

MOOR TOR

Whilst many visitors prefer to simply drive around enjoying pretty towns or seeking out Devonshire cream teas, Dartmoor's true majesty can be experienced hiking between its famous tors and heather moorland. Yet making the transition from pottering around to attempting more adventurous walks does require a degree of confidence and preparation. So what better way to instill confidence than by following a tried, tested, and published route? In this case, a cracking walk recommended by the renowned outdoors writer and publisher Ken Wilson.

His book, *Wild Walks* (published 1988) is a classic that compiles some of the UK's finest walks. His selection for Dartmoor in *Wild Walks* not only strings together Dartmoor's most iconic rock-formations and Bronze Age relics but also demonstrates with good weather it's possible to navigate more challenging routes by using the landscape's visual features. Although no hiker should ever set off on Dartmoor without a good map a compass is also a godsend if the notorious mists descend. ▣



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“There is little pleasure to be gained from struggling along a contrived route across desolate and boggy hills just for the sake of wilderness,” wrote Ken. Instead, he pieced together a circular hike we shall follow called the ‘The Moors and Tors of Eastern Dartmoor’. It combines wilderness (without ever straying too far from public roads) and the spellbinding symmetry of Eastern Dartmoor’s tors, which by late autumn exude a rich tapestry of moorland colours.



Top, Hound Tor
Middle, Hameldown Beacon
Above, Hound of Basket Meals Tea-Van

Our daylong adventure commences in the picturesque moorland town of Widecombe-in-the-Moor. Ken seemed in a hurry to escape the cream teas and coach-parties of this well-visited town made famous for its September Fair that spawned the legend of Uncle Tom Cobley. And indeed, it doesn’t take long to access open moorland shortly after passing the aptly named 14th-century Old Inn.

Thereafter, the first hour of this hike heads roughly northwards along glorious Hamel Down. This broad moorland ridge delivers both the sensation of wildness and antiquity. The standing stones, inscribed boundary stones, and Bronze Age barrows, on route make interesting and useful navigational pointers following the well-trodden trail along the Down. But these relic stones are mere hors d’œuvres for what waits at Hamel Down’s end.

Grimspound left Ken purring with pleasure. “I found it a moving experience to approach Grimspound through wet, clinging mist and suddenly be confronted by the massive lichen encrusted boulders, left where they had fallen thousands of years ago,” he wrote, before calling this 1.6ha compound of 24 huts the finest Bronze Age relic on Dartmoor. It’s well worth exploring this exceptional site and keeping an eye open for low-flying hen harriers.

Thereafter, Ken’s trail diverts steadily eastwards beneath King’s Barrow towards a remote wooded valley, which is entered at Heathercombe Brake. On route he explains the decaying wooden posts you’ll notice were

erected around 1940 “to deter German gliders from landing on the flattish moor”.

Once inside the enchanting and privately owned Heathercombe Woods, our route ventures steeply downhill through an oasis of exotic gardens and new plantations until a tiny hamlet of late 15th-century granite longhouses. There, I decided to go off-piste from Ken’s trail, instead continuing through the woods due south towards Natsworthy Gate to avoid some tricky navigation ahead onto Cripdon Down.

But we return eventually to Ken’s walk at a much-revered memorial called Jay’s Grave. Flowers invariably adorn this tragic grave of young farm girl, Kitty Jay, who was ‘taken advantage of’ then cruelly shunned by the local community and eventually committed suicide around the late 18th-century. Her tragic spirit, however, lives on in local memory and occasional ghostly apparitions.

From here, we climb onto craggy Hayne Down to begin an enchanting afternoon southwards bagging tors. The highly-visible tor formations, for those without memories stretching back 280million years, are jointed granite stacks of subterranean magma exposed by erosion then slow-weathered into remarkable formations such as Bowerman’s Nose. Ken notes this 10m-high pinnacle guiding hikers onto Hayne Down resembles the “head of an old man with a thrusting chin and very prominent nose”. I’d also add sporting a baseball cap, which may well have ravens (real ones) perched upon it.

From Hayne Down, next up is the ever-popular Hound Tor whose name failed to impress Ken. It “is said to resemble a pack of hounds although I cannot see the likeness,” he protested. I have to agree because to me Hound Tor’s assemblage of rock chimneys resemble a mini Manhattan skyline. See what you think?



