

Transcript of Audio Walk for Haytor

Peter Nash – Presenter

Jackie Ridley, Sustainable Tourism Officer, Dartmoor National Park Authority

Bill Allen, Ranger, Dartmoor National Park Authority

Track 1 – Introduction (Grid reference SX765 772)

Hello and welcome to Dartmoor National Park, all 368 square miles of it. I'm glad you're able to join me on this audio walk from Haytor, which is on the eastern side of Dartmoor and is one of the most popular locations with visitors and locals alike.

This particular walk not only offers rewards of stunning views and landscapes, but also encapsulates so many of Dartmoor's special qualities – its natural beauty, its wildlife and, of course its cultural heritage.

We've divided this audio tour into several sections, each one being a separate track for you to download onto your player. That way you can simply switch off when you are walking and then start the new track at the next point of interest.

Our walk today will take us north-west from the new Information Centre, past the most well-known of Dartmoor's tors, Haytor Rocks, through the old Quarry and out the other side to see the remains of the extraordinary Granite Tramway. Then it's northwards to Smallacombe Rocks to see prehistoric features and fabulous views across the Becka Brook valley. From there we head to Hound Tor – site of Dartmoor's most important medieval village and of course, legendary Houndtor Rocks, made famous as the inspiration for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's story of "The Hound of the Baskervilles".

Due south then crossing the beautiful openness of Holwell Lawn, passing Greater Rocks on our right and retracing our steps, emerging eastwards at Haytor Rocks to enjoy far reaching views to the coast. Then a short walk downhill concludes the tour and it's just a case of deciding whether to have a well earned ice cream or indulge in a Devonshire cream tea at nearby Widecombe-in-the-Moor.

So, let's make sure we have sturdy boots, as it can get a bit wet and muddy up there and the terrain can be a bit uneven, and a waterproof coat – oh and sunscreen, as you never can be too sure with Dartmoor's changeable weather.

The walk is approximately 6 miles (10Km), so best allow around 3.5 hours, that way you can take time to really appreciate your surroundings.

Joining us on the walk is Jackie Ridley, Dartmoor National Park Authority's Sustainable Tourism Officer and I've just met up with her here at the newly built Information Centre.

(Greet Jackie)

So Jackie, tell me a little about the Centre – it's packed with information, but I understand it has been built with the environment in mind.

Jackie - Yes, that's right, using sustainable options wherever possible: recycled materials, timber sourced from local sawmills in Devon and Cornwall; energy efficient lighting and heating and grey water for the toilets. And even the entrance mat is made out of recycled tyres.

Now just before we set off, a word about maps – pretty essential to have one if you are walking anywhere on the moors. Mine is an Ordnance Survey Explorer OL28, entitled Dartmoor and Jackie, you're bringing one that you downloaded from the website that accompanies the audio.

Jackie - Yes, you can download this from the Authority website, but if you haven't got one with you, call into the Information Centre and collect one.

The grid reference of the Information Centre is SX765 772 and we're at the entrance to the car park.

Cross the road, go through the two boulders and head up towards Haytor Quarry on a fairly well worn path towards a pile of rocks on the horizon with a distinctive pine tree in front.

On the walk you will see a wooden fenced area on the right, which is the header tank for the reservoir at the start of the River Lemon and Haytor Rocks on your left.

Track 2 – Haytor Quarry (Grid Reference SX759 774)

We've arrived at the big pine tree and just in front of it is the broken stone wall. This would have been the enclosure for the ponies who worked in the quarry. Turn left here, keeping the stone wall to our right and follow it round to the gate at the entrance of the quarry.

And here we are at the gate, a great pile of granite rocks on our left and what looks to be a Ranger on the other side of the gate. Goes through gate and meets with Bill Allen, Ranger.

Wow, look at this, it really is a quarry – a steep drop down with some hawthorn trees and silver birches ready to break your fall should you fall in!

Bill – Yes, it shows how nature has really claimed back what would have been an industrial landscape in the past.

Now, this great pile of granite rocks to our left, as we have come through the gate, have some interesting marks on them. Do you know anything about them?

Bill – That was actually the method they split the granite in the past. They would have used an iron bar, about 5 feet long, called a jumper (this was before we had drills or generators) and they used it to make a hole about 3 inches deep and move along about 6 inches and do another one and so on. That could take a whole day to make a line of holes and then they would put a series of wedges in to those holes, called feather and tares, and tap along with a hammer until the granite would split. But, and there is a but, the pile of granite you see are ones where they didn't split where they were meant to. I often wonder what they said!

