

RAILWAY, CASTLE AND QUARRIES

The Northern Fringe of Dartmoor

The private Dartmoor Railway line between Okehampton and Meldon, a little way to the west, provides a pleasant and easy way to access this part of Dartmoor. The railway line is accompanied the whole way by a cycle route, the Granite Way, and by using this easy access route to Meldon and walking back along a slightly more circuitous route over the edge of the moor, an attractive and interesting walk can be followed.

Because the Granite Way is a cycleway and follows the railway, it is well surfaced and largely flat and is therefore accessible for wheelchairs and buggies. The Dartmoor Railway trains will also carry wheelchairs and buggies.

Fact File

Okehampton is served by buses to and from Exeter, Plymouth, Bideford and Barnstaple. For timetable details contact Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit www.traveline.org.uk In addition on summer Sundays there is a Dartmoor Railway service to and from Exeter. Dartmoor Railway trains between Okehampton and Meldon operate daily in August, five days a week in June, July and September and at weekends in June, July and September and at weekends October to April. For information telephone 01837 55637. There is plentiful car parking at Okehampton Station, which is well signed from the town centre and approach roads.

Walk Length: 10km/6.25 miles; 1 stile; one steady climb of 160m/530 feet [although steady, never especially steep].

Facilities: Okehampton - all facilities; Okehampton Station - refreshments, toilets; Meldon Station - refreshments, toilets (both seasonal).

The Walk

The walk starts at Okehampton Station.

The station is positioned at the very top of the town. There is a pleasant signed walk through the park from the town centre, although it does involve a climb of some 60m/200 feet, Alternatively, most buses call at the station on Sundays and there is plentiful car parking.

The station was in a state of semi-dereliction until the 1990s. It was then acquired by Devon County Council which, in partnership with a range of local authorities and companies, including Dartmoor Railway, renovated the station in the style of a provincial Southern Railway station of the 1950s.

Walk down the station forecourt to the road, then take the lane immediately opposite.

The lane is marked with the National Cycle Network Route 27 sign, and also signed as the Granite Way. Cycle route 27 stretches across Devon between Ilfracombe and Plymouth. The Granite Way is the name given to the largely off-road section of route 27 around the edge of Dartmoor. Route 27 and Granite Way signs guide the whole way between Okehampton and Meldon.

About 100 yards/metres along the road turn left at the large granite bollard opposite Brandize Park and follow the path as it turns to run parallel with the railway. Continue along the path towards a road overbridge.

Just before the bridge is a cleared area next to the railway and next to this is a collection of huts for the Air Training Corps and the Army Cadet Force. This is the location of the old military sidings, the nearest point on the railway to the large military Okehampton Camp on the moor above, to be passed later in the walk. In times past men, munitions and ordnance would have been loaded and unloaded here in vast numbers.

At the little car park just before the bridge bear left, following the route 27 sign, to pass under the bridge and so to come directly alongside the railway.

Shortly afterwards the views to the right open out, giving a splendid view of Okehampton Castle. The Castle was begun shortly after the Norman Conquest of 1066. It commanded views of the surrounding countryside and controlled the road to Cornwall. The Castle has stood as a ruin since 1538 when Henry VIII ordered it to be demolished as a punishment for its owner's treason. It is now maintained by English Heritage.

The area surrounding the castle, including the Granite Way and beyond, once formed part of Okehampton Deer Park. This was established by the Earls of Devon when they owned the Castle to guarantee good hunting. They cleared former settlements and established harsh laws to prevent poaching.

As the railway approaches a short tunnel under the A30 road, follow the Granite Way as it bears slightly away to the right. At the end of this section go through the wooden gate, then follow the path to the left through the tunnel.

The A30 Okehampton by-pass was built between 1985 and 1988, after some controversy over its route. This tunnel was constructed for agricultural access, allowing local farmers to take stock from one side of the road to the other safely.

At the end of the tunnel go through the gates on the right and continue on the surfaced path to again come next to the railway.

Approaching the railway sidings at Meldon Quarry notice the steps on the right leading up to "Emmett's Folly". These lead to a good viewpoint over the quarry workings. Beyond there is a viewpoint over the A30, both the old road which is alongside the buildings in the middle distance, and the new one at the foot of the slope. On the skyline to the left the new road can be seen climbing over Sourton Down, the highest point on the A30 between London and Land's End.

Emmett's Folly is named after Roger Emmett, the County Council engineer who successfully (eventually) planned the path over and around the quarry spoilheap which now forms the viewpoint.

Return to the path and continue alongside the quarry.

There is an information board explaining the geology of the area a little way further on. It also gives some background to the Dartmoor Railway.

The quarry was opened in 1895. It produced hornfels, a very hard rock, which was important as ballast for the railway lines. It became the major source of ballast for

the London and South Western Railway. It continues to produce ballast, and also roadstone, up to the present day, and the retention of the railway is due to the existence of the quarry and the desirability of moving much of the stone by rail.

After the quarry sidings the path passes behind Meldon Quarry Station

This new station was established for the Dartmoor Railway in the 1990s. Like the station at Okehampton, it is painted in the traditional Southern Railway green and cream.

On the left, over the railway, old quarry buildings house displays of historic photographs and equipment associated with the quarry and the railway at Okehampton and Meldon (open seasonally). There is also a seasonal buffet here.

Continue on beyond the quarry buildings and buffet to Meldon Viaduct.

