

Saturday 30th April 2016, Symondsburry and Colmer's Hill with Vivien Insull

"Colmer's is watching you"

The walk description was correct – the iconic Colmer's Hill was watching us throughout most of this most enjoyable and beautiful walk! The weather was sunny and warm, the sky clear and blue – an ideal day for such a varied and interesting hike. Eleven lucky walkers crossed meadows in Lower Eype and through some fabulous bluebell woods, making our way to Symondsburry for a coffee stop in the sunshine. Colmer's Hill beckoned us from above and we made the steep ascent to the top for a picnic lunch overlooking the pretty Dorset countryside, admiring a flock of sheep and lambs far below us, with the sea shimmering in the distance. This conical sandstone hill is visible from miles around and is topped by several pine trees planted during WW1. Although it was sunny it was a little early in the year to see butterflies but we saw several small tortoiseshells flitting about on the steep slopes of the hill, looking a little ragged after their winter hibernation. However, a true indication of the arrival of Spring was the sight of one Orange Tip Butterfly - the first to emerge from its chrysalis - looking for Lady's Smock plants on which to lay its eggs.

We'd been told that the next part of the walk involved the "perils" of Hell Lane, a deep, mysterious, ancient hollow-way considered to be the most impressive and interesting example in Dorset. The conditions underfoot had improved since Vivien's "recce" so although we emerged at the other end rather mud-spattered, it hadn't been as wet as we'd expected. Part of our route had been covered by Julia Bradbury in a recent TV programme and there were a lot of opinions expressed about it along the way! We crossed another stile through some boggy fields in the direction of Chideock, to inspect the Martyrs Monument – a wooden cross next to the grassy humps and hollows which are all that remains of the moat of a Norman Castle built here in 1086. The castle was partially destroyed by the Roundheads during the Civil War and through the years has practically disappeared. Chideock is a very pretty village with a lot of thatched houses, bisected by the busy A35, which we had to cross again.

Following a footpath bordered by wild garlic and bluebells we reached Seatown which, on a Bank Holiday weekend, was not unexpectedly crowded with visitors and children enjoying the good weather and the beach. We could see the steep cliff path towards Thorncombe Beacon ahead of us but the reward for the climb was wonderful, clear views along the coast, Chesil Bank and Portland Bill when we finally reached the top. Three of the group who were "in training" for the 40-mile Challenge had sprinted ahead up the slope and were waiting for the others at the summit. From here we could see a circular man-made pool below us which called to mind that famous passage in Thomas Hardy's "Far from the Madding Crowd": "The sheep washing pool was a perfectly circular basin of brickwork in the meadows, full of the clearest water. To birds on the wing, its glassy surface, reflecting the light sky, must have been visible for miles around as a glistening Cyclops Eye in a green face." An old wheeled lambing hut in the next field recalled once again the scenes from the book and reminded us we were walking in Hardy Country. A short downhill walk brought us back to Down House Farm for a Dorset cream tea before tackling the final mile to the car park.

I really enjoyed the hike – it had everything one could wish for: fields, bluebell woods, history, wildflowers, seaside, cliffs, and a splendid tea shop near the end! Thank you Vivien for researching and leading this superb walk (9.3 miles).

Rosemary Hatch

1st May 2016