



## A walker's introduction to Exmoor and the Quantock Hills



*West from Lynton*

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*Stan Lester*

## Exmoor and the Quantock Hills

Exmoor and the Quantock Hills take up most of west Somerset and part of the far north of Devon. They stretch a little more than 40 miles east to west and extend from the Bristol Channel to at most fifteen miles inland. They are in a sense off the beaten track: no motorways run close by, they are not on the doorstep of any major cities, and since the North Devon Link Road opened in 1988 they have been bypassed by most of the summer traffic heading for coastal Devon and Cornwall. They are nevertheless an outstanding region for walking and exploring, and of all the protected areas in Britain (Exmoor is a National Park and the Quantocks were England's first Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) they have some of the most varied landscapes.

The geology of Exmoor is sedimentary rock – mainly sandstone, slate and shale – making for a landscape that is less stark and more diverse than the granite, tor-studded uplands that are found on Dartmoor and Bodmin Moor. High moorland, deep wooded combes, a dramatic coastline, rolling pasture, babbling streams, lichen-clad and moss-draped Atlantic rainforest, picture-postcard villages and even two sizeable lakes (albeit man-made) can be encountered within a short distance of each other. It is this variation that makes the region so attractive for walking. It is possible to do walks that stay on open moorland or traverse continuous stretches of wooded coast path, but many of the best routes switch between contrasting landscapes all within a few miles.

Exmoor and the Quantocks are prime walking country: there are enough paths, lanes, tracks and bridleways, nearly a thousand miles in all, to keep even the most dedicated hiker busy for several months. There are no mountains and only a few rocky crags and outcrops, but the attraction is more in the way in which routes drop from exposed moorland into deep wooded valleys, paths suddenly emerge from primeval oak forest to give spectacular coastal views, and strenuous hikes across moor or clifftop turn a corner to arrive at a picture-postcard village or welcoming hostelry. The coastal scenery is superlative, and the long stretch from Ilfracombe to Minehead includes some of the most exhilarating and challenging sections of the South West Coast Path, including the highest sea-cliffs in England.

While longer walks give access to some of the more remote moorland, countryside and coast, there are opportunities throughout the region for short strolls from and around towns, villages and parking areas, including many that can be reached by bus or (in season) steam train. All the main centres on Exmoor – Dulverton, Dunster, Porlock, Lynton and Lynmouth

*The Barle Valley near Simonsbath*







The larger settlements in this western segment are all at the edges of the moor. The coastal resorts of Minehead and Ilfracombe, both on the edge of the area, are the biggest towns by some margin, while of the other larger centres Combe Martin, Lynton and Lynmouth, Porlock and Dunster are all on or near the coast. Only Dulverton sits inland, below the southern edge of the uplands close to the confluence of the rivers Barle and Exe. All these small towns and larger villages have interesting histories, are well-equipped for visitors, and reward exploration. Dunster was once a market town and the most important centre on Exmoor, and while it retains its medieval charm very well it has a preserved ambience rather than the feel of a working town or village. Dulverton on the other hand is still an important hub for the surrounding area, and though not a lot bigger than Dunster it combines an

and Combe Martin – have plenty to offer for the casual explorer, as have the larger resorts of Minehead and Ilfracombe, along with Watchet and Nether Stowey either side of the Quantocks. Many villages provide good bases for short walks, and areas such as the Horner woods, Heddon Valley, North Hill and Fyne Court have a selection of fairly easy paths. On the other hand, the region is traversed by several waymarked long- and medium-distance trails, and the hardened hill walker might be tempted by the 31-mile Perambulation of Exmoor that takes place annually in June.

### Character and orientation

The Exmoor and Quantocks region can be divided into three unequal segments from west to east. The western part, over half the total area, comprises Exmoor ‘proper’ and the adjacent countryside and coast. This is an area of moorland plateau, blending into rolling farmland on its southern and western fringes, and on its northern edge dropping steeply into the Bristol Channel to provide spectacular coastal scenery. The central and southern uplands are cut by the meandering rivers Barle and Exe and their tributaries, while in the north several steep wooded river valleys run into the sea. The northern valleys include the Heddon Valley, the East and West Lyn gorges, and further east the densely wooded Horner Water valley that leads down to the Porlock vale, the only significant low-lying area within Exmoor. It is this interplay of uplands, combes, woods and coast that gives Exmoor its special character and makes for infinite variation in walks. The open moors rarely feel as remote as those of Dartmoor, the Peak District or the Lakes, but there are still enough continuous uplands and big skies to give a feel of being far from civilisation.







Tarr Steps

attractive and historic centre with a remarkable range of shops, refreshment-houses and other facilities. Up on the moor itself, settlements are smaller and mix farming and small-scale rural industry with tourism and country pursuits. Places such as Exford, Winsford, Withypool and Parracombe are suitably picturesque and (at least outside of winter) well set up for visitors, while also being surprisingly self-sufficient communities.

### The Royal Forest of Exmoor

A forest was originally an area of wilderness set aside from habitation and farming, generally associated with hunting wild animals. Although some forests were heavily wooded, others including Exmoor and Dartmoor had only small areas of tree cover. Exmoor was already regarded as a royal forest in late Saxon times, although it seems to have been formally documented only after the Norman invasion. The boundary of the forest changed several times over the centuries, and under King John it encroached on surrounding villages. There were no houses in the forest until 1654, when James Boevey, who had acquired the freehold after the overthrow of the monarchy, had Simonsbath House built. The colourful and combative Boevey managed to retain a lease on the forest after the restoration of Charles II. Exmoor Forest, then amounting to 18,810 acres (7615 hectares), was finally sold off in 1818 when the Crown had no further use for it.

The A396 road takes a somewhat tortuous north-to-south route between Minehead and Tiverton, roughly marking the boundary between high Exmoor to the west and to the east the Brendon Hills and the rolling country around Bampton and Wiveliscombe. Although the Brendons rise to 423 metