

Walk No. 55 A Visit to the Hangman

The North Devon Coast is characterised by high cliffs and deep valleys, or combes. This walk explores two of the more spectacular examples of these features.... Combe Martin, a long, narrow village which straggles for some two miles up one of these coastal combes, and the sinisterly named Great Hangman, at 318m or 1,044 feet one of the highest points on the Devon coast, with one of the most wide-ranging views.

The high point and the combe are linked by a length of the South West Coast Path, which here is also followed by the Tarka Trail, which traces the journey by Tarka the Otter in the book of that name. The return part of the walk follows that path, while the outward leg uses historic inland lanes.

Not surprisingly, since the walk has to get to the top of Great Hangman from sea level, this is a walk which perhaps should best be attempted by the relatively fit. Although not the whole 1,044 feet is climbed in one length, there is a long, steady climb of 200m or 650 feet which has to be tackled. Although not exceptionally steep, it is somewhat unrelenting, although the views from Great Hangman are worth it.

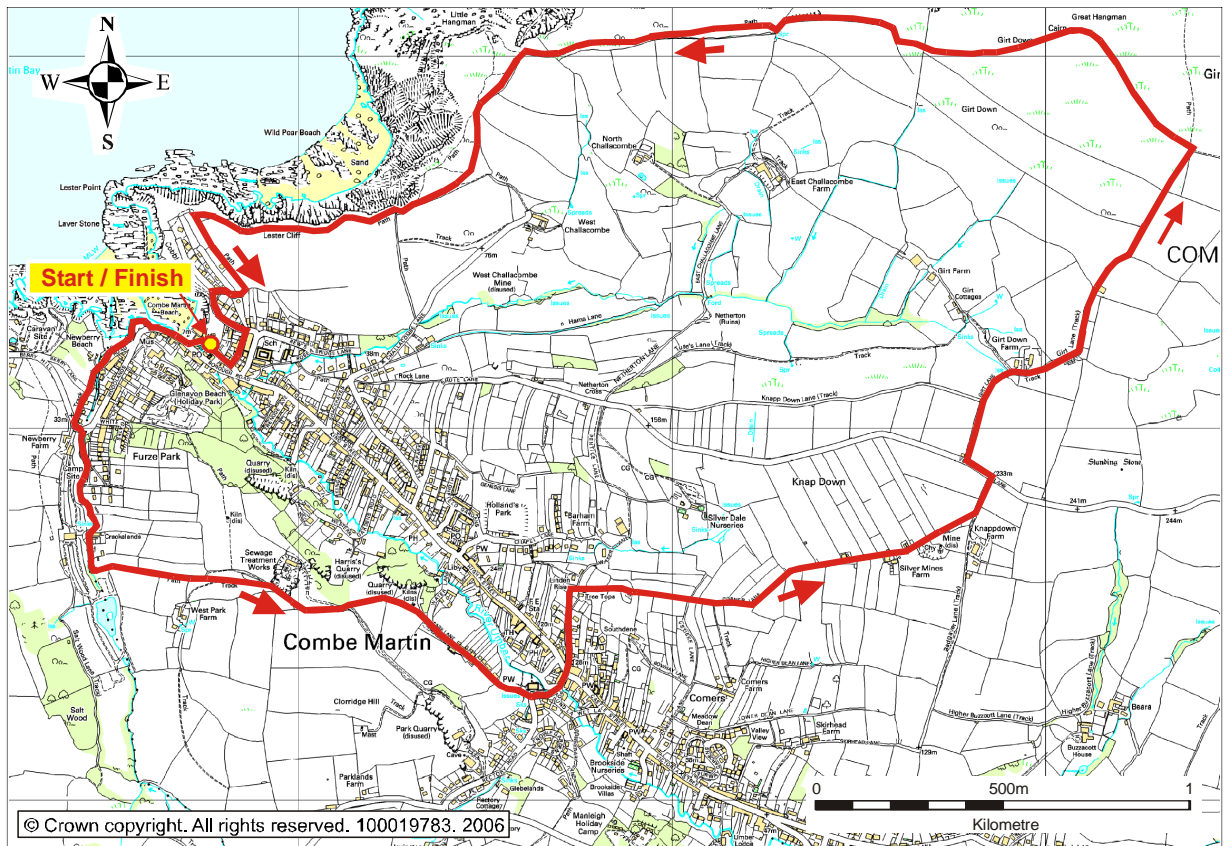
Fact File

The walk begins and ends in Combe Martin, which has regular bus connections from Barnstaple and Ilfracombe. For timetable details contact Traveline on 0870 608 2 608 or visit www.traveline.org.uk. Combe Martin also has car parks.

