

Monday 8th July “Otter Source to Mouth Stage 1 Churchinford to Upottery” with Penny and Paul Kurowski

On a perfect July morning twenty four walkers and two dogs met in the car park of the Sidmouth Arms, Upottery, for the first of a four stage walk along the river Otter. Whilst waiting for the Dartline bus we had time to appreciate Upottery, a picturesque village nestled in the Black Down Hills, declared an area of outstanding natural beauty in 1991.

The bus that arrived to transport us to the start of the walk in Churchinford looked full and rather small; we did wonder if we would all fit onto it. As it turned out the bus driver and locals were more than happy to breathe in and make room for us, because the bus service is under threat of being cancelled and we were a welcome boost to numbers using the service.

Churchinford Village dates back to the 15th century and is located at the crossing point of two roman roads, the Fosse and the Inkfield way. We left the village and were soon walking through open farmland. It was not long before we were joined by a group of curious young cattle who accompanied us downhill to our first glimpse of the Otter. There glinting in the sun was a tiny stream of water that was narrow enough for us to step over quite easily, once a member of our group had bravely moved a group of rather larger cows and even bigger bull out of the way.



The true source of the Otter was about ½ mile upstream on private land.

We walked through open countryside and country lanes until we arrived at Otterford Church. Otterford is a tiny parish but is able to boast the most spacious grave yard in

Somerset. The church was built in the 19th century in memory of William Bendon who built the Otterhead lakes and estate.

Otterhead lakes are now owned by Wessex Water, they were designated as a nature reserve in 2008 and are jointly managed by Taunton Deane Borough Council and The Otterhead Trust. They were originally a flight of seven lakes but only two remain. The reserve provides a number of semi-natural habitats and is a haven for wildlife. We caught sight of a heron patiently waiting in a shallow part of the lake for its prey that was seemingly quite happy to pose for our photographs.



A little later we heard the distinctive trilling of a little Grebe hidden amongst the vegetation. This was soon followed by the beautiful fluting sound of a blackcap warbler in the surrounding woodland. Our coffee break was enjoyed sitting on a fallen tree in the welcome shade of the woods above the lake.

We re-joined the River Otter again at Otriford Mill, which was built in 1367 and was operational until its closure in 1906. The river at this point was wider and flowing more freely. We cheered as we crossed the cattle grid that marked the boundary between Somerset and Devon.

We took a small detour to enjoy lunch in a lovely meadow adjacent to the Otter. Here we were mesmerised by a pair of mating *Beautiful Demoiselle* damsel flies, part of their courting ritual was carried out on Dave's obliging left boot, whilst they periodically dipped into the water to lay the eggs. The male was a particularly striking shade of turquoise.



We continued our walk through farmland enjoying the stunning views across the valley. Although we were never far from the river Otter we were not able to walk alongside it all of the way, because some of its length runs through private land. After enjoying a beautiful and varied walk on a hot summer day, the sight of The Sidmouth Arms and the thought of a long cold drink was most welcome.

A big thank you is extended to Paul and Penny for organising such an enjoyable day.

Linda Lowes