

A Perambulation of the Forest of Dartmoor

Encircling the high moor, this historic boundary makes an outstanding walk. Deborah Martin follows the trail of 12 medieval knights

PHOTOGRAPHS FELI ARRANZ-FENLON,
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Historical Background

The Perambulation is probably the oldest of Dartmoor's historical routes. It marks the boundary of the land that belonged to the Crown and was known as a forest because it comprised the King's hunting ground. Though Dartmoor Forest originally belonged to the King, in 1337 Edward III granted it to the Black Prince who was also Duke of Cornwall and it has remained part of the Duchy of Cornwall ever since.

The Forest lies within the parish of Lydford and adjoins 21 other parishes, so there are numerous boundary stones around its borders. In order to mark out the line of the boundary various Perambulations have taken place over the centuries, the earliest one recorded being in 1240. In that year the reigning King, Henry III, despatched 12 of his knights to ride on horseback around the Forest boundary and to record certain fixed points on the route. They made the journey clockwise, starting in the north, and these are some of the points they noted:

Hogam de Cosdonne (Cosdon Beacon) – Parva Hundetorre – Thirstone (Watern Tor) – Wotesbrokelakesfote (Hugh Lake foot) – Heighestone – Langestone (Long Stone on Shovel Down) – Furnum Regis (King's Oven) – Wallabrokeshede (Walla Brook head) until it falls into the (East) Dart – another (West) Dart to O Brook – Dryework (Dry Lake) – Battyshull (Ryder's Hill) – Wester Wellabroke until it falls into Aven (Avon) – Ester Whyteburghe (Eastern White Barrow) – Redelake (Red Lake) – Grymsgrove – Elysburghe (Eylesbarrow) – Crucem Sywardi (Siward's or Nun's Cross) – Ysfother (South Hessary) – aliam Ysfother (North Hessary) – Myster (Great Mis Tor) – Mewyburghe (White Barrow) – Rakernesbrokysfote (Rattle Brook foot) – la Westsolle (Stenga Tor) – Ernestorre (probably Yes Tor)

Another Perambulation was recorded in 1608 and a few more details added to the route. In subsequent years the line of the boundary varied in places as different parishes disputed the bounds set by the Duchy, and the boundary line shown on Ordnance Survey maps is the more modern alternative. On the whole, the differences between the two are not great.

Our Walk

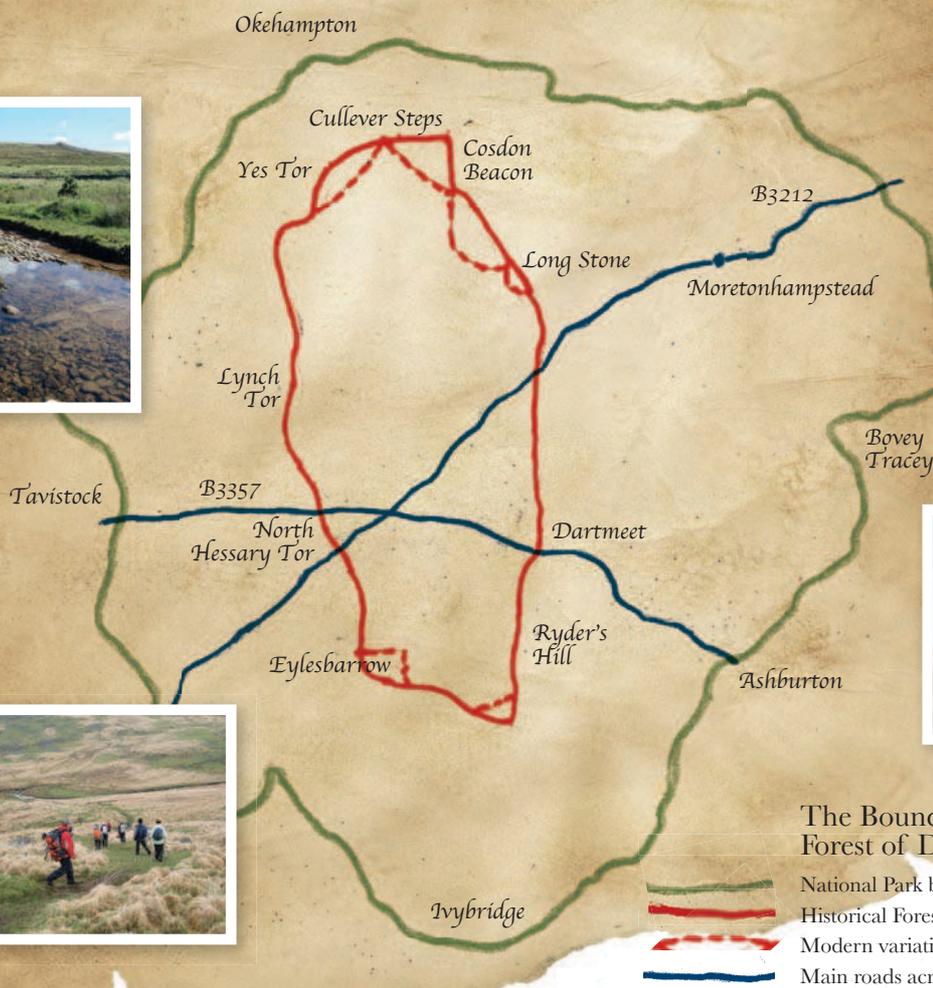
In May 2010 a group of us from the Ramblers' Moorland Group walked the Perambulation over three days with overnight stops. Doing it as a continuous walk has the advantage of gaining a perspective on the whole route, of 'joining up the dots' of the significant features that mark out the boundary. Though the knights of 1240 started at Cosdon, we opted to begin at Dartmeet for practical reasons. May meant long daylight hours – but would the weather be kind? We knew there would be some challenging terrain underfoot and numerous rivers to cross, so hopes were pinned on a dry, clear spell. This is a brief account of our journey.

