

Getting Started in Letterboxing

Ian Barber introduces this popular Dartmoor activity that is enjoyed by people of all age ranges.

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Gather the best bits of treasure hunting, navigation and art. Combine them with a bit of exercise and place conveniently in the largest wild area in southern England. Ladies and Gentlemen: Dartmoor letterboxing.

This obscure, yet highly addictive hobby has nothing to do with the Royal Mail red pillar boxes of course. Letterboxing's roots lie deep in the northern moor at Cranmere Pool. When James Perrott, a moorland guide from Chagford brought his guests in the mid 19th century to this spot, their trek could be recorded by the leaving of a calling card in a bottle he'd planted at the site.

Modern day letterboxing involves following clues to find hidden 'letterboxes'. A letterbox typically contains a rubber stamp and a visitors' book. A letterboxer takes an imprint of the stamp and leaves an individual mark in the book. There are many hundreds of letterboxes on Dartmoor, yet it is possible to walk all day and, unless actively searching, not spot any at all.

I was introduced to letterboxing at a young age, but I was quickly hooked. The family trips to the moor were eagerly anticipated, and I was searching under every rock and in every crevice on the moor - like a ferret - in my hunt for boxes. The family collection of stamps grew steadily, until now when almost 25 years later, the scrapbooks were filled with over 15,000 stamps. I love Dartmoor letterboxing as much as ever, and despite having lived and worked abroad, and all over the UK, I was drawn back to the South West to be close to the moor and continue adding to the letterbox collection, updating my log as I go.

To get letterboxing, you'll need a map - the OS Dartmoor Explorer map is perfect - and a compass, preferably a sighting compass for accuracy. Some letterbox clues provide GPS coordinates, like in its spin-off hobby, Geocaching, so a GPS can be of use. You'll also need to take paper or a book and an ink pad to take impressions of any stamps you find, and it may help to have a walking pole or similar, to poke under rocks where boxes may be hidden.

A circular walk in an easily accessible area of the moor is the best way to start letterboxing. This can best be achieved by purchasing a charity walk. Clues for these can be bought at one of the Letterbox Meets, held every year at Lee Moor Village Hall on clock-change Sundays, in March and October or by obtaining the current list of walks from the Letterbox 100 Club, the informal group for those who have amassed 100 stamps. The Meet is a great opportunity to join the Club. The catalogue of Dartmoor letterbox clues is sold there too.

Alternatively, you might like to take your chance and visit such places as Pew Tor, Cox Tor, Staple Tors, Belstone Tors and Row Tor, all of which have a fair number of boxes hidden under rocks around their slopes. Please ensure that any letterbox found is well hidden in the same place it was found, and not visible to any passer-by.

Dartmoor letterboxing is great for families, perfect for competitive types, awesome for almost anyone really! It tests navigation skills which last got an airing at Scouts. The requirements of solving cryptic letterbox clues, visiting unexplored corners of the moor and general observation ensures that new found appreciation and knowledge of the moor is gained through letterboxing.

Happy hunting!



Charity Letterbox Walks

Searching for these boxes was how many Dartmoor letterboxers started their hobby. Cluesheets are sold to raise money for good causes. The siting of this type of walk requires advance permission from the National Park Authority due to the numbers of people that complete the walk as well as the sensitivity of the landscape.

Clues

Whilst chance finds come from just searching under rocks, following a clue can quickly pinpoint a box location. Clues are an element that makes Dartmoor letterboxing so unique. Typically a letterbox clue involves several compass bearings on surrounding visible landmarks such as tors, standing stones and buildings, plus some detail of where and how the box is hidden such as the shape and size of the rock it is beneath.

Other clues may state how far from a point the box is, such as from a wall corner or stile, this is usually measured in paces. Some clues provide full Ordnance Survey grid references, as used in Geocaching. These can help narrow down a location and when a GPS is used it can obviously make letterboxing easier.

Not all clues are straightforward though. Some clues are intentionally tricky, with cryptic or vague references which require map work, intricate knowledge of the moor or puzzle solving skills in order to find them. They often provide fewer compass bearings and are quite a challenge to find!



Essential Equipment

- Map
- Compass, GPS and the skills to use them.
- A selection of coloured ink pads, as very few letterboxes include them.
- Postcards, some paper or a book in which to make a copy of the stamp found.
- A 'personal stamp' - unique to you - so you can leave your mark in the letterbox visitors' books found.

Letterbox stamps can take many forms. A selection can be purchased at craft shops. Some artistic folk hand craft their stamps using carving tools on pieces of rubber. Unique, custom made designs can be turned into sheets of polymer stamps by companies such as Nina Crafts www.ninacrafts.com or The English Stamp Company www.englishstamp.com.



Siting a Letterbox

To site a letterbox you will need:

- A blank notebook as a visitors' book.
- A rubber stamp.
- A robust and airtight letterbox container.

Good quality clip-lid food boxes are excellent. Though to survive long term on Dartmoor may require two boxes - one inside the other. Two boxes also helps protect against vermin damage. Please do not use metal containers so as to avoid confusion with Ministry of Defence debris.

Anyone can site a letterbox but letterbox owners are responsible for maintaining their own boxes. Boxes should only be sited in natural holes and cavities on land which has public access. Please avoid siting any boxes in archaeological features, such as cairns and stone circles or in locations where they will obviously disturb wildlife, such as known bird nesting sites.

Letterboxing Code of Conduct

The National Park Authority and the Letterbox 100 Club have produced a code of conduct for letterboxing which offers top tips on letterboxing responsibly. The code states that letterbox hunters should always follow the Country Code, and search for letterboxes in a way that does not damage land, and leave letterboxes as you would hope to find them - securely closed and well hidden.

Further Information

- www.letterboxingondartmoor.co.uk
- www.dartmoorletterboxing.org
- www.who-is-the-challenger.blogspot.com