

Walk No. 46 Castles, Town Walls, Granite and the West Devon Way - A Lydford Walk

The West Devon Way follows the western edge of Dartmoor between Okehampton and Plymouth, offering some of the most attractive walking in Devon. Approximately half way along the route is the village of Lydford, a real historical gem on the edge of the moor. Because Lydford is also served by the Granite Way cycle route, it is possible to use the village as a base and walk a circuit using these two routes and thus get a good flavour of what both have to offer, as well as being able to sample the historic delights of Lydford itself.

Because the Granite Way is a cycleway it is also suitable for use by wheelchairs and buggies. In addition, this part of the West Devon Way is generally well surfaced and has no stiles and is also suitable for the more robust buggies.

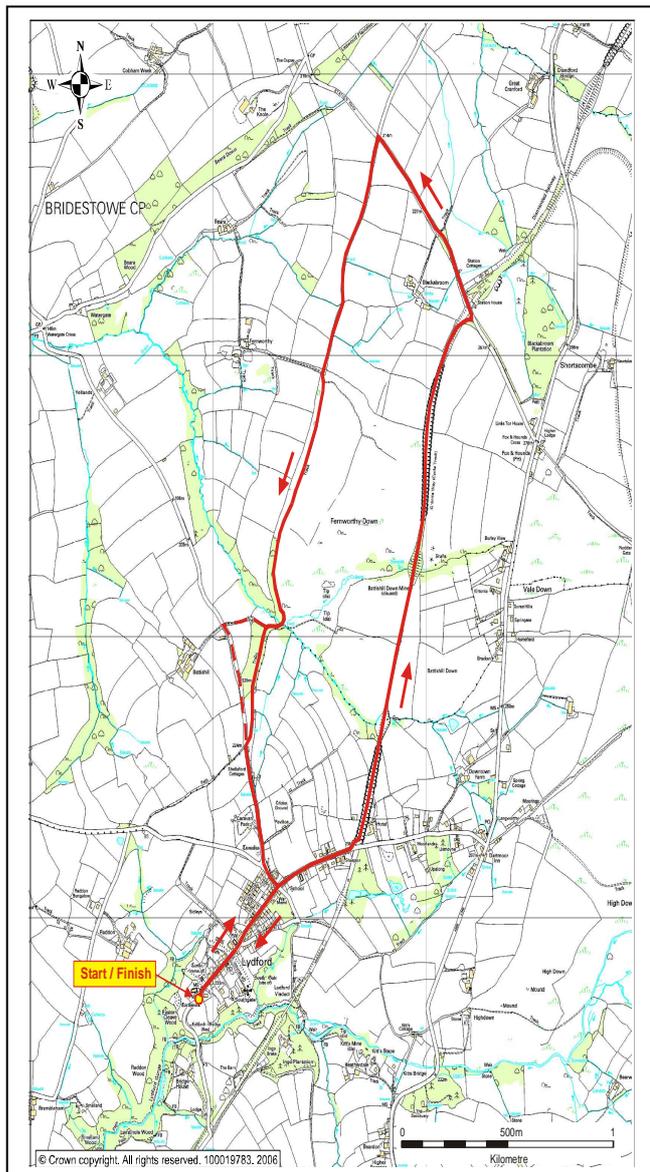
Fact File

Lydford is served by a regular bus service between Barnstaple, Bideford, Torrington, Okehampton, Tavistock and Plymouth. On Sundays it is within the Dartmoor Sunday Rover bus network which gives cheap access over a wide area. For timetable details contact Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit www.traveline.org.uk.

Walk length: 8km/ miles; no stiles and all flat except for one short climb.

Facilities: Lydford has a pub, toilets, car park and buses; there is a Post Office/store 1km/0.5mile off the route; refreshments are available in the summer season at the National Trust café at Lydford Gorge, 1km/0.5 mile from the village.

The Walk



Start the walk by the bus stop and toilets at the entrance to the car park in Lydford, opposite the Castle Inn.

The large square stone tower next to the pub is Lydford Castle. Although always referred to as the castle, it was actually built as a prison in 1195. It was rebuilt in the 13th century, when the ground was built up around the base. Prior to that, it would have stood even taller. Its function was to act as the prison for those who broke the stannary laws. These were laws applying to Dartmoor tin-mining, and were administered by special courts which were notoriously harsh.

Next to the castle is the church. Although the church dates from the 13th century, it seems it stands on a very early Christian site. The churchyard forms an embanked area, usually the

sign of an early site, and the dedication to St Petroc indicates a probable Celtic origin, perhaps pre-dating the Saxons' arrival at Lydford.

Behind the churchyard is a grassy area and at the far end of this are a series of mounds. These are the remains of the "real" Lydford Castle. This was built as a Norman fort in the late 11th century, shortly after the Battle of Hastings. As can be seen it occupied an impressive defensive position at the end of the ridge on which Lydford stands.

