



# War Horse Walk

## Meandering around the Meavy

*"I have never before in my long and eclectic career been gifted with such an abundance of natural beauty as I experienced filming War Horse on Dartmoor."*

- Steven Spielberg

Exploring the high Meavy country on the south west side of Dartmoor is always an enchanting experience. The landscape is rich with beauty, heritage and natural history. Spielberg claimed this extraordinary country was the third character of his blockbuster adaptation of *War Horse*. In his piece in *The Telegraph* the author, Michael Morpurgo, ponders why Dartmoor was chosen. "I'm sure, because it has so much to offer a film-maker: wide skies, craggy tors, boulder-strewn fields; here you can see the farming is hard." He also adds, "It's hardly surprising, then, that so many writers and poets and storytellers have been attracted to this place, from Conan Doyle, in his spine-chiller *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, to Alice Oswald in her celebratory poem *Dart* and now Spielberg."

With all this in mind I was keen to revisit Meavy country and was prompted by a leaflet I picked up describing a walk undertaken by Shaugh Prior Primary School, Dartmoor's education officer Willem Montagne and Aune Head Arts project called "Walk your Ears." Although not immediately in the vicinity of the *War Horse* film's base at Ditsworthy, this exploration is at the heart of the scenes captured on film.

The walk starts at Norsworthy Bridge car park and climbs steadily over close cropped grass to the castle like Middleworth Tor. This stands in a dominant position overlooking Burrator Reservoir built in



Sunset over Leather Tor and Sharpitor

1891 to supply Plymouth with its drinking water. Sandeman, the County's water engineer, proposed this as a solution to the leaks of potable water in Drakes Leat, at a cost of £96000

The path continues to climb on up towards Down Tor where boulders and clutter lie strewn about like a natural maize able to absorb and hide away a great number of other visitors. Twenty three tors are identifiable from its summit along with a grandstand view of rolling hills and sweeping downs. To the south west is the sea and beyond the Tamar river are the Cornish heights of Bodmin. The view down over Sheepstor and Burrator has to be one of the great British views and the sunsets in this area are particularly beautiful.

To the north of Down Tor lies

the Newlycombe valley littered with bronze age remnants, tinning activity as well as the derelict 17th century farmsteads. The last inhabitants were cleared out in 1916 after the water corporation seized the watershed in a heavy-handed measure to protect the potable nature of the water feeding into Burrator. It's easy to speculate whether the last men and boys forced off the land at Newlycombe were then sent to the front in France.

Between Down and Combshead Tors the way wanders over the shoulder of Higston Top bypassing its 350 metre long stone row. Ahead lies the bleak and desolate upper watershed of Eylesburrow Common, reputed to be Dartmoor's coldest spot.

The route then drops steeply

past Cuckoo Rock into the tinning area of the Upper Narrator Brook and past the ruins of Combshead Farm, once the home of John Pomeroy and his three arable fields known as Corn Park. In the film of *War Horse* the far fetched scene of Joey ploughing the rough ground at Dittsworth could well have been the reality here.

The way crosses the brook via a hidden clapper bridge in a tiny gorge of willow and ash that shade bubbling pools and little falls of sparkling water. Rocks, tin pits and gerts abound. - its easy to see why this spot was the ideal place to hide smuggled liquor inland from Plymouth.

Down stream it is a delightful woodland walk with the opportunity to spot a pied flycatcher. The well marked path passes the blowing house near Deancombe and follows the good forestry track back to Burrator. The view through the trees on a sunny day towards distant Sharpitor and Leather Tor rising above the conifers is one of my favourites - it reminds me of walking in the Swiss Alps near the little village of Bondo under the Piz Badille.

The last few strides of this lovely walk encounter huge beech trees, planted no doubt by the Pengelly family who inhabited the numerous farms along the now deserted Narrator Brook making this once a veritable tribal valley. Perhaps this was the inspiration for another great story teller - RD Blackmore and his book *Lorna Doone*... ■



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**FOOT FILE**

**LENGTH:** 5.5km  
**HEIGHT GAIN:** 160m  
**DIFFICULTY:** Whilst this is a straightforward walk in good weather, this is open rough country following an unmarked route for much of its length. The country is prone to impenetrable fog that can descend without warning. The ability to use a map and compass is therefore a key skill necessary to undertake this walk safely.  
**TIME:** To enjoy the walk and a picnic with stops along the way allow 2-3hrs.  
**REFRESHMENTS AND ACCOMMODATION:** Royal Oak at Meavy  
 Foxtor Cafe and bunkhouse at Princetown

**FOOT NOTE**

*What was in the pack on my back?*

We took enough drink and food for a rugged walk with spare energy snacks. We all had a coat with a hood and a spare layer. I took a map and compass, small first aid kit (that contains a space blanket and a tick-tool) plus a mobile phone. I had Scarpa walking boots and Anna wore Wellington's that had a vibram walking sole. I carried our baby in a very comfortable ERGO baby carrier. [www.ergobaby.com](http://www.ergobaby.com) At the steep descent to Combshead Farm a walking pole would have been useful.



**TOP LEFT**  
Walking between Combshead Tor and Down Tor

**TOP RIGHT**  
The secluded beauty of Upper Narrator Brook

**ABOVE**  
Setting the map using Cuckoo Rock seen on the skyline

**Tor Focus**  
 There are three tors worth visiting along the route. **Middleworth Tor** and its rock basins, beautiful **Down Tor** and its view of 23 tors and **Combshead Tor**. The hard core remnant **Cuckoo Rock** is the most enigmatic stone in this area. The bouldering is excellent although for experienced climbers only - see [www.javu.co.uk](http://www.javu.co.uk). According to [legendarydartmoor.co.uk](http://legendarydartmoor.co.uk). "Distant legend also says that the rock was a place where the pixies used to meet and dance and frolic in the moonlight. In days of old this was also said to be where smuggled liquor was hidden." To hear the Cuckoos of Deancombe the best time to visit is from the 19th May onwards.