

WARRENS, GIRTS AND OUZELS

Tamsin Grey explores a circular route full of historical interest close to the Warren House Inn on the east side of the high moor.

Starting and finishing at the historic Warren House Inn with its famous open fire that is said to have been burning since 1845, this route can either be walked or cycled and has a number of variations that make it more or less challenging to suit your mood, age, fitness and the weather. It is also accessible by bus, although at the present time these do not carry bikes.

This route is almost entirely off road following unsurfaced bridleways, so expect rough going in places and some mud or lying water at times. It crosses open moorland, dips in and out of Soussons forestry plantation and runs back up the Challacombe valley past Challacombe and Headland Warren Farms offering stunning views of disused tin mines and medieval farming remains and perhaps a glimpse of the elusive ring ouzel.

Starting with your back to the Warren House Inn, turn left along the B3212 to find the bridleway leading off on your right shortly after the small car park on the right. Follow this track as it winds across heather moorland and down into the valley. This whole area formed part of two of the largest tin mines on Dartmoor, Birch Tor and Vitifer, and the deep gullies or gerts left by the surface mining can still be seen. There were also underground workings with mine pits up to 400 feet deep.

For those wanting more of a short stroll and perhaps a picnic,

this valley with its smooth grassy areas alongside the stream makes a great point to aim for. With stunning views of Birch Tor and the walled enclosures built by the mining community for rabbiting and vegetable growing there is much to look at. The enclosures are said to be in the shape of playing card symbols and folklore has it that one Jan Reynolds was picked up by the devil for playing cards in Widcombe Church and dropped his cards in this spot where they turned to stone.

This area is also a favoured by the ring ouzel, a red status species of the highest conservation priority that is

Famous open fire that is said to have been burning since 1845

slightly smaller and slimmer than a blackbird. Keep a look out and you may be lucky enough to see the male with its distinctive black plumage with a pale wing panel and striking white breast band.

If you're planning to carry on, cross the West Webburn River and turn right to follow the track down the valley to the edge of Soussons plantation. Go through the gate and follow the track onwards for a short distance until it divides. Here you have a choice of routes. Keep left for the shorter option following the footpath and permissive bridleway that contours around the hill to Challacombe Farm

passing the disused Golden Dagger Tin Mine on the way. Here you will see the remains of buddle pits used for washing the tin ore and the ruins of Dinah's House, a meeting place and dormitory for the tin miners.

For a longer option turn right and follow the bridleway along the forestry track to Soussons Farm. In front of the farm turn left and follow the bridleway across open grassland and back across the West Webburn before sweeping uphill to join the track down to Challacombe Farm.

Look out for the Medieval Village of Challacombe shortly after passing the current farmhouse where the remains of at least seven houses can be seen. The most well-preserved show similar features to the longhouse with animals and people sharing the same building.

Continue to follow the bridleway straight on up the valley. After the group of cottages on your left the track turns to grass but remains clearly defined all the way to Headland Warren Farm, which along with warrening or rabbit farming, was once said

to have been an inn serving the mining community of the area. Depending on the vegetation growth you might be able to see the remains of the medieval strip lynchets above you on the left.

At Headland Warren Farm turn left up the drive and pass through the yard and in front of the main house to reach the gate back into open country. After the gate you have two options. For a longer route (either walking or cycling) that includes a short section of main road for the cyclists among you, turn right and follow the bridleway up to the road where you will need to turn left and then left again after a short distance along another bridleway that runs up over the flank of Birch Tor before dropping down to Bennett's Cross, a boundary marker of Headland Warren and also of Chagford and North Bovey parishes, and turning left along the B3212 to reach your finish point back at the Warren House Inn. Do bear in mind that this second bridleway crosses open moorland and can be soft and liable to damage in wet weather.

The Early Bronze Age village of Grimspound with its circular



PHOTOGRAPHS JOHN BAKER

ROUTE INFO

LENGTH: Main route 5 miles (8km)
TIME: Allow at least 2 hours
START/FINISH: The Warren House Inn SX674809
TERRAIN: Mostly off road and a mixture of unsurfaced tracks that can be rough in places and grassy paths. Expect some mud and lying water at times.
MAPS: OS Explorer OL28 Dartmoor; HARVEY Dartmoor and surrounding area for Cyclists.
PUBLIC TRANSPORT: The Transmoor Link between Yelverton and Moretonhampstead passes the Warren House Inn on a regular basis. It does not carry bikes.
PARKING: There is roadside parking outside the Warren House Inn and two small car parks a short distance in either direction along the road. There is also a car park at Bennett's Cross.
REFRESHMENTS: The Warren House Inn is open daily from 11am, serving hot and cold drinks from a well-stocked bar. Food is served from midday with an extensive menu and specials boards which cater for all tastes.

wall enclosing twenty-four huts is also a short detour away from here and well worth a visit (turn right up the bridgeway then right at the road to pick up the bridgeway on your left at Firth Bridge that leads up to the pound itself).

If you're looking for a shorter route, or a firmer wet weather alternative, turn left after the gate and follow the harder path alongside the wall and then up and over Headland Warren. This section can be quite narrow and rough in places particularly on the descent. There are also significant drops into disused mine workings alongside the path.

Back in the West Webburn valley keep another look out for ring ouzels before retracing your way up the bridgeway to the Warren House Inn, reputed to be the third highest public house in England. The Inn has been refurbished but retains its character. There is now a restaurant adjacent to the bar and a display of fascinating artefacts highlighting the sometimes turbulent history of the Inn.

