

Walk No. 26 Ruby - Devon's Hidden Gem

The north west interior of Devon is one of the County's relatively undiscovered areas. Its quiet attractions receive relatively few visitors and many Devon residents are unfamiliar with the area. However, it comprises perhaps the most truly rural part of the County, and is to be celebrated for its quiet tranquillity and wide, open views.

These quiet attractions are now being used by a partnership of organisations to help bring much needed economic regeneration to the area. This part of Devon was among the worst-hit in the entire country during the foot and mouth outbreak of 2001 and suffered considerable economic problems as a result of the pressures on agriculture and its supporting industries. Economic regeneration is now under way through the promotion of a series of walking, cycling and horse-riding trails. These are aimed at encouraging environmentally-conscious visitors to boost the local economy.

The area is being promoted under the title of "Ruby Country", named after the Ruby Red cattle. Take the opportunity of seeing a really peaceful part of Devon while helping the local economy and try one of the Ruby Trails!

This Ruby Trail is based on one of the two market towns in the area, Hatherleigh. Long-distance walkers may already be familiar with this small town since it is also on the Tarka Trail. This Ruby walk therefore also acts as an attractive loop for Tarka Trail users. Keep an eye out for the red Ruby Country waymarkers on the walk.

Fact File

Hatherleigh is served by a regular bus service between Plymouth and Barnstaple, which also links to Tavistock, Okehampton, Torrington and Bideford. For timetable details contact Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit the website at www.traveline.org.uk

Walk Length: 6.5 km/4 miles; 13 stiles; generally level but one steady climb of 66m/200 feet.

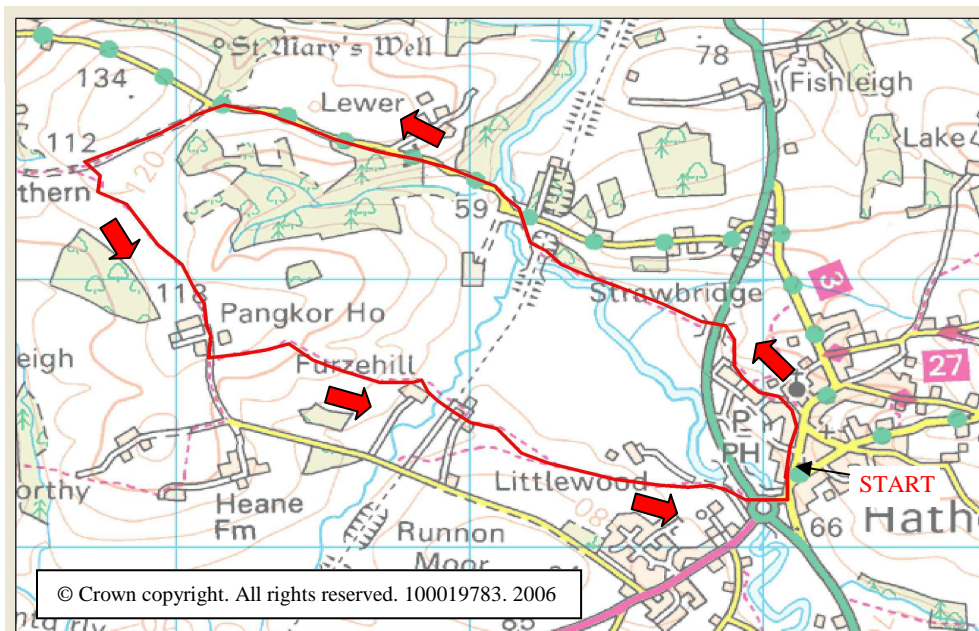
Facilities: Hatherleigh has buses, shops, pubs and cafes.

The Walk

Start the walk by the "Sheep". This is next to the car park and where the bus stops.

This very distinctive sculpture was erected in 1994 as part of a town enhancement scheme. It reflects the life of the town and its market.

Walk down to the road [Bridge Street] and turn left.



The street has an interesting and attractive variety of houses dating from between the 16th and 19th centuries. At that time it was on one of the most important highways between north and south Devon.

Pass the George Inn and turn left at the Square opposite the Post Office.

The George Inn is probably late medieval in origin. It could well have been the court house for the Abbots of Tavistock, who were lords of the manor until the 1500s. Later it became an important coaching stage on the way between Bideford and Exeter or Plymouth.

At the Square notice the ram's and bull's heads, set up to mark the impact of foot and mouth disease on the area in 2001.

Go through the Square into the Churchyard.

The church was built in the late 1400s. However, it probably had earlier origins. It has retained much of its medieval fabric and has an impressive interior. There is an information book available in the church. The shingled spire is a notable local landmark.

Now retrace your steps back to the Square. Turn sharp right, next to the 1828 National School [see the plaque on the wall - now the local hall]. Turn right next to the garage then left to the livestock market, following the public footpath sign. At the market keep to the right, along the top edge of the market, to a stile at the end.

Hatherleigh's livestock market is held on Tuesdays and is an important occasion for the local community. It remains one of the main bases of Hatherleigh's economy. Make sure to keep any dog on a lead through the market.

Cross the stile and turn left, where a second stile leads to a clear green lane. Continue ahead to pass through an underpass beneath the Hatherleigh by-pass and at the end of the narrow surfaced lane continue ahead over another stile.

The path passes lines of veteran oaks, typical of much of Ruby Country. They will be of value to roosting bats and a variety of invertebrates. Many support a diversity of lichens, indicative of the good air quality.

Enter a small pasture and head for the gate and stile opposite. Cross this next stile and bear right, keeping next to the bank.

These tussocky damp grasslands are also typical of Ruby Country and are of value as habitat for waders as well as small mammals and the barn owls that prey on them.

Continue to a double-decker stile. Cross this and continue ahead, parallel to the river and at the bottom edge of a field.

The river here is the Lew. One of the two Devon rivers of this name, the Hatherleigh Lew rises north west of Dartmoor and flows north to become one of the major tributaries of the River Torridge.

Keep to the path as it dips back alongside the river through a wooded strip. The path is quite narrow in places here.

The woodland has a very species-rich ground flora. Some species found here, such as barren strawberry and primrose, are often indicative of ancient woodlands. This length also shows good examples of river action. On the outside of each bend there is a high bank while on the inside there are areas of deposition.

Follow the path to the right to a kissing gate to an old railway embankment.

The railway had a relatively short life. It was opened in 1925 and linked Torrington with Halwill Junction. As a result the area had a direct rail connection to Exeter and Plymouth via Halwill Junction and Okehampton, and to Barnstaple and Bideford. However, it was never very profitable and was closed in February 1965. Hatherleigh's station was to the right along the line from here, some distance from the town.

Now go down the other side, through another railway kissing gate and then diagonally across the tussocky field to the bridge visible in the far corner. Cross the stile to the lane, then turn left over the bridge.

This is Lewer Bridge. Look for the plaque in the left-hand parapet wall showing the building date of 1844.

Keep on the lane as it rises steadily, relatively steeply for a while.

Note the woodland being planted on the fields next to the lane. The relatively poor soils make forestry a good land use in parts of Ruby Country.

After the lane levels off, look out for a sharp right bend with a clear farm track over a cattle grid to the left, leading to Keyethern Farm. Turn left along the track.

The higher parts of the lane give atmospheric views to the left over Ruby Country to Dartmoor. The banks along the lane are very species-rich and give a stunning display in springtime, all making the climb seem worthwhile.

In the woods on the right, now inaccessible to the public, is the site of the old St. Mary's Holy Well, which would have been used for local baptisms.

Continue on the farm track as far as a deer fence and ladder stile. Do not cross but turn left just before the fence, over a small stile.

Fallow deer will often be seen in the field beyond the deer fence. The farm track also gives further wide views to Dartmoor.

Follow the path along the field edge. Go through a gate into another field and continue ahead, still on the field edge, to cross two more stiles in quick succession. Then continue ahead again along the edge of the next field to a gate at the far end.

Look out for the spire of Hatherleigh church ahead peeping over the trees. This succession of fields has been another typical example of Ruby Country's largely unimproved grassland, valuable as a wildlife habitat.

Go through the gate to a narrow green lane. Continue to a farm track then through a metal gate ahead. Keep ahead on the track, pass the house on the left then take the next track on the left. This leads into a field.

From here, Hatherleigh is laid out before you.

Go into this field then bear right and head for the far left bottom corner. There is a stile here. Cross this and turn left then go immediately right along the field edge. At the end of the field turn left through a gate then immediately right, along the edge of the next field. Pass through two gateways then over a small field to a footbridge.

The bridge crosses Pulworthy Brook, a tributary of the River Lew which was passed near the start of the Trail. The bridge is guarded by two unusual pull-apart stiles.

Go through the old railway gate.

Be sure to close the gate or there is a fine to the railway of two pounds! This is again the line of the railway crossed earlier.

Keep ahead on the farm track between the buildings

This is Waterhouse. The farmhouse has been dated to around 1500, with later additions, although records indicate a settlement here in the 1300s.

Bear right to the gate, then go left and left again. Cross the stile at the end of the bank into a field. Bear slightly right to cross a double stile on the far side, then head diagonally across the next field to the far opposite corner, Hatherleigh now close ahead.

Go through the gateway and continue ahead next to the hedge, then on through two gates to a track. Keep ahead over cattle grids to pass Hatherleigh Cricket Club to arrive at the Hatherleigh by-pass.

The by-pass was completed in 1995 and has relieved the traffic problems which could occur in the narrow streets.

To return to the start at the "Sheep" cross the road past the Bowling Club entrance and turn left past the Bridge Inn and up Bridge Street.

Further Information

There is a pack of walks in Ruby Country available in local Tourist Information Centres price £3.50; it may also be obtained from the Discover Devon Informaion service, Westcott Road , Barnstaple, EX32 8AW. Quote reference DP 104 and make cheques payable to Devon County Council.

For information on the wider network of walks in Devon, including the Tarka Trail which also passes through Hatherleigh, pick up a copy of the free brochure "Discover Devon - Walking" from local Tourist Information Centres or from the address above. Alternatively visit the website www.discoverdevon.com, which has all the walks information and an order form.

OS maps for this walk:

Landranger [1:50,000 scale] no. 191 Okehampton and North Dartmoor
Explorer [1:25,000 scale] no. 113 Okehampton