Grimspound

FOOT FILE

LENGTH: 22.5km (14miles)
 TIME: 6-8 hours
 START/FINISH: Widecombe-in-the-Moor
 SUITABLE FOR: Reasonably fit
 MAP: OS Explorer OL28
 PUBLIC TRANSPORT: Service • 271 'Haytor Hopper' Saturday and summer service links Widecombe to Newton Abbot (which has rail connection). • 672 limited to Wednesday only links Widecombe and Newton Abbot.
 PARKING: Widecombe has several car parks providing all day parking (from £0.70-£1.30)
 LITERATURE: *Wild Walks* by Ken Wilson & Richard Gilbert



On Hound Tor

Getting to it, however, I wasn't so impressed with Ken's direct route so I'd recommend heading back down to the small lane from whence you came and follow this due south to Hound Tor's car park where the wittily named Hound of the Basket Meals tea-van might be rustling up refreshments.

From Hound Tor an awe-inspiring section scales the heights towards Dartmoor's very own 'Twin Towers' - Haytor Rocks. Again, using this massive megalith as a horizon marker, follow a decent footpath beyond Hound Tor to the left of the jagged Greater Rocks. You'll know you're on the right track (excuse the pun) because the walk dissects an old tramway. Ken researched this long-abandoned stone tramway to discover it was once used by horse-drawn wagons to transport granite from local quarries. He dates it to 1820 and explains how local granite made its way into grandiose London buildings such as London Bridge and the British Museum.

Such features inspired our intrepid author to wax lyrically: "Man's uses of natural resources on the moor, whether the huts and enclosure at Grimspound, the numerous standing stones or, far more recently, the granite rails of Haytor Down blend harmoniously with the wild moor and in no way detract from the beauty of the landscape."

And that 'beauty' is never more evident for non-vertigo sufferers than by ascending Haytor's stone-cut steps onto its 457m summit for the best

360° panorama on Dartmoor. On a clear day one can easily see the South Devon coast.

It's also possible to spy the final hour of our walk, which traces a succession of smaller tors that Ken blithely notes, "come thick and fast". And by the time you've scaled Pil and Top tors, the now visible 33m-high perpendicular tower of Widecombe Church should prove a welcoming sight. This marks the end of a long circular walk where you will most definitely have earned a cream tea whether shared with Uncle Tom Cobley or not. ■



- A** Take bridleway east of Grimspound for 1.5km skirting King's Barrow towards Heathercombe Brake at (GR716813) – entering through a woodland hunting gate just beyond new tree planting.
- B** Steep downhill through woods first to hamlet's junction (GR718811) for right turn signed 'Natsworthy Gate' then bridleway to Jay's Grave (GR732799).
- C** Access Bowerman's Nose via bridleway opposite Jay's Grave to Moorhayes (GR738798) then return back to Moorhayes to take lane south to Hound Tor car park (GR740792).
- D** South of Hound Tor is a well-defined footpath running left of Greater Rocks (GR747786) that plunges downhill through woodland marked 'via Leighon'. After crossing stream, soon exit woodland and leave footpath to Leighon to hike uphill ahead onto rising moorland.
- E** Continue south across a broad pass crossing tramway to Haytor Rocks (GR757770).
- F** From Haytor, head downhill (towards car park) and negotiate westwards Saddle, Rippon, Pil, and Top tors, for roughly 4km back into Widecombe skirting the B3387.

5 OF THE BEST

Grimspound Bronze Age Settlement

The chunky walls of this 3000years-old Bronze Age settlement were once thought defensive although recent theories suggest they were to contain livestock.

Church House

This National Trust property is a wonderful two-storey church property built around 1540.

Hen Harrier

Elusive moorland bird that swoops low over open moorland while the males' striped tail earns the sobriquet 'ringtail'.

Rock Scrambling Hound Tor

Relive your childhood and go for a rock scramble on this famous adventure playground.

Dartmoor Ponies

You'll see many crossbred ponies but the true Dartmoor pony, a breed recognized since the Middle Ages, are strong-bodied with flowing manes and singular colour: such as brown, bay, or black.

Shortcut

If the weather is bad, shave 1.5-2 hours off this walk by skipping the moorland section from Hound Tor onwards. This involves a 4km road walk back to Widecombe by initially following the lane running south from Hound Tor car park before joining the B3387 westwards into Widecombe.