



Walk 40. Simonsbath to Lynmouth via Cheriton Ridge.

- 9.8 miles, ascents of 440 metres and descents of 750 metres. 3 hours 50 minutes constant walking, allow 5-5½ hours.

Terrain: Open moorland including some boggy sections, paths, and a short distance on roads. A compass is useful. There are narrow paths above steep tree-covered hillsides, and the final section into Lynmouth is a continuous steep descent of nearly 200 metres.

Access: By car, park in Simonsbath (SS 774 394, near TA24 7SH, donation) or Lynmouth (see walk 5 or 6) and arrange transport between the two. No bus service to Simonsbath; Lynmouth can be reached by the 309/310 from Barnstaple, or the Exmoor Coaster from Minehead or Ilfracombe, then take a taxi to Simonsbath (book in advance, c. £25 in 2023).

Map: OS Explorer OL9 Exmoor; the last part of the walk is also on Croydecycle 04 and 54.

Refreshments: Inn and seasonal tearoom at Simonsbath, wide choice in Lynmouth; nothing on the route unless you divert to Watersmeet.

THIS IS A MAGNIFICENT WALK OVER THE MOORS and along the top of the East Lyn valley, one of England's longest and deepest river gorges. The first part of the walk heads up to the watershed known as the Chains that divides the two main Exmoor river systems: the Exe and the Barle flow south to the English Channel, while the twin Lyn rivers and their tributaries carve their way through northern Exmoor into the Bristol Channel. The route then tracks Hoar Oak Water and rises above the East Lyn river, providing spectacular views of the steep valley, the hills above Lynton and Lynmouth, and the Bristol Channel. It is a perhaps the most dramatic way to approach Lynmouth, revealing the scale and depth of the East Lyn in a way that is not so apparent when driving along the A39 or walking in the valley bottom. The route uses the northernmost section of the Two Moors Way, joined from Exe Head by the Tarka Trail.

Start from the Ashcombe car park in Simonsbath, taking the footpath to Prayway Head that starts between the upper and lower parking areas. The path takes you along the edge of woods high above a stream in the now overgrown Ashcombe Gardens. Ignore a gate at a large tree stump. Continue until the path turns sharply left along a small valley; after some slippery rock steps turn right and splash across the stream, then ascend to a gate on the right (10mins). Follow the path into the field, taking the right-hand (upper) fork when it splits. Climbing gently you soon arrive at another gate in a corner: go through and keep right on a stone bank or causeway, then bear left and cross a small footbridge. Turn right over another plank bridge into a field and aim just to the right of a line of trees. Your route will be marked by the occasional yellow-topped post or hurdle. Beyond the trees it may be very boggy, so pick your way carefully. You are heading for a pair of field gates with a signpost; go through the one ahead of you (30mins), then turn left to follow the field boundary. On arriving at a road (the B3223), turn right and follow it until you come to a parking area on the left (40mins,



[1]) close to Prayway Head. Go through the gate at the far end of the layby; keep right, go through a field gate, then turn left to walk alongside the field edge. At the field corner head very slightly to the right (signposted to Exe Head; the compass bearing is 290°). Walk across a large area of tussocks, then after cresting a slight rise head for a pair of stony paths. This brings you to Exe Head, the source of the River Exe, where there is a stout signpost (1hr10mins, [2]).

At Exe Head go through the gate on a well-made path signposted to Lynmouth. In a few minutes keep to the left to stay above a steep valley. Less than ten minutes later, Hoar Oak Water joins from the left; cross it (rarely a problem apart from after a long spell of heavy rain) and continue along the valley until you come to a gate. Turn right downhill just before the gate, cross a footbridge over Hoar Oak Water, and come below the fenced-off Hoar Oak, a boundary tree that was planted in 1917 to replace predecessors dating back to medieval times. Turn left here and go through a gate (1hr30mins, [3]).

Your way continues ahead and very slightly to the right, gradually heading upwards: aim for a slight saddle between two hills. On the opposite side of the valley you may be able to see the ruined Hoar Oak Cottage. Pick up a rough path heading parallel with the valley, and cross a small gully. A grassy path now heads uphill, taking you on to the broad and almost flat Cheriton Ridge. (The direct compass bearing from the Hoar Oak gate to the gully is 355°, but the easiest route veers first to the left and then right). The now wide path crests a slight rise, and views open up to the hamlet of Cheriton straight ahead, and across the hills to the coast. The path eventually starts to lose height and a field boundary begins to close in from the left. Aim just to the right of the left-hand farm; this brings you to a stony track and then a signpost. Continue ahead through a gate on the track (2hr20mins, [4]). Turn left on a road, follow it around to the right, then

bear left through a farm. The tarmac soon runs out and the path starts to descend, with the Hoaroak valley on your left. Cross a bridge next to a house, and turn right on a signposted bridleway alongside the river. Detour to the left around a hotel where indicated, then make your way gradually back towards the river. Drop down to a car park and turn left to arrive at a main road (the A39) at Hillsford Bridge (2hr50mins, [5]). The detour to Watersmeet leaves here: see below.

The steepest and most scenic part of the walk now begins. Turn left on the road and head uphill alongside it. Where the road bends left, take the footpath straight ahead signposted East Lyn and Lynmouth. The path is steep at first; when it levels out, ignore a right-hand turn to Watersmeet. For the next mile or so you will have spectacular views across and then down the East Lyn valley, over to Countisbury Hill and the A39 (and the Welsh coast beyond), and finally down to Lynmouth. At a fork keep right signposted to Lynmouth, then ignore another path back to Watersmeet (3hr5mins, [6]). A gentle downhill section ends with two pedestrian gates; soon afterwards, a zigzag descends into a deep combe and comes to a cascading stream. A correspondingly steep zigzag heads up the other side. From the top you will be able to see the East Lyn and the A39 far below, cars looking like toys in the valley bottom. There is now a short section of fairly level path; ignore a turn to the left, then take a path to the right signposted M/W to Lynmouth (3hr30mins, [7]). This first heads along a prominence (Oxen Tor), then bears left to start its descent of nearly 200 metres into Lynmouth. Keep to the main path, right and downwards. Arriving at a wall, turn right on a (possibly slippery) tarmac section and descend to the A39; the upper car park is opposite, or turn left to head back to the sea front.

Alternative start from Prayway Head (● 8.2 miles, 3 hours 10 minutes, ascents of 330 metres and descents of 740 metres). Park or arrange to be dropped off at Prayway Head car park on the B3223 (SS 767 410) and join the walk at the 45min point ([1]).

Diversion to Watersmeet (adds 0.8 mile and ascents and descents of 100m). At the 2hr50min point ([5]) turn right across Hillsford Bridge then head left on a path into the Watersmeet Estate. In just over ten minutes head down to the left on a narrow path that leads to a foot-bridge, crossing over to Watersmeet House. You can continue to Lynmouth alongside the East Lyn as described in walk 17, but to rejoin the main walk cross back over the East Lyn, then cross Hoaroak Water and make your way up to the A39. If you are opposite an official parking area turn right, otherwise head straight across the road, either way joining a path on the left-hand side of the road heading up the hill. This rises steeply and, keeping right at the fork, rejoins the main walk at the second Watersmeet path ([6]).

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