Day 1: Dartmeet to Princetown (about 16 miles)



Crossing the West Dart at Week Ford

We set out in bright sunshine but with a chilly breeze – ideal walking weather. With the Dartmeet stepping stones looking slippery, we walked upstream to Week Ford to cross the West Dart and then followed the boundary up the O Brook. After a coffee break at Dry Lake Foot we began the long climb up to Ryder's Hill. We failed to find the Holne boundary



rock in Wellaby Gulf but passed another two bound stones on our way to the top. A group of cattle were gathered around the trig point and looked a bit surprised at this intrusion on their territory.

From Ryder's Hill we turned SSE over rather squelchy ground to find the head of the Western Wella Brook and then followed the stream down to Huntingdon Cross. The historical boundary crosses the Avon here but we prudently used the clapper bridge upstream, though Feli (our leader today) made sure we returned down the opposite bank of the river before the ascent to Eastern White Barrow. This ancient burial mound is the southernmost point on the boundary and a fine viewpoint over south Devon, but the chilly wind made us shelter in a nearby tinnars' gully for lunch.

It didn't take long to pass Western White Barrow and then it was down to Red Lake to follow the Erme upstream; the spoil heaps around here are evidence of medieval tinworkings. From Erme Head Ford it was more or less a beeline to Plym Steps, with plenty of typical 'Dartmoorish' terrain to enjoy on the way. The boundary crosses the river here, then runs uphill past the Hartor Tors to reach Eylesbarrow, another ancient cairn. Just below it are the ruined buildings of the 19th-century Eylesbarrow tin mine. From the cairn it was downhill to Seward's (or Nun's) Cross, with a clear view ahead and west to the tors around Burrator. Now we just had the long tramp into Princetown along the sandy track, passing the lump of South Hessary Tor, named as Ysfother by the early perambulators. The prospect of tea at Fox Tor Café kept us going at a brisk pace. Sunshine all day: so far so good.

Day 2: Princetown to Belstone (about 17 miles)



The cobbled ford at Culliver Steps

Next morning was a different matter altogether – thick mist and drizzle. Typical Princetown weather! Girded up in waterproofs we set out, thinking it could only get better. It didn't. We climbed to North Hessary Tor, then when Great Mis Tor loomed out of the mist we stopped for coffee, picturing the view in our mind's eye. Continuing north to the Walkham, we crossed it near Dead Lake. This was the first of several rivers to be crossed today, so the rain wasn't welcome; but George, today's leader, had contingency plans in case of high water levels. As we continued to White Barrow (probably Mewyburghe of the 1240 Perambulation) visibility improved and we could see

Limsboro Cairn before we reached it. Now there was a marshy section to reach Western Red Lake, which we followed down to the Tavy. This had to be crossed to avoid a lengthy detour; the rocks were wet but well above the water and, despite a few shrieks, no one fell in. On the far side we had a well-earned lunch break, now resigned to wearing our waterproofs all day.