We'll follow the path round until you reach an amphitheatre and the lake – the quarry pond. It looks like a natural feature, but it was a working landscape – a hive of activity with noises and smells and the sound of hammering, but now it is a tranquil oasis.

Bill - Granite quality can vary, but this was identified as being of very good grade and was wanted for building large monuments in London, including Nelson's Column, the old London Bridge, which is now in the middle of the Arizona desert and the British Museum.

There are remnants of the old winding gear at the side of the lake and what looks like an old telegraph pole lying in the water. You can turn the handles of the winding gear which are worn smooth.

(Sound of winding gear being turned and sound made by metal rings).

Look out for goldfish in the pond – there are thought to be around 200 in the pond, the original pair probably being deposited there on the way back from Widecombe Fair.

Leave the quarry by climbing the stile and passing through the cutting. As you emerge from the cutting, the view opens out – take the path to the left and follow this until it is crossed by the Granite Tramway.

Track 3 – Granite Tramway (Grid reference SX757 777)

We've arrived at the Granite Tramway– it looks like a huge railway line.

Jackie – Well, this is the Granite Tramway and actually forms part of a much longer walk, called the Templar Way. It's 18 miles starting from the quarry area and follows the route the granite would have taken on its way to Stover, where it would have been loaded onto barges and transported by canal to the port of Teignmouth and then shipped off around the world.

Bill – It was very labour-intensive. The granite had to be manhandled onto trucks and these were drawn by horses, with extra horses being used for the uphill sections. The trucks used were flat bed types that the men used to walk alongside and had metal wheels which went on the outside edge of the granite. There are many miles of track laid, plus all the sidings - it was an incredible feat of engineering.

We'll now head over to Smallacombe Rocks by crossing onto the path opposite us.

We'll say goodbye to Bill for now as he needs to get on with his Ranger work and we'll meet up with him later at Haytor Rocks at the end of our walk.

Track 4 – Smallacombe Rocks (Grid Reference SX753 783)

Jackie - So now we're at Smallacombe Rocks and if you look over to your right, you will see the remains of a circular stone house. This probably dates back to 1500 BC. It is likely it would have had a thatched roof and would have been quite cosy with a fire inside and sufficiently protected from the elements.

We'll head on to the next pile of rocks, which is right on the edge and overlooks the Becka Brook Valley to Houndtor Rocks in the distance.

Good grief, what a fantastic view – looking down into a valley with lots of hawthorn, silver birch and a few oak trees dotted around and some interesting vegetation and boulders sprayed all over the ground.

We'll clamber down to the right of these rocks, taking care as we go, and head into the valley. We're passing some old, knarled hawthorn trees which are quite windblown and are covered with lichen, which is a good indicator of clear air.

We'll follow the path downhill until we reach a wooden signpost for Houndtor Down.

Once at the signpost, we'll carry on as it takes us into the woods, picking our way over the moss-covered boulders until we reach the river and the stone (granite) clapper bridge (Grid Reference SX752 787).

This makes an excellent coffee stop to have a rest before embarking on the steep climb up the hill.

Look out for the larch conifer plantation on our right and the old stone gateway as we go up the hill – and take time to stop for a breather and look back at the views! Continue on until we reach a gate at the top which opens on to Houndtor Down and leads on to Hound Tor Medieval Village.

Track 5 – Hound Tor Medieval Village (Grid Reference SX747 788)

It was quite a walk up that steep hill, but we reached the gate and followed the path, bearing right to arrive at the main medieval settlement at Hound Tor, which is actually a medieval longhouse – this accommodated both humans and animals.

If you would like to find out more about this settlement, visit the Virtually Dartmoor website www.virtuallydartmoor.org.uk and select the Higher Uppacott virtual tour and listen to the commentary by Deborah Griffiths, Head of Archaeology and Cultural Heritage for Dartmoor National Park Authority.

