

Saturday 15th August 2015, Exe Valley Way(VI) with Chris and Mike

"Stage 6, Dulverton to Withypool. - A walk alongside the River Barle!"

This was one of a series of walks, exploring the Exe Valley. As it was my first, I was volunteered to write this report. Unlike earlier walks, public transport was not an option so the first challenge was getting walkers to the start and cars to the end of the walk - a task masterminded with aplomb by one of the walk leaders and a spreadsheet. The plus side for the non-drivers was the time we had (while awaiting the return of the drivers) to sample the delights of Dulverton (Somerset), be that the good coffee shop, the fine church with a 13th century tower or the Heritage Centre.

Eventually a dozen walkers set off for the 9.5 mile stretch of the walk which turned out to be not along the Exe Valley but along the valley of the River Barle. The reason for this was initially obscure to the writer (though it later transpired that, at this stage, the Exe Valley offers poor walking- only along a busy road or through steeply- sloping woods). But I was assured that the next and final walk would take the group from Withypool (on the River Barle) to the Head of the River Exe!

Be that as it may, the Barle (a tributary of the Exe) provided good walking country for the first half of our walk. After the initial climb, offering views across Dulverton, we walked mostly through woods and more or less on the level. In fact, some of the way was right beside the river (although at this point the path became quite overgrown and we began to doubt our leaders' ability to find the path they had reced. When they told us lunch was not scheduled for another hour, there was mutiny in the ranks and a late coffee stop was called for - and enjoyed (it was a scenic spot!)



Revived and with a new confidence in our leaders and their respect for democracy, we struck out enthusiastically for Hawkridge. Again, the going was good as we climbed up above the river, ignoring tempting signs which beckoned us towards Tarr Steps, the only well-known spot in the area which, in their wisdom, our leaders had determined to avoid. Finally, we emerged into the open and there before us was Hawkridge Church. We readily tucked into our picnic lunches on the edge of the church-yard, enjoying the fine view towards Exmoor via West Anstey and Molland Commons. Some of us took time to explore the church or to trace local family names on the tombstones. The sun even shone on us briefly.

The second half of the walk was a nice contrast. Skirting Hawkridge Common we were soon out into the open. Over Parsonage Down (with more signs attempting to lure us down to Tarr Steps - possibly a focus for a future walk?), we proceeded to cross West Water and then the Two Moors Way took us north. Views now were across rolling farmland and on up towards moorland to the north and east.



A last climb and when we crossed the cattle grid, we felt this must at last be Exmoor. Indeed almost immediately a group of Exmoor ponies - four or five adults and two smallish foals, appeared from the gorse bushes, tossing their manes and crossing the path behind us. In fact, this was Withypool Hill. We rounded its shoulder and then looked and headed down to our destination, Withypool itself. As we took the bridge across the River Barle, holidaymakers were bathing in the river (perhaps the "Pool"), the sun came out and we strode on, thankfully, to rest and refresh ourselves at the Tea Rooms which signalled the end of our route.

A great day's Exe Valley walk along the River Barle!

Jean Quinn

20 August 2015