The Viaduct was built in 1874 as a single track span. It was added to in 1878 when it became double track. It is one of only two of this design which was ever on the mainline rail system. This line was, in fact, the old Southern Railway mainline between London and Plymouth and was, in its day, as prestigious and as quick as the better-known Brunel Great Western Line. It was closed in the 1960s as part of the Beeching cuts when it was considered an alternative route between London and the far west was not needed. The Viaduct, and several miles beyond, now form part of the Granite Way.

While you should go onto the Viaduct for the superb views of older quarries below and of Meldon Dam, built in 1972 to form a large reservoir behind, our walk now leaves the Granite Way.

Return to the end of the Viaduct and take the path down some steps on the left hand side of the Viaduct as approaching it from the station, signposted to the moor and reservoir.

This path gives a good opportunity to look closely at the Viaduct's structure, and to see the intertwined metal legs, the result of the extension of 1878.

Where the path divides go left, still signed to the moor and reservoir. This path soon forks. Keep to the wider, uphill path bearing left and then turn right onto a grassy path which leads to the quarry access road. Go ahead on the road for a short distance then fork right towards the small car park.

There is an information board about these quarries in the car park on the left.

Go through the gate to the right of the car park.

This is the old Meldon Aplite Quarry. It was worked from the 1800s until 1970 for aplite or granulite, a hard form of granite used for roadstone. It was also used to manufacture glass, and at this point in the 1920s was a relatively short-lived glass works. There are examples of the bottles made in the museum in Okehampton.

Continue on the track past the first building, next to the car park. Bear left just before the next old quarry building, crossing a small bridge next to an older, stone structure. Continue on a stony track, which initially bends left, then right up a valley (do not take the higher path towards the stone wall).

This attractive moorland valley is that of the Red-a-Ven Brook, the stream flowing down over a series of small waterfalls on the right of the path.

As the path rises there are remains of further quarry workings and overgrown spoil heaps of the 19th century Red-a-Ven copper mine.

The path rises and bears left out of the valley as a grassy path. Follow this uphill away from the stream. Where the path forks you can take either route, both leading to where a stone wall turns almost at right angles. Keep ahead here, next to the wall.

On the right can be seen a series of red and white posts. These mark the edge of the Army's Okehampton Firing Ranges. If live firing is taking place, red flags will be flying from prominent hilltops. Make sure you do not stray beyond the posts.

The stone wall on the left largely coincides with the boundary of the Okehampton Deer Park, mentioned earlier. Today its use is as the boundary of the Meldon Quarry area.

As the path, and the wall, continue to rise gently, views to the left over the centre of Devon become ever wider. If the day is clear, the edge of Exmoor can be seen on the far skyline ahead and left.

The path then starts to descend gently.

Notice the prominent tor on the right-hand skyline. This is Yes Tor, the second highest point in England south of the Peak District at 619m or 2,030 feet above sea level. The highest point, incidentally, is High Willhays, just behind Yes Tor but not visible from here and just 2 metres higher.

Continue parallel to the stone wall as it descends to meet a surfaced road. Go ahead on the road to arrive at a junction by a bridge and cattle grid. Turn left over the grid and then immediately fork right, away from Okehampton Camp. Keep on the road as it starts to head downhill, off the moor.

The first permanent army camp here was established in 1892. It is used to train soldiers on the moor and it is also the base for the annual Ten Tors weekend when intrepid youngsters undertake a two day trek across the moor.

Continue downhill past the cross marking the old spring of Fice's Well then, when the road turns sharp left, go ahead through the left-hand of two gates directly ahead. Keep on next to the wall then, when the wall goes off to the right, continue ahead and slightly left downhill towards the bushes at the bottom. At the bottom turn right, next to the fence, then turn left across the footbridge over the A30. On the far side cross the stile ahead and continue downhill. At the bottom turn left along the path.

This is Station Wood. It is largely comprised of sessile oak, typical of woodland on the fringes of Dartmoor. At the other end of the wood is a small reservoir, built to supply the water tanks at Okehampton Station which were used to top up the water in the steam locomotives.

Go through the gate at the end and turn right, downhill. Go down towards Okehampton Youth Hostel.

The hostel, on the right, occupies the former goods sheds of Okehampton Station. It was converted to a Youth Hostel in the 1990s.

Cross the car park and head for the footbridge on the far side. Cross this to arrive at the platform at Okehampton Station.

Further Information

Okehampton is the meeting point of a number of long-distance walks, including the West Devon Way (to Plymouth), Two Castles Trail (to Launceston), Tarka Trail (to North Devon) and Devonshire Heartland Way (to the Exe Valley). Basic information on these walks, together with how to obtain more detailed information, is available in the free brochure "Discover Devon Walking" available in local Tourist Information outlets or by contacting the Discover Devon Information line, Westacott Road, Barnstaple, EX32 8AW, telephone 0870 608 5531. The information may also be obtained by visiting www.discoverdevon.com.

Local Tourist Information outlets also have information on other local walks, including two packs on Okehampton Countryside Walks East and West, price £2 each. There are also free leaflets on "Meldon Rambles" and "Dartmoor Railway Walks".

OS maps for this walk:

Landranger (1: 50,000 scale) no. 191 Okehampton and North Dartmoor
Explorer (1: 25,000 scale) no. 113 Okehampton or
no. OL28 Dartmoor