We left the Tavy to follow the Rattle Brook upstream virtually to its source. The sky was beginning to clear and we could see the Dunna Goats ahead and, soon, the remains of Bleak House. This well-known ruin was built in about 1879 for the manager of the Rattlebrook peat works; then it was called Dunnagoat Cottage, but today it lived up to its present name. We stayed with the Rattle Brook, passing a boundary stone marked L for Lydford, until it vanished into the general surrounding bogginess, at which point we veered east to Stenga Tor. Things were looking up: across the valley the High Willhays/Yes Tor ridge was clear of mist – perhaps the weather was changing? Contouring round, then descending, we reached the West Okement at Sandy Ford; again we were lucky – it was just possible to cross (quickly) without getting water in our boots. Nearby in the rushes is the first Okehampton parish boundary stone.

Now came the steepest climb of the day, up to Fordsland Ledge and then on to High Willhays. Sadly, that window in the weather had disappeared and we groped our way along the ridge, almost touching Yes Tor before we saw it. A descent through clitter brought us to the Red-a-ven Brook, then up to West Mill Tor. Down towards Row Tor the sky finally cleared and we had a good view ahead of the Belstone ridge – something to look forward to tomorrow. Following the lovely Black-a-ven Brook, we reached Cullever Steps and the two boundary stones that mark the meeting of Okehampton and Belstone parishes; though it's not recorded on the stones, this is also the Forest boundary. We crossed the East Okement and left the boundary to walk into Belstone.

Day 3: Belstone to Dartmeet (about 19 miles)



Coffee break at Cosdon Beacon

A sunny morning – and my turn to lead so I was well pleased – and, by luck, the sun remained with us all day. We walked back towards Cullever Steps then climbed steeply up beside Irishman's Wall to cross the Belstone ridge. The views were exceptionally clear and ahead was our next port of call, Cosdon Beacon. Although no longer on the Forest boundary, it was included in the 1240 Perambulation so we felt duty bound to go there.

Descending to the Taw, we were able to cross easily at the ford and begin the long ascent. Our coffee break at the top was rewarded with panoramic views and these continued as we walked south along the ridge to the stone circle and the White Moor Stone. This latter is unmistakably on the boundary for it bears the letters 'DC' on its south face, as well as 'TP' and 'T' for Throwleigh and South Tawton parishes. From this point we chose to follow the modern rather than the historical boundary – a higher level and more interesting, though slightly longer, route. After Hound Tor and Wild Tor Well, the next climb took us up to Watern Tor, where 'GP' carved into the Thirlstone marks the boundary with Gidleigh parish. Now it was down through Hawthorn Clitter, across Hugh/Hew Lake and over to Manga Rock, also marked 'GP'. Crossing the North Teign at Manga Rails, we stopped for a lunch break – this time in summer sunshine!

Over Stonetor Hill and past two boundary stones, the next significant point was the Long Stone; this bears the letters 'DC', 'C' and 'GP' to record the Forest's boundary with both Chagford and Gidleigh. Beyond

Thornworthy Tor lies a barrier that wouldn't have troubled the knights in 1240: the Forest boundary now passes through Fernworthy Reservoir. We opted for the drier route via the footpath below the dam. After a brief look at the Heath Stone (uncertain as a boundary marker, but clearly showing the religious conviction of a reservoir superintendent), we trekked south over Hurston Ridge, crossing the stone row to reach the mining remains near King's Oven. A grassy mound here is believed to be the site of Furnum Regis.

The boundary now follows the Walla Brook, but lack of access point near Runnage entailed a detour down the Redwater valley and through Soussons plantation, with a view of tin-mining remains on the way. Rejoining the boundary at Runnage Bridge, we passed the ancient tenement of Pizwell Farm and took a permissive path to reach Riddon Ridge. The carved stones here mark tanners' boundaries, not the Forest, which continues along the Walla Brook. The ridge seemed to go on and on – by this time leg muscles were aching – but at last we reached the track to Babeny Farm and were soon back at the Walla Brook, which we followed down to the East Dart. It was then just a short step back to the start.

Tired muscles aside, the overwhelming feeling was a great sense of achievement. We had experienced some of the best parts of the moor in a continuous walk that had linked the past with the present and brought history to life. If you've never done the Perambulation, it's well worthwhile. And what's more, you can then enjoy the accolade of being a recognised 'bounder'! ■



The White Moor Stone, bearing TP for Throwleigh parish and above, less clearly, DC for the Forest boundary; on the other side is T for South Tawton

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