(Extract played from Virtually Dartmoor)

(Transcript starts)

This is the deserted medieval settlement at Houndtor, which is in Manaton parish, but not very far away from Higher Uppacott and it's a deserted, stone built settlement that was probably constructed around about 1250 AD and then was deserted about 150 years later - so there's a little bit of an overlap with Higher Uppacott, this was just going out of use as Higher Uppacott was really being born. The buildings here are very similar in their form to Higher Uppacott, they are the traditional Dartmoor farmhouse type which is the longhouse, but a much cruder version, and they've got all the essential characteristics of a longhouse: so it's a long rectangular building which is built into a hill slope, so you have a higher end and a lower end and it's essentially divided into two halves by doorways in the long side, which are opposing each other and create a passage across the width of the building. And then in what we call the lower end is the area that's used for accommodating cattle, and then at the higher end is the domestic end, where people were living. This site was excavated by an amateur archaeologist called Mrs Minter from Torquay back in the 1960s and it's thanks to those excavations that first of all we realised how significant longhouses are and secondly that we can actually see how they were when we visit here. So in this particular building and in the other longhouses you can actually see the central drain, which is running down the middle of the lower end, and you can see also in the higher end the flat stone which would have been the hearth stone for an open fire - so again, when it was first built, Higher Uppacott would have had those attributes as well. Where this differs from Higher Uppacott is the scale: it's a much smaller building, but it's also much more crudely constructed, the walls are drystone walls, which means there is no mortar used to hold the stones together...and the walls were probably fairly low with the roof sitting on top of them, so it would have been a single storey structure, no evidence of any windows but they may have been there, but certainly none anywhere recognisable. And so you would have had a low dark building which would have had the smoke from the open hearth billowing around at one end and some cattle aroma billowing around at the other end, so it's probably fairly stuffy in here, but there's a very intimate relationship clearly visible here between people and their animals. Like Higher Uppacott there is this little room at the higher end which is buried

deeply into the hillside, which we call an inner room: it's not heated and we're not entirely sure what its purpose is, it's either a kind of retiring room for members of the family, or else it's a store, but as a store it would be particularly damp: it would [be] pretty horrible as a retiring room for the same reason.

The settlement of Houndtor probably came into existence in the middle of the 13th century, as a result of land hunger, so the lower lands were filling up so people got pushed onto marginal lands; and it was deserted around about 1400 when the trends reversed. The Black Death which came into Devon in the 1340s undoubtedly reduced the population, and at the same time the climate got worse, it got colder and wetter, which meant that people were able to desert these marginal areas and move back down into the lowlands; so it's only here for about 150 years but it does have, as I said before, this little overlap with Higher Uppacott.

The interesting thing is that when you visit here it's very much a moorland setting, so you've got gorse and heather and bracken and things, and it's quite difficult to believe that in medieval times people were actually ploughing the land just outside the settlement and they were growing cereal crops here, they were growing rye and they were growing oats, and Mrs Minter's excavations actually discovered some remains of some charred oats, so around about here would have been arable fields, each longhouse has its own little garden, so they'd be growing vegetables and things like that, and really quite remarkable to think that was all going on 750 years ago.

(Transcript ends)

Our next stop is at the monumental Houndtor Rocks – a bit of a climb from the medieval village – just nestling on the horizon.

It's looking a bit mystical as the clouds are just coming down over it – I wonder if this is going to set us up for some rather chilling stories?

See you at the top.

Track 6 – Houndtor Rocks (Grid Reference SX743 790)

Houndtor Rocks are perhaps the most dramatic of Dartmoor's tors and you can understand why so much myth and legend surrounds them.

Jackie - On a misty day, it can get very atmospheric – the shapes of the rocks can look like beasts and legend has it that a pack of hounds was turned into these rocks by a trio of witches.

The most famous writing of Houndtor is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's classic novel, "The Hound of the Baskervilles" – you can just imagine Holmes and Watson rushing through the mist to save Sir Henry, but to no avail.

(A passage from the novel is read with sounds of howling in the background)

A lot of people have been inspired by the Dartmoor landscape – one of those is Seth Lakeman a local folk musician, whose music "Poor Man's Heaven" has been played throughout this audio tour.

Let's walk in between the avenue of tors and bear left, keeping the road parallel to us. There's a chance for refreshments at the "Hound of the Basketmeals" in the car park at the bottom of the hill!

With the road on our right, we'll head towards a circle of stones, which is the remains of a pre-historic burial, known as kistvaen.

Track 7 – Cairn Circle and Cist (Grid Reference SX742 787)

We've come through some gorse, but the stone circle is very visible with a coffin in the middle – it's remarkably well preserved.

Jackie – There are a couple of stones missing as this would have been a circular enclosure. The coffin would have been made using slabs of granite and covered with a mound of soil to protect it, then the stones would have been placed around the outside of it to prevent the soil from creeping outwards and draining off.

We are going to carry on our walk to Holwell Lawn, so with the circle of stones on our left, and the road parallel on our right, we'll continue southwards until we reach a stone wall.

Once we're at the stone wall, we'll turn right to join the road, then turn left and walk along the road for a short distance until we come to a gate on our left for Holwell Lawn.

