

Walk for War Heroes

An Account by Brian Finch of a Walk by

Brian and Catherine Finch on The Two Moors Way 10-16 October 2011

Day 1: Wembury to Ivybridge 10 October

In 2005 The Two Moors Way was extended southwards to incorporate the Erme-Plym Trail, which is now the first stage of the South-North route.

This was an easy walk; a useful warm-up for the more taxing days ahead.

The route begins on Wembury beach. Wembury is a pretty little village on the coast to the south of Plymouth. Before starting, I took some water from the English Channel and put it in a bottle which I carried throughout the seven-day trek.



Catherine and Brian Finch before starting The Two Moors Way

The trail starts on a track through woods and fields, passing Wembury village, across farmland to Brixton (not to be confused with the town in south London with the same name), where it first bypasses much of the residential area, then cuts back through the village past the church and post office before heading out into the countryside again. After going across a few more fields, through some woods and along a short stretch of road, we found the first fairly steep but short climb up a hillside before dropping down to Yealmpton. The local café provided an early lunch.

A short walk along the bank of the River Yealm and across Yealm Bridge was followed by more fields, taking us to the River Erme, first following the river bank, then climbing uphill across more fields and woods. From here the route continued across rural South Devon roughly parallel to the River Erme, mainly through fields and woods until reaching Ivybridge, skirting the Tennis Club and

ending with a very pleasant walk through the park up to the finishing point: the Tourist Information Centre.

Day 2: Ivybridge to Holne – 11 October

Ivybridge is known as “The Gateway to the Moor” and is the original starting point for the Two Moors Way established in 1976, before the Erme-Plym Trail was incorporated.



Catherine and Brian at the original start of The Two Moors Way

This stage of the walk began with a steady climb out of Ivybridge, past the college, up to Stowford Bridge, along a track past farmland, up to a gate which led out onto open moorland: our first steps on Dartmoor proper. The walk continued to climb up to the first marker stone on a well used track. This stretch of 2.83 kms involved a climb of 256 metres, a climb of 9%, or 1 in 11.



Two Moors Way marker stone near Ivybridge

The next couple of hours or so involved a continuous steady climb along this good track, much of which followed a disused tramway, which had been used in the past to transport china clay mined in the area. This part of the route was easy going, although still climbing all the way.



The tramway looking North



Brian on the tramway

The weather was misty with drizzle and occasional light rain; so disappointingly Catherine did not benefit from any of the stunning views that can normally be seen from many parts of Dartmoor.

On reaching the next marker stone, which directs hikers off the tramway, the nature of the ground changes dramatically. No longer the easy going and steady pace, but instead we were faced with rough ground, parts of which were very muddy and difficult to pass, and generally much more difficult walking. The route shown on the map is clear enough, but on the ground there are three separate paths, none of which is very clearly defined, but any might be the correct path. Because they initially diverge only slightly, it is easy to pick the wrong path. Fortunately, because I had been on this route previously – and taken the wrong path on the first occasion – I knew the correct route, which winds downhill, ending in a very rough and steep, rocky, slippery path down to a clapper bridge across the River Avon. The clapper bridge, which is a series of very large, long, flat stones supported on pillars, is believed to have been built by the Romans. It is indeed very useful, as otherwise crossing the River Avon at this point can be very tricky; and after heavy rain quite treacherous.

The route then follows the River Avon downstream to the point where it is joined by the Western Weller Brook. The path here is muddy and boggy in places, slow going and with some difficulty in negotiating a clear path. Just before reaching the brook, there is an area sheltered by a stone wall. This was a great relief. Up to that point, apart from the mist, drizzle and occasional rain, we had also been buffeted by very strong winds. By now the rain had eased off, but the wind remained strong. The wall provided an effective windbreak so we were able to take a short rest and eat our packed lunches.

Also behind the wall is an ancient stone cross, Huntingdon Cross, which is known to have been standing there since at least 1557, over 450 years.



Huntingdon Cross



Ancient settlement

Several ancient settlements can be seen on the hillsides in this area, they are generally circles or similar shapes outlined with stones, probably dating from the Bronze Age. There are many similar structures on Dartmoor.

