

## **Wednesday, 29<sup>th</sup> September 'Avon Dam and Redlake Tramway - a Dartmoor walk' with Penny and Paul Kurowski**

Our group of fourteen walkers arrived at the Shipley Bridge starting point in just four cars - possibly an OVA record. The leaders had sorted this out to avoid our cars filling what is a fairly small and popular parking area. This turned out to be a good call as we arrived to find a substantial chunk cordoned off for resurfacing work, though plenty of room was left for us. Then the bad news dawned on us - a Pay and Display machine has been installed!

During the preamble Paul promised us plenty of interesting historical information and true to his word he started right there by telling us that the parking area and 20ft retaining brick wall were the remains of a naphtha distillery from the mid-1800s. Peat was transported by horse-drawn trucks from the Red Lake area using the Zeal Tramway, which we were to walk along later in the day. Naphtha distilled from the peat was probably made into candles, but the venture only lasted for four years. In the 1880s the same infrastructure was re-used to ship china clay down from Brent Moor, but again, for only a few years.



We set off in glorious sunshine, thankful for the marked change in the weather from the torrential rain of the preceding days. The River Avon was in spate and an impressive sight where it was squeezed between rock walls into a rushing torrent. The access road up to the dam follows the river and the narrow valley is filled with trees and rhododendron bushes in stark contrast to the surrounding moorland. We stopped at a rectangular walled enclosure that turned out to be the ruins of a mansion built for the Victorian owner of the estate. It later served as a Youth Hostel but when the dam was built it was deemed too dangerous for occupation were the dam to burst and was demolished by the army in 1957. Further

upstream, the dam itself is a rather plain and functional design. On this occasion there was an impressive flow of water over the spillway.



The reservoir is not very extensive and we soon rounded the head of it and crossed the upper Avon river by a clapper bridge. We started climbing the side of the valley and had good views of the imprint of Man's hand on the landscape, be it Bronze Age to Medieval field enclosures, granite crosses marking the estate boundaries of the Petre family (who had profited greatly from the dissolution of the monasteries in the mid-1500s), mounds and pits from tin workings, or modern-looking pipework used to transport china clay slurry in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Another industrial relic, a well-preserved pumping station on the brow of the hill made a good spot for lunch sitting on the low walls of two small clay settling ponds. This was part of the Red Lake China Clay works transport system by pipeline from the quarry a few miles away (marked by a distinctive conical spoil heap) and in the other direction to a factory in Ivybridge. The quarry was operating sporadically from 1910 until 1932.



The rest of our route followed the Zeal Tramway back to the carpark. Its wooden rails are long gone, but the granite sleepers, some of them still showing iron bolts, are preserved and make an easy track to follow across the moor. Back at the cars a mobile refreshments van had appeared and provided us with a refreshing cup of tea. Paul and Penny received our thanks for the meticulous planning and research that made the walk so enjoyable.

Jon Roseway