Walk Length: 9km/5.5 miles; there are three stiles and a climb to a high point of 318m/1,044 feet; there are actually three noticeable gradients on the walk, of 200m/650 feet, 45m/150 feet and 40m/130 feet.

Facilities: Combe Martin has all facilities; there are no facilities on the higher lengths of the route.

The Walk



Start the walk outside the Tourist Information Centre, by the entrance to the main car park [Kiln Car Park].

Although much of Combe Martin was developed in Victorian times, it has much older origins and has some fascinating history. Its name comes from the combe, or narrow valley, in which it is situated, plus the name of the medieval lord of the manor. In its time it has been important for mining, especially of silver and lead, as a port and for the quarrying of limestone. The Kiln Car Park here at the start got its name from a lime kiln which stood here to burn the limestone quarried locally, which was then spread over the local fields as a fertiliser.

From the Tourist Information Centre head towards the sea and along Cross Street to arrive at the main road alongside the beach. Follow the roadside path, here used for the Coast Path and Tarka Trail.

The shelter of the little bay made Combe Martin an important port in times past, when roads were too poor to be used for transporting goods very far. In medieval times Combe Martin would supply a ship for royal military expeditions if required.

Towards the top of the hill bear right along the tarmac footpath. Keep right at the fork to descend, but keep above the beach to some steps.

Climb to a lane and continue ahead, rising slightly. Where the lane swings sharp right, taking the Coast Path with it, continue ahead on the signposted public footpath, along a track. At the house keep to the right of the wall to arrive at the main road.

Be careful here, as visibility on the bend can be restricted.

Taking care, cross the road and turn left, then almost immediately turn sharp right along the signposted public footpath at Furze Park. Follow this lane then fork right along the farm track signed towards Crackalands. Follow this pleasant winding track past the former farm buildings and on into a green lane. At the next junction keep right to start climbing an attractive, grassy green lane.

This is the first of the relatively stiff climbs on this walk, rising some 45m/150 feet.

At the open grassy area head uphill to the clear track and continue ahead.

Here at the top the route crosses the watershed between two combes, leaving the relatively small Crackalands combe to enter the combe in which Combe Martin sits.

Continue ahead, going downhill now, on the clear track.

This track is known as Park Lane. It gets its name from the hill rising to the right, which in medieval times was a deer park. The park was fenced for the exclusive use of the lord of the manor.

At the crossroads of tracks continue ahead and downhill.

Look across the valley to the hill slopes on the opposite side of Combe Martin. You may be able to notice that some of the fields are long narrow strips running down the slope. Their origin probably lies in a system of common open fields which once occupied the slopes. These became divided into strips owned by individuals but, whereas in most other places these strips were themselves consolidated into fields, here this never happened and they became fossilised in the landscape. During the 19th and early 20th century they were especially used for growing strawberries.

Continue downhill until the tower of Combe Martin's church appears ahead.

The linear nature of the village is very obvious from here. Combe Martin has a claim to the longest village in the country - the steep and narrow nature of the valley made development up the sides very difficult so it grew along the valley bottom.

The track becomes a surfaced lane and after passing some houses arrives at Combe Martin Church.

The origins of the church are 13th century, but much dates from the 15th, including the distinctive tower. Notice the gargoyles on the side of the tower. As in so many coastal settlements, the church was a little way inland, to avoid being easy prey for raiders from the sea. It is now conveniently situated half way along the linear village.

On reaching the road bear left downhill towards the village. At the main street go straight across into Corner Lane and begin climbing the side of the valley. After a residential length, this becomes a deep, sunken green lane with, in places, a rocky surface.

Combe Martin has many of these sunken lanes. They may well originate as access ways to and from the many mines, mostly silver and lead, which used to surround the village. A number of them also go parallel to the narrow strip fields, and they may well have been used for access to these. Some of the lanes are very deeply cut into the surrounding land.

Note the possibly even more deeply sunken lane joining on the left, but keep going on up the main track, which bears to the right and continues to climb.

The hedges on both sides are quite high, but gates give good views over the valley down to the right. On the left are the narrow ends of some of the strips.

