

Saturday 22nd August 2015, Exe Valley Way(VII) with Chris and Mike

“Stage 7, Withypool to Exehead. - The longest walk to the finishing line”

We'd gone to bed anticipating a very wet and wild walk on Exmoor, but by the time we set off the next day from Withypool, for the 12 mile, and final stage of this epic journey, the sun was out and, save a brief late afternoon shower, we enjoyed a warm dry day. Warm enough for a fetching, Wimbledon style headband to make its debut.

Like so many stages before it, this one started with an uphill climb out of the village. (150 metres of ascent) Those of us who had public spiritedly taken cars to the end of the route for the return journey (no public transport: no pressure!), had to endure the smug boasts of the rest who had been indulging themselves at the delightful café in Withypool, and stocked up with celebratory rock cakes to eat later.

Once we had gained height, we joined the Two Moors Way looking down the valley of the Barle as it flowed under the beautiful Landacre Bridge and, as on many subsequent occasions, cameras were pointed at quite breathtaking views.



Landacre Bridge

After about 3 miles, the path drops down to the riverside for some easy, albeit wet after the previous 24 hours of heavy rain, walking into Simonsbath.



not far now to Simonsbath!

The pace had been swift at 2.7 miles per hour and lunch in the sun, in the restored Ashcombe Community garden on proper bench seats (usually its logs if you're lucky!), or on tended grass in the shade of a gigantic Copper Birch, was welcome. Some ate their rock cakes. The headband, though not its owner, was hung up to dry.

We'd completed 6 ½ miles in the morning, and now, rested and refuelled we set off to tackle the 2 ½ miles to the source of the River Exe. Those of us of a certain age know that getting comfortable before exercise is not advisable, and as, inevitably, we dragged ourselves up Ashcombe Bottom (another 120 metres of boggy ascent), it was the driver's turn to feel self satisfied, as the pace dropped and rock cakes did not seem like a good idea after all. But, we soon picked up as we walked briskly over open moor, on top of the world, with views of folded hills, coombes and valleys in every direction, in the company of a group of walkers who had shared each other's idiosyncrasies for 60 miles. One was moved to announce that "it doesn't get better than this!"

Excited with anticipation, the group spread out like a police sweep for evidence, as we continued to climb Dure Down, one of those featureless rounded hill tops that needs a Dartmoor Tor to give it a focus. "What are we looking for?", said one

on all fours with a magnifying glass. "You'll know by the bright lights and 'Kiss me quick' hats, when you've found it", said others helpfully. And then, suddenly, the wait was over. Nestling in a small hollow, at the convergence of several hillocks, flowing innocently and unobtrusively, like water out of a bath tap, was the source of the River Exe that had chosen to make its exit to the sea over 50 miles to the south, rather than in the nearby Bristol Channel.



one of the possible sources of the Exe

The celebrations began! Ritually, some drank the cool, pure liquid, some bathed in its restorative waters; others could not believe the extent of their achievement and became emotional, while those with technology to hand wondered if this really was the end.

But everyone drank Champagne!



toasting success

On the return leg from Exehead, in between the showers, we were treated to a classic view of Exmoor to raise our spirits for the last mile or so.



Iconic Exmoor
pix by Stella

Job done, but where now to tempt us out of the Otter valley?

Chris Buckland
23rd August 2015