

Drake's Dartmoor - Buckland Monachorum and the Walkham Valley

Sir Francis Drake has many associations with the parish of Buckland Monachorum, in the far south west corner of Dartmoor. Chief among these is the fact that he made Buckland Abbey his home, but he also had links with the village itself. The Drake connections have prompted the promotion of the area and its history, facilities and walks as Drake's Dartmoor.

The walk starts and finishes in Buckland Monachorum, the village at the centre of this very scenic and historically interesting parish. It descends the valley of the River Walkham, flowing off high Dartmoor, follows the river until it reaches the Tavy past a variety of old mining sites and then climbs back to the village.

The walk crosses and re-crosses the West Devon Way, one of Devon's long-distance walks which links Okehampton with Plymouth and which also passes through Drake's Dartmoor.

Fact File

Buckland Monachorum lies just outside the boundary of Dartmoor National Park, between Tavistock and Plymouth and is reached by relatively narrow roads. It is served by regular buses to and from Yelverton, which is on the main road between Tavistock and Plymouth and which has regular bus links to and from both towns as well as to Exeter at weekends and on weekdays through the summer.

For timetable details call Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit www.traveline.org.

Walk Length: 5 miles/8 km; there are no stiles but three climbs - one gentle climb of 50m/165 feet; a shorter one of 20m/65 feet; and a longer one of 100m/330 feet.

Facilities: Buckland Monachorum has buses and a pub; there are some small car parking areas along the route but no other facilities.

The Walk

The walk starts in the village of Buckland Monachorum.

The walk description starts outside the church. However, the bus stop for the village is at the far end. If arriving by bus it is worth returning into the village for a look around. Buckland Monachorum has a number of fascinating old buildings, making it very picturesque as well as interesting.

Towards the top of the village is the Gift House. This is reputed to be an almshouse dating to 1661 and endowed by a Sir Francis Drake, a descendent of the famous one. He left £120 to build an almshouse for six "pious" persons born and bred in the parish.

Further down are a number of houses of similar age or even older, especially nos. 15, 16 and 17. The pub, the Drake Manor Inn, is also from the 1600s and may have been the former church house. The church is also a fine example of ecclesiastical building with a good interior. The present church was built around 1490 on the site of an earlier one, and has always had close links with Buckland Abbey, a mile or so to the south.

The Abbey was founded as a Cistercian monastery by the Countess of Devon 1275 - hence the village and parish name "Monachorum", Latin for "of the Monks". Following the dissolution of the monasteries, it was sold in 1541 to Sir Richard Grenville and then, in 1581,

sold on to Sir Francis Drake. It is now the property of the National Trust and is well worth a visit. It is not on this walk.

Start the walk outside the church. With your back to the church turn right, past Lady Modyford Hall.

Notice the stone plaque above the door, commemorating its building in 1702 and repair in 1850. The hall is in fact the old school for the parish.

Follow the road on past the bus stop and turning point and on round to the left. At the next junction, next to Netherton House, turn right.

Netherton House, which was a farmhouse dating from the 1600s, is not visible from the road, but on the right here is Whitehall, formerly Netherton Cottage, which dates back to the same time.

Continue gently uphill on this lane to reach a staggered crossroads. Keep straight ahead here and soon the lane ends by a car parking area on the edge of open downland.

This is the western end of Roborough Down, itself the very western edge of Dartmoor. It was an area of Iron Age occupation and seems to have been farmed until medieval times.

Our walk cross the West Devon Way here. Note the waymark signs by the gate. The West Devon Way is a 36 mile route between Okehampton and Plymouth, largely following the western edge of Dartmoor. Following it to the right here will lead to Yelverton and then, ultimately, Plymouth while going left leads to Tavistock and on to Okehampton.

Walk ahead from the end of the lane, just to the right of the obvious track. The track, carrying the West Devon Way, soon veers to the left but our walk follows a grassy track straight ahead and gently downhill.

The high land of Dartmoor is now seen ahead and right, while over to the left is the deep wooded valley of the River Walkham, a tributary of the Tavy.

The path enters an area of bushes then trees and steepens and becomes quite stony.