After what seems an age of climbing, some old farm buildings are passed on the right.

This is Silver Mines Farm, on the site of Knap Down Mine, one of the many mines that were found around Combe Martin. Just beyond is the ivy-covered remains of the mine chimney. Silver and lead mining began in the 1200s and was a royal monopoly. Edward I brought miners down from Derbyshire to work the mines. Mining continued on and off through the 1300s to the 1500s, and then again in the 1800s. This was the last working mine, abandoned in 1875. Elsewhere around Combe Martin there were numerous other silver and lead mines and some iron, copper and manganese was also mined.

Keep climbing past the chimney to reach a junction. Turn left here, still climbing, though less steeply. At last the gradient eases as the walk reaches the top of Knap Down.

The route has just climbed 200m/650 feet from the village street, so if you are hot and tired, that is excusable.

Turn left along the road along the ridge of Knap Down then, after a short distance, turn right along a wide track signposted to Girt Farm and Great

Hangman. Keep to the track ahead through the gates at the house called Girt Down then follow the track as it swings left to wooden gates. Pass through two sets of gates then continue ahead next to the wall on the right.

Pass another gate without going through it and continue next to the wall to a gate and a stile in the far corner. Go through onto the open land of Girt Down.

This is a superb atmospheric location with tremendous views all around. Notable to the right is the prominent height of Holdstone Down, said by those who follow such matters to be an important centre of ley lines. Behind are views over Combe Martin's valley and on to the edge of Exmoor. The only sounds are likely to be the song of skylarks and the bleating of sheep.

Continue ahead and, breasting the hill, the sea comes into view. At the end of the stone wall is a crossroads of paths - the walk has now reached the Coast Path. Turn left here and follow the Coast Path as it climbs gently to arrive at the cairn on the summit of Great Hangman.

At 318m/1,044 feet this is one of the highest points on the entire 630 miles of the South West Coast Path. Views east along the Exmoor coast show the "hogsback" cliffs so characteristic of this coast. Inland can be seen a wide sweep of North Devon and Exmoor. Ahead, to the west, is the prominent pointed summit of Little Hangman with the bay at Combe Martin beyond.

There are various theories relating to the origin of Great Hangman's name. There is some sketchy evidence that gallows formerly stood here [or possibly on Little Hangman], while some say the name derives from an earlier Celtic name "an men", meaning the rock.

Continue on the Coast Path, descending off Great Hangman. Keep going as it leaves the open down. The impressive cliffs next to Little Hangman are passed, then the Coast Path goes to the landward side of the summit.

For those who still have enough energy, a side path goes to the top of Little Hangman's summit. There are more superb views from the top, especially over Combe Martin.

After Little Hangman the path descends more steeply for a while, then passes behind the green cliffs backing Wild Pear Beach.

In the late 18th and early 19th century iron ore was mined here and shipped to South Wales from Combe Martin.

This path is not only part of the South West Coast Path but also the Tarka Trail. The book mentions Tarka reaching the beach on his route from Exmoor to the Torridge estuary; following his lost mate and cub, he picked up their scent here.

Keep to the Coast Path as it rises for a while, then drops quite steeply until it reaches some houses and then arrives back at the top of the Kiln Car Park.

Further Information

For further details of the South West Coast Path, an annual guide including an accommodation list is published by the South West Coast Path Association price £6. It may also be obtained from the Discover Devon Holiday Line, Westcott road, Barnstaple, EX32 8AW, telephone 0870 608 5531, price £7.50 including postage and packing. Quote reference DTY/DP33 and make cheques payable to Devon County Council.

For those interested, there is also a Tarka Trail information pack and a Tarka Trail leaflet available. Both may be obtained from local Tourist Information Offices or from the address above. The pack costs £2, or £3.50 from the Holiday Line including postage and packing - quote reference DP102; the leaflet is free quote reference DP 101.

There is also a National Trust leaflet on walks on the West Exmoor Coast, available from normal Trust outlets, price £0.75, and the Combe Martin Tourist Information Centre has a selection of leaflets and brochures on local walks.

Information on the wider network of walking routes throughout Devon is available in the free brochure "Discover Devon - Walking" from local Tourist information Centres or the address above. Alternatively visit the website www.discoverdevon.com which has all the information and an order form.

OS maps for this walk:

Explorer (1:25,000 scale) No. OL9 Exmoor