One of the reasons why this early castle was built was that in Saxon times Lydford was a very important settlement. It was one of four Saxon boroughs established by Alfred the Great as a defence against the Danish invasions. It was an early planned town and there are still signs of the original grid pattern established as early as the 880s. It was one of the relatively few walled Saxon towns and also had a mint, producing coins from the 970s until

about 1050. These have been found in Scandinavia, presumably taken there as part of a “Danegeld”, or Viking protection money.

Note on the track between the castle and the church there is a runic stone. This was erected in 1997 to commemorate the 1000th anniversary of the Viking raid on Lydford.

As time went on, Lydford’s military importance was replaced by Okehampton and Launceston and its commercial importance by Okehampton and Tavistock. Consequently, while those settlements grew, Lydford if anything shrank, famous only in the later middle ages for its harsh stannary law and grim prison.

Leaving the church, castles and pub behind, walk along the road through the village.

Look out for a bridleway on the left which marks the line of one of the Saxon streets of the planned town. The line of the wall is just before the Nicholls Hall is passed.

Continue along the road past the War Memorial and on past Lydford Primary School.

On the skyline of Dartmoor ahead is Widgery Tor, clearly crowned by a cross. The cross was erected in 1887 to mark the golden jubilee of Queen Victoria. William Widgery was a stone mason who lived in what is now the Lydford House Hotel. Widgery Tor is also known by its earlier name of Bratt Tor.

A little way after the school turn left down a track signed as the Granite Way. This leads down to a cutting and the line of an old railway.

The Granite Way is the name given to that length of the National Cycle Network which runs along the western edge of Dartmoor. It forms part of the Devon Coast to Coast cycle route between Ilfracombe and Plymouth, National Cycle Route number 23, but also forms a useful route for walkers.

The railway here was part of the London and South Western Railway’s main line between London Waterloo and Plymouth. Although Plymouth was not reached until 1890, this part of the line was completed in 1874. Express trains used this route for much of the 20th century, until it was closed to passengers in 1968.

As the track emerges from the cutting the edge of Dartmoor becomes clear to the right. To the left is a superb view over the valley of a tributary of the river Lyd.

The track passes a National Cycle Network marker and a railway platelayer’s hut used as a shelter for walkers and cyclists. After walking

a little further the trail leaves the old railway at a road bridge and climbs up to the road. Turn left here, across the railway bridge.

On the right as you cross the bridge, the private house occupies what used to be Bridestowe Station. This quite remote station was actually a couple of miles from the village of Bridestowe. Passengers seeking the solitude of Dartmoor would use the station, and it was also used for the shipment of rabbits from the Dartmoor warrens to London for cheap food.

Continue along the lane.

The lane is lined with trees, and used often to be referred to as Bridestowe Cathedral, from the likeness to a cathedral aisle.

Pass the entrance to Blackabroom Farm then, a little way further on, turn left along a wide track at a “crossroads”. There is a West Devon Way waymark on the signpost.

This lane is shown as a road on early maps. It is possible it may be the original main road to Lydford from Okehampton. It now makes a pleasant track and an ideal way to pass quietly through the countryside.

Keep ahead through some gates to arrive at an area of open land. Follow the track as it bears slightly left before continuing ahead.

This grassy moorland is Fernworthy Down, a western outlier of Dartmoor. It is a superb length of the walk and gives splendid views in all directions.

Follow the track as it descends off the Down.

Note the evidence of mining and quarrying activity around here. There used to be iron workings in this area in the 19th century.

Cross the stream at the bottom of the slope.

Notice the colour of the water in the stream. The brown tinge is partly from the moorland peat, partly from the iron in the soil here.

Continue on the track uphill. A little way up the track is a junction of paths. Turn left up the narrow path, signed as the West Devon Way.

(Note that during the winter this path can be a little muddy. As an alternative, or for the slightly less active or those pushing buggies, carry on up the main track to the lane at the top. Turn left along the lane to re-join the West Devon Way at the first house on the left).

Follow the path uphill to arrive at a lane at the top, by a house. Turn left along the lane. Keep ahead at a junction to arrive back at the Lydford War Memorial. Turn right to the village centre, pub, castle and car park.

Further Information

An information pack on the West Devon Way is available from local Tourist Information Centres, price £3.00. Alternatively, it may be obtained from the Discover Devon Holiday Line, Westacott Road, Barnstaple, EX32 8AW, telephone 0870 608 5531 price £4.50 including post and packing. Quote reference DP 16 and make cheques payable to Devon County Council.

There is also a free leaflet on the Granite Way available locally or from the above address - quote reference DP 91.

For information on the wider network of walking or cycling routes in Devon there are free brochures "Discover Devon - Walking" and "Discover Devon - Cycling" which may be obtained from local Tourist Information Centres or from the same address above. Alternatively, visit the website www.discoverdevon.com which has the 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.OL28 Dartmoor.