We are now entering old mining country and near the bottom of the slope, by the steep zig zags in the path, is the site of the old 19th century Walkham United Mine, where copper was extracted. Many of the slopes here are artificial, being the remains of spoil heaps, although the area all looks very picturesque now.

Continue to the bottom, pass the car parking area and cross the bridge.

This is Grenofen Bridge over the River Walkham. The Walkham rises high on Dartmoor before eventually joining the larger River Tavy. Our walk now follows the Walkham to its confluence with the Tavy at Double Waters.

Walk up the road for a short way and then turn left along the track signed as a public bridleway. The path passes behind Lower Grenofen and continues through woodland parallel to the Walkham. Follow the waymarks, keeping left at the first fork and right at the second.

This a superb length, the only sounds being those of birdsong and the running water, this being a relatively fast-flowing river.

Continuing on, the remains of another copper mine are passed, this time with an intact chimney. This was Westdown Mine, another 19th century venture. It is hard to imagine the noise and fumes that must have been here 150 years ago.

The path returns to the riverside then, after a picturesque section of rapids, bears away again and climbs to a hard track. Follow this uphill to a junction.

The walk here meets the West Devon Way again. Going right the West Devon Way will lead to Tavistock and on to Okehampton, left is towards Yelverton and Plymouth.

Turn left at the junction, following the West Devon Way downhill. The track descends steeply to return alongside the Walkham, then climbs as a rocky path to pass through a gap in the rocks. On the other side bear left to reach a footbridge.

This very scenic location is Double Waters, where the Walkham joins the Tavy. The Walkham, followed from Grenofen Bridge, is the river on the left while the Tavy comes in on the right. In due course the Tavy, reinforced by the Walkham, will itself meet and be absorbed by the Tamar.

This area supports important lichens, including a number of uncommon and rare species. Over 80 species have been recorded locally, including some scarcely found elsewhere in the country.

Cross the footbridge and climb the opposite bank to the main track below the rock outcrop.

The walk leaves the West Devon Way here. That route goes left on its way to Yelverton and Plymouth while our walk goes right.

Turn right along the track.

Up on the left here is the site of yet another old copper mine. This is older than those passed previously, being in operation from 1558 until the 1870s. It goes by the wonderful name of Virtuous Lady Mine, said to be named after Queen Elizabeth I.

Follow the track ahead and then bend left, right and left again on the main track uphill. Keep climbing to emerge on open downland.

There are now superb views left over the Walkham Valley and also backwards towards the Tamar Valley.

At the top keep ahead and go through the gate onto the lane. The lane descends to the farmstead at Coppicetown. At the junction here turn left. Where this lane itself goes sharp left, just past some houses, turn right down a narrow track signed as a public bridleway. Descend steeply to a ford, cross the stream and continue on a green lane on the opposite side. Follow this to emerge on a gravel drive, which is followed to a surfaced lane. Turn left here.

Note that after wet weather it might be better to keep to the surfaced lane from Coppicetown. To do this go straight ahead at the farmstead at Coppicetown then keep left at Fairtown to arrive at the far end of the bridleway.

Follow the road round to the right at the next junction to arrive back at the bus stop and turning point at Buckland Monachorum. Continue ahead to return to the centre of the village.

Further Information

For details of the West Devon Way, there is an information pack available at local Tourist Information Centres, price £3. Alternatively, it may be obtained from the Discover Devon Information Service, Westacott Road, Barnstaple, EX32 8AW, price £4.50 including post and packing. Make cheques payable to Devon County Council and quote reference DTY/DP16.

For information on the wider network of walking routes in Devon, obtain the free leaflet "Discover Devon - Walking" from Tourist Information Centres or the address given above. Alternatively, visit the website www.discoverdevon.com which has all the walks information.

For further information on Drake's Dartmoor, visit www.drakesdartmoor.co.uk. The information includes further walks by clicking on "What's On".

OS maps for this walk:

Landranger (1: 50,000 scale) no. 201 Plymouth and Launceston
Explorer (1: 25,000 scale) no. 108 Lower Tamar Valley and Plymouth