



Walk 39. The upper Exe valley, Larkbarrow and Lanacombe.

- 11.2 miles, ascents and descents of 345 metres. 4 hours 20 minutes constant walking, allow 6 hours in total, more if the ground is wet.

Terrain: ! Open moorland, not suitable after prolonged rain. Paths and tracks, some road walking, potentially boggy moorland, and streams to ford. Little shade or shelter on the whole walk. A compass is useful in case of poor visibility.

Access: Park at Prayway Head layby on the B3223 north of Simonsbath (SS 767 410). No buses. For the linear walks park at Simonsbath or Malmsmead and arrange transport back to Exford. Or do the alternative walk from Exford to Simonsbath, stay overnight, and return using walk 22A. Exford is served by Dulverton to Minehead bus 198/467.

Map: OS Explorer OL9 Exmoor.

Refreshments: Pubs and seasonal tea rooms in nearby Simonsbath and Exford.

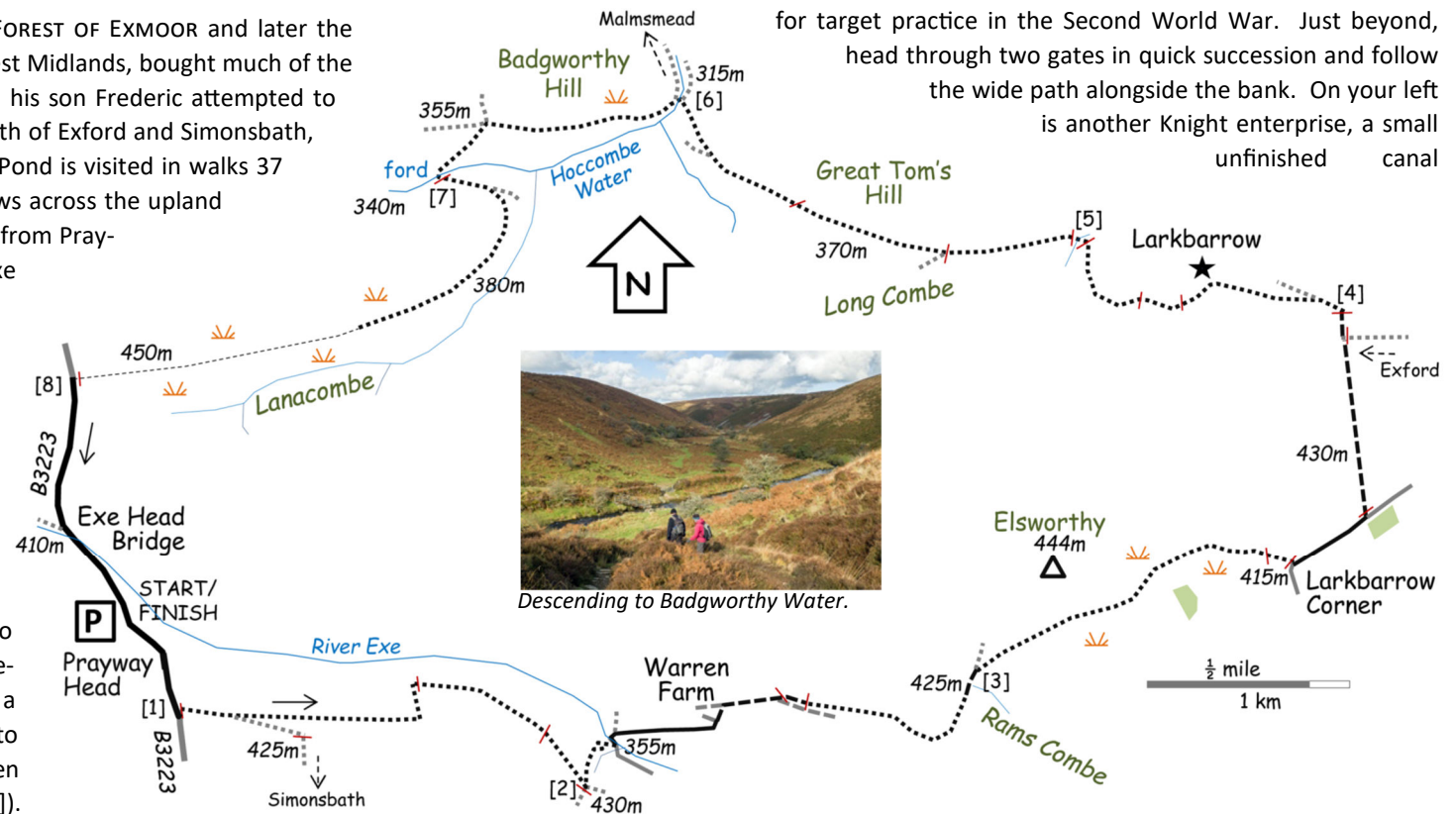
SIMONSBATH WAS THE SEAT OF THE WARDENS OF THE ROYAL FOREST OF EXMOOR and later the Knight family. John Knight, an ironworks owner from the West Midlands, bought much of the old Exmoor Forest in the early nineteenth century and with his son Frederic attempted to 'improve' it for agriculture. This walk explores the moor north of Exford and Simonsbath, including several remnants of its Knight ownership (Pinkery Pond is visited in walks 37 and 38). It leaves roads and habitation far behind, with views across the upland Exmoor landscape and beyond. The walk is circular, starting from Prayway Head north of Simonsbath and heading down the Exe valley, before turning north to Larkbarrow and Great Tom's Hill, crossing two of the Lyn tributaries, and returning up Lanacombe. An alternative linear route from Exford to Simonsbath is described in walk 43.

