track around the edge of the reservoir, again the narrow area of trees around the reservoir gave good shelter.



As we approached the dam, the track led us out through a gate and onto the moor again. Just off to the right was an old mortar stone, evidence of the earlier industrial activities the area had been used for. A plaque outlined the original function of the old moulding stone stood behind the stone, for those interested in the industrial archaeology of the area.

A few metres on was the road leading across the dam and to the car park we had left, getting on for 4.5 hours earlier. The car park was full, not surprising on such a warm and sunny day.

There is another car park across the dam and from what I could see, this was also full to overflowing.

"What a lovely walk" was the view of the group, and what a superb day for it too. We thanked to the leader for his efforts in adjusting the walk to suit the conditions on the day. He is of modest disposition and doesn't want recognition here. Following the farewells, we were on our way back along the narrow and winding road snaking across the moor, close to Combestone Tor, to beyond Hexworthy and onto the Dartmeet to Two Bridges road.