Track 8 – Holwell Lawn (Grid Reference SX739 782)

We've arrived at the gate which is the entrance to Holwell Lawn – a nice open expanse of lawn, which is absolutely beautiful in May when there is a proliferation of bluebells.

We'll go through the gate and take the right hand fork of the two paths, looking out for different birds on top of the bushes – yellow hammers, stonechats and wheatears, which have a distinctive white rump.

The path gently climbs and opens out to a bowl shape and field, with small houses and fences – this area is actually used by the Pony Club.

We can see sheep grazing here – indeed, all the livestock that graze Dartmoor are very important to keep the vegetation down. This allows for recreation and walking opportunities and also shows off the archaeology, which is what makes Dartmoor so special.

Farming is vital to Dartmoor and is closely connected with tourism. Visitors love to come to Dartmoor because of the landscape and this is kept as it is because of the farming methods used. The two are inextricably linked.

We'll follow the path, slightly downhill and across the field until we come to a stone wall – go through one of the gaps in the wall and turn left, keeping the wall to our left. Follow this along until we come to a gate in the corner – from here we can see Greater Rocks.

Track 9 – Greater Rocks (Grid Reference SX747 786)

We've arrived at Greater Rocks – the wind has got up a bit, due to being that much higher up. The views are amazing as you come over Holwell Lawn towards Greater Rocks and the rocks are huge, although they weren't that impressive when you passed on the other side of them.

There are views across to Haytor Rocks and the valley where there are silver birch trees primarily and hawthorns. It all looks natural, but of course it isn't – there has been quarrying where the granite has been pulled out by mankind and a lot has been deposited by the end of the ice flows. If it had been left to nature, the area would have been covered by oak woodlands.

Jackie – Dartmoor is a fantastic landscape and you think it is wild and untamed, but it is a managed landscape – that is the irony of it.

We'll walk around Greater Rocks, keeping the rocks on our right until we see the remains of what looks like an old boundary wall on our right. Follow this down, keeping the wall on our right until we come to a path and a gate on the right. Go through and retrace our steps back down to the clapper bridge at the bottom and from there, back up to Smallacombe Rocks, passing the signpost.

(Climb back up the hill to Smallacombe Rocks)

Track 10 – Smallacombe Rocks (Grid Reference SX753 783)

We'll be heading over to Haytor Rocks from here, so let's go back along the path, passing the pile of rocks to the right and the stone circle, which is now on our left, back to the Granite Tramway. Turn right and follow this along until the path forks – the right fork goes to Holwell Quarry, but we will take the left hand option which goes to Haytor Rocks.

So let's rendezvous there and hopefully meet up with Bill to hear about his day.

Track 11 – Haytor Rocks (Grid Reference SX757 771)

We're now at the foot of Haytor Rocks, which are absolutely magnificent – looming over us. As we are approaching from behind, what would be best to do is to walk along with the rocks on our right and then go through a gap between the main two outcrops – this is known as an avenue of tors – and then we will be treated to the most spectacular view.

As we reach the brow of the hill between the avenue of the two main rocks of Haytor Rocks, we can see the sea at Teignmouth! You can also make out the towns of Newton Abbot and Bovey Tracey.

(Meets Bill Allen, Ranger and asks what a typical day is like for a Ranger)

Bill – “It varies, you can plan your day and then something else crops up, but today I have been doing some path checks and path clearing around stiles. It's just like people's lawns as the vegetation never stops growing! We do all the practical work on the Rights of Way network and as it is all on other people's land, we have to get their permission, so liaison with the landowners is very important.

We also carry out conservation work – we work closely with the Commoners who have rights to graze their animals on the open common land to carry out controlled burns, known as swaling.

We appreciate that with global warming, people will wonder whether burning should take place, but if the vegetation (gorse, heather, bracken) was not controlled, whole hillsides could go up in one burn. Controlled burning at the right time of year actually rejuvenates the vegetations which is good for wildlife and the grazing animals and the cleared areas act as firebreaks.”

Well, this is the end of the walk – just a downhill stroll back to the Information Centre, so we will leave you here to admire the view – and possibly to climb up the rocks, where the view is even better. It is quite safe to climb up the rocks (on same side as the Information Centre) as there are some old worn Victorian steps.

(Thanks Bill and Jackie)

We hope you have enjoyed this walk – do look out for more walks that might be coming along on the Dartmoor National Park Authority website.

Thank you for joining us and we hope you have enjoyed it too.

Walk ends.