This last stretch, and the next, provide some interesting navigational challenges. There are no waymarks on the moor other than the marker stones already referred to, and much of the ground can be difficult to identify on the map for the inexperienced navigator. There are many paths, but often these do not coincide with specific routes such as The Two Moors Way. This whole area is probably the most difficult part of the entire route to navigate.

The Two Moors Way heads up Hickaton Hill to the left of the clearly visible settlement. Finding the path is difficult, sometimes impossible, because for long stretches it simply does not exist. Walking in this area is very hard going, with long tufty grass, making each step a real effort. Over a prolonged period this is very tiring on the leg muscles and movement is inevitably extremely slow.



Two views of the "path" on Dartmoor

As the route climbs over Hickaton Hill and starts to drop down past Pupers Hill, it descends down a now defined path to a footbridge which leads off the moor down to Scorriton and on to the delightful village of Holne, where this leg finishes. There is a local café where we were able to enjoy a welcome cup of tea.

Day 3: Holne to Chagford Bridge – 12 October

This was the second day of the walk across Dartmoor; the weather remained overcast, drizzly, misty and very windy.

Setting out from Holne, the Two Moors Way takes a very pleasant walk alongside the River Dart. What seems like a gentle stroll comes to an abrupt end with a sharp left turn and a steep if shortish climb to Leigh Tor (a tor is a hilltop with exposed granite rocks, the surrounding soil having been eroded over millions of years by the weather). The climb continues, albeit now on a well-defined footpath called Dr Blackall's Drive, round Aish Tor, then past Mel Tor and Bel Tor. At Bel Tor Corner the route goes downhill to the charming village of Ponsworthy, then follows the River Webburn before starting the long climb onto open moorland near Wind Tor.

As we began the long climb up Hamel Down, Catherine was trying to decide whether to wear a coat and hat, as it was getting a bit cold, and asked whether it would be exposed up ahead. I could not suppress a laugh! Hamel Down is one of the most open and lonely places on Dartmoor, up above Widdecombe-in-the-Moor, with not a tree in sight, no cover of any sort and completely open to the elements. And that day there were plenty of elements: wind, mist, rain and cold. Catherine in particular was feeling the cold, having flown in from Hong Kong just two days before starting the walk. It was unfortunate that again the mist completely obscured the views which on a clear day can be breathtaking. But as Catherine said later, at least it gave her the chance to experience a blustery and misty walk on Dartmoor. On reaching Hameldown Tor our route took us down a steep slope to Grimspound, a Bronze Age enclosure, before rising steeply to Hookney Tor with its impressive granite formations. The weather had by now really closed in and it was impossible to see either Hookney Tor or Grimspound; indeed, it was difficult even to see the map, or to find a foothold on the very rough terrain. We slowly found our way down the steep slope almost having to guess the way to Grimspound, when finally the stone wall enclosure slowly emerged from the mist. The path up the steep slope to Hookney Tor was then clear, and the granite rocks provided some shelter from the wind and a good place to stop to eat a packed lunch.

The climb from Ponsworthy to the top of Hookney Tor is 7.3 kms long and rises over 300 metres. Whilst navigation was no real problem compared to the previous day, the physical effort in the face of the bad weather was significant.

After lunch the weather lifted slightly, allowing some views from Hookney Tor, albeit not very clear.



Hookney Tor



The view from Hookney Tor



Dartmoor Ponies near Hookney Tor



Bennett's Cross

From Hookney Tor the walk went downhill across a road, up and over Birch Tor and down to Bennett's Cross. By now the weather had cleared and the walk across the wide open spaces of Chagford Common before coming off the moor was a contrast to the experience on Hamel Down, with some clear views. Even then the walk was far from finished as there was another 5 or 6 kms across mainly farmland, which included an unexpected very steep (but mercifully quite short) climb just before Teignworthy, and a few roads before reaching Chagford Bridge: the end of Day 3.



Chagford Common



Chagford Bridge

Day 4: Chagford Bridge to Morchard Road – 13 October

The next two days are off the moors and across the Devonshire heartlands, a very rural area with some great views of the quiet and peaceful countryside of mid-Devon.

The walk began at Chagford Bridge and followed a good path along the banks of the River Teign to Dogmarsh Bridge. This was a good start to the day: flat, easy going and pretty views.



Brian at the waymark at Chagford Bridge and standing by the bridge.
By now the weather was warm enough for Brian to wear his "57th" T-shirt.¹

Crossing the road at Dogmarsh Bridge the path continues along the river bank for around one km before turning left uphill. Along this stretch Catherine made friends with a corgi dog. Despite being friendly a first, the dog unexpectedly snapped and nipped her on the hand. Fortunately no great harm was done; and Catherine was delighted that on Monday the following week we received in the post a cheque from the dog owner as a donation to The Lisbon Maru Account! Catherine decided the pain had been worth it!

After leaving the river, the track turns uphill following Hunters' Path, which goes along the upper levels of the Teign Valley, offering some splendid views such as this one:



Teign Valley from Hunters' Path

¹ The 57th of Foot later became The Middlesex Regiment. The 1st Battalion fought gallantly in Hong Kong and were amongst the prisoners of war on the ill-fated *Lisbon Maru* in 1942. Brian was commissioned into The Middlesex Regiment in 1960

Although the path rises fairly constantly, it actually follows the river downstream. After about two kms skirting the hill just below the National Trust property Castle Drogo there is a sharp left turn uphill before dropping down to a stream and climbing up again to the delightfully picturesque village of Drewsteignton.



Stone at Drewsteignton



The village of Drewsteignton

The route now follows the road downhill, then along tracks and farmland, uphill again and over the major trunk road in the area, the A30.



Two Moors Way Commemorative Stone

More fields full of cows and sheep. At one point a herd of young cows took an unhealthy interest in us and when they ran out of the way as a group, quickly reassembled to see where we were heading, sometime blocking the way. Although obviously just curious and quite friendly, their obstinate blocking of the pathway almost seemed aggressive, and there was a real concern that out of sheer skittishness they might have caused a nasty accident. But the walk continued without incident. Through a short stretch of wood where the waymarking is hard to find and the route can be confusing, across a ford and a road and another very steep uphill climb through farmland.

Remembering the experience of the cows, Catherine was a little nervous to be confronted by a magnificent chestnut mare standing at about 18 hands blocking the footpath. Normally horses tend to move out of the way easily and can be persuaded without too much trouble. But this beautiful female was being very friendly with a stallion on the other side of a fence; it seemed that

the pair were in love and wanted to spend the day in each other's company, with no wish to be disturbed by hikers. The stallion in question was overambitious, as he was an extremely short Shetland pony, apparently from Dartmoor. Had the fence not been in the way, he would have found it impossible to realise his clearly romantic ambitions! However, the mare was obviously captivated by the pheromones he was giving off. It was with great difficulty that we managed to make our way one at a time past this love scene without causing any upset.

Shortly after this incident we reached the small village of Hittersleigh where there is one of the few benches to be found on the route and was therefore a good place to stop for lunch. Afterwards there was a stretch of some five miles along roads and further undulating countryside through fields, some more interesting than others. The weather was generally clear and gave the opportunity to take in some good views.



A view of Devonshire heartland



Paschoe House

A few more miles across fields to Morchard Road, the end of Day 4.

Day 5: Morchard Road to Knowstone – 14 October

This leg had some similarities to the previous day, as much of the route was either on roads or across farmland. It was generally less interesting and more tiring, with quite a bit of uphill work, especially at the beginning, despite still being off both the moors. It was without doubt the muddiest and therefore the filthiest of all the stages of the Two Moors Way.

The day began with a three mile climb across farmland and some tracks to Morchard Bishop. Although not especially steep, it is a long climb and parts of the terrain are roughish grass making the going a bit difficult. There is one spot of light relief on this stretch: shortly before arriving at Morchard Bishop there is a farm with Alpacas. They are very attractive creatures in a variety of colours.

Morchard Bishop is at the heart of the Two Moors Way and has a stone and a map to commemorate this fact.



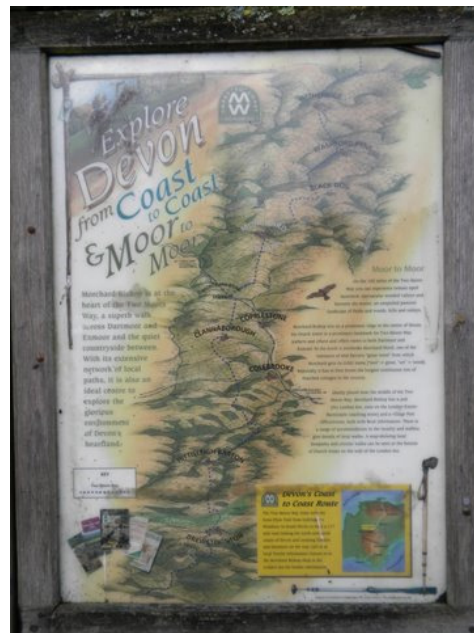
Brian *En Route* to Morchard Bishop



Alpaca near Morchard Bishop



Stone at Morchard Bishop



Signboard at Morchard Bishop

The trek continued across farmland. Map reading in this area was especially difficult because in a very small area the Two Moors Way crosses the join of four separate map sheets, alternately going from one to another and back again; making it virtually impossible to identify precisely where the route is on the ground. Fortunately the way marking here was very good, so there was no real danger of getting lost. The fields, especially around the gates, had many muddy stretches. Occasionally some long grass offered the opportunity for a natural automatic boot and shoe cleaning facility; but sadly these helpful fields always seemed to be placed just before the next patch of really thick, sticky mud. We reached Witheridge at lunch-time and had time to stop for a brief lunch break in a local pub, having to remove our muddy footwear before going in, of course.

From Witheridge the route continued mainly across fields, but also with some lengthy stretches on roads, which made the going much quicker. We were glad to reach Knowstone after a long day; at nearly 20 miles this was the longest leg of the whole week.

Day 6: Knowstone to Withypool – 15 October

Mark Cooper joined the walk on Days 6 and 7 and Alex Jakubowski joined on Day 6.

Day 6 was a complete contrast to the previous day. The walk was the shortest of the week, at just over 13 miles; and the route was both attractive and interesting. It was not difficult going and provided the walkers with a bit of a respite ahead of the rigours of the final gruelling day.

The first time I did a walk starting at Knowstone I took a wrong track and had to retrace my steps for a short distance. On this occasion I took the correct route first time, so we were able to “leave Knowstone unturned”.

After a short stretch on roads, the route went along tracks and across fields via Owlaborough Moor and Easter New Moor to Yeo Mill, then started a steep two mile climb through West Anstey up to Badlake Moor Cross, at the edge of Exmoor. This is recognised by one of a pair of sculptures created by Devon sculptor Peter Randall-Page from a granite boulder taken from a river.



The Sculpture at the edge of Exmoor

The first part of the walk on Exmoor was along a good track, initially flat, then downhill. This was a most pleasant walk through heather in good weather allowing some clear views of the local scenery. After a short climb to the village of Hawkridge, the route continues along a good track through farmland, fairly flat, until it descends to Tarr Steps, the famous clapper bridge on the River Barle. The farm here is also a pub, where we stopped for lunch.

The route continues upstream along the bank of the River Barle. This is a delightful walk. The first part, near Tarr Steps, is popular with families, including mothers with prams and pushchairs. After a while the path becomes less flat and easy going, but it is still popular, especially for hikers and dog walkers. We came across some dead trees lying near the path into which hundreds, or possibly thousands, of old coins had been inserted. The trees were natural and the coins real (if unusable!), so although this was not a piece of normal sculpture, it was clearly intended as a work of art.

The river here is quite beautiful and the scenery and topography varied. This four mile stretch took us to Withypool and the end of this short and delightfully enjoyable day 6.



Brian on clapper bridge at Tarr Steps



Coins in tree near Tarr Steps

Day 7: Withypool to Lynmouth – 16 October

This was perhaps the toughest day of the whole week.



At Withypool before setting off for the final day



The first part of the journey is a six mile hike to Simonsbath, beginning with a climb up onto the wilds of Exmoor, with some great views:



Landacre Bridge



Brian and Mark near the River Barle

The path is good and after a couple of miles drops back down to the bank of the River Barle, where it continues upstream. Much of this stretch is reminiscent of the last part of the previous day: a relatively easy walk mainly along the river bank until reaching the village of Simonsbath, hidden in the depths of Exmoor.

The route then starts some serious cross-country climbing through Ashcombe Plantation and along the hillside parallel to Ashcombe Bottom; at the top of which is a very muddy, boggy patch to be negotiated before getting back out onto open moorland. Fortunately the weather had been reasonably dry in recent weeks, so the going was not as difficult as it can be. Nevertheless, as the climb continued up to Great Ashcombe, the ground became more and more boggy and difficult to walk on without sinking. At Great Ashcombe a sharp left turn took us along a reasonable path and on to a short stretch of road. Again, this path was less difficult than it would have been after prolonged rain, which is often the case on Exmoor, especially at this time of year.

After leaving the road the path continues uphill for a few hundred metres before disappearing. The next target is Exe Head – the source of the River Exe which drains down to Exeter and eventually Exmouth on the South Coast. But although there is a signpost pointing to Exe Head, there is no discernable track; nor is Exe Head visible from a distance: the shape of the ground means that it can be seen only from perhaps 100-200 metres away. The only sure way to reach it is to go on a compass bearing or use a GPS navigation system for around a kilometre. The going here soon becomes very rough, with some long, tufty grass, some of which is quite boggy. Again, on this occasion the relatively dry weather meant that it was not too boggy, but the long grass still made the going difficult and slow.



Brian at Exe Head

From Exe Head the nature of the route changes completely: whilst still in the wild and lonely part of Exmoor, the path now becomes clear and good going, as it goes downhill following the Chains Valley and joining Hoar Oak Water.

Following the path downstream we crossed the river at the Hoar Oak Tree (which is fenced to protect it from animals) and found a spot near the river where we could stop to eat our packed lunches.

The route now moves away from the river and climbs up onto Cheriton Ridge, a wide, open, windswept hill, which after a lengthy climb eventually drops down to the village of Cheriton. A sharp drop down an old road whose surface has been washed away brought us to Smallcombe Bridge. A short and pleasant walk along the bank of the Hoar Oak Water through Combe Park Wood took us to Hillsford Bridge and the start of the final phase of the Two Moors Way.

Instinct suggests that at this point the route is likely to be downhill to Lynmouth; but this is far from the case. The route continues downstream along the valley carved out by the Lyn River, until finally dropping to the sea. But although the water is constantly flowing downhill, the path along the hillside above most certainly is not. From Hillsford Bridge we were faced with an initial climb of nearly 70 metres in under a kilometre. The next kilometre is an equally sharp drop; this time of nearly 90 metres, giving us the deceptive impression that the descent to Lynmouth has finally begun; but then we were faced with another 80 metre climb in under 500 metres, much steeper yet. The final drop is even steeper: 250 metres in just over one kilometre, an incline of nearly one in four.

Despite the sharp climbs and drops, the experience of walking along Lyn Cleave is not to be missed: the views are magnificent.



View across the valley from Lyn Cleave



First sight of Lynmouth from Lyn Cleave

The end of Two Moors Way is marked by a signboard and separately by a stone



Signboard and stone marking the northern end of the Two Moors Way

The Exmoor National Park Centre kindly advertised the walk on their noticeboard and gave us a warm welcome on arrival.



The walk was now complete, but for the final ceremony

The Final Ceremony



Brian pouring water taken from the English Channel at Wembury into the Bristol Channel at Lynmouth

Afternote

This challenge was undertaken by Brian Finch and his daughter Catherine to raise awareness of some very brave Chinese fishermen who, in 1942, rescued 384 British prisoners of war from a sinking ship, the *Lisbon Maru*, whilst under fire from Japanese soldiers. The fishermen were not armed, not trained soldiers, not under orders; rather they acted out of pure humanity. Funds raised as a result of this walk will help support these brave but poor fishermen, their families and their community.

For details please see: www.wix.com/bfinch/walkforwarheroes
or <http://walkforwarheroes/yolasite.com>