Start from the layby at Prayway Head (SS 767 410). Turn right and walk towards Simonsbath on the road; in three or four minutes turn left through a pedestrian gate on a footpath signposted to Simonsbath ([1]). Walk parallel with the hedge on the right, keeping on high ground. In about 15 minutes turn left at the field boundary, then go through the first gate on the right just as you begin to descend (for a view over the Exe valley, first continue down to a grassy knoll then return to the gate). Keep the field edge to your right. In about ten minutes go through a field gate, then four or five minutes later come to a signpost (40mins, [2]).

Turn left here on a narrow path along the left-hand side of a deep gully. The going is easy at first, then steep and slippery as it descends to the road. Turn left at the road: this takes you over a bridge and uphill to a farm.

When the road turns into the farm, enter a yard through a gate to the right. Turn right at a T-junction just after. Head uphill, then when the track forks go through the gate with the field boundary on your right. Continue through a second gate. Don't go through any more gates, and curve left with the field edge. At a line of trees (1hr15mins, [3]) cross a stream and continue ahead on a well-defined track. This soon forks, and potentially becomes very waterlogged; keep right (bearing 050°), heading just to the left of a group of conifers. The track narrows but is still fairly distinct. After passing the conifers the field boundaries will funnel you into a corner. Go through the gate here and take the right-hand path. In another three minutes go through a gate on to a tarmac lane (Larkbarrow Corner). Turn left here. In about five minutes turn left through a gate on a broad track. When you come to a gate, go through and turn immediately left on a grassy path (2hrs, [4]).

The path soon brings you to some broken-down walls beneath tall beech trees. These are the ruins of Larkbarrow, one of Frederic Knight's farms; it was only occupied briefly in the mid-nineteenth century, and the derelict buildings were used for target practice in the Second World War. Just beyond, head through two gates in quick succession and follow the wide path alongside the bank. On your left is another Knight enterprise, a small unfinished canal



that was designed to connect with Pinkery Pond. Follow the path around to the right and through two further gates at a valley head (2hr20mins, [5]). Continue alongside the tree-topped bank. At the next gate, with Edwards' Post above it, continue ahead (right at the fork) on a path across Great Tom's Hill. When you reach a pedestrian gate through a bank, go through and bear sharply left on a track that heads towards a line of trees climbing a hillside. The path heads slightly uphill, with a stream and small footbridge coming into view ahead. Follow the main path around to the right. It goes down to a streamlet then up again and to the right of a series of small knolls. Keep right at the fork. Descend to a footbridge over a wide stream; this is Badgworthy Water, one of the tributaries of the East Lyn (2hr50mins, [6]).

Cross the stream, go through a gate and turn left (right for the alternative walk to Malmsmead), zigzagging up the side of Badgworthy Hill. From the top you will have views back along your outward route, and further around to the left South Wales will be visible on a clear day. 12-15 minutes from the top of the zigzag there is a fold in the landscape where the path starts heading uphill*. A path crosses here; on the left there are two branches, one directly left and the second one at an angle. Take the angled path and descend to Hoccombe Water; you are aiming to meet the path that descends diagonally down the hill. Ford the stream and go through a gate (3hr10mins, [7]). The stone wall marks the boundary of the old Royal Forest of Exmoor, part of a 29-mile long perimeter created by John Knight. Head uphill and follow the path gradually around to the right; where it divides, take the wider, right-hand branch. You now have a little over half an hour of walking on vague tracks over open moorland. Keep parallel with Lanacombe on your left, but don't lose height or attempt to cut across the head of the combe, as the ground is likely to be boggy. The compass bearing veers gradually from 220° to 265°. Eventually go through a gate and turn left to walk beside the B3223 (4hr5mins, [8]). You now have nearly a mile of roadside walking, but it does provide a good view down the upper Exe valley, a geological fault with the river – here a small stream – in its bottom. Arrive back at the Prayway Head layby on the right.

* Continuing ahead here you will come in 1.4 miles to Brendon Two Gates, a better option in wet conditions. Turn left on the road, arriving back at the Prayway Head parking area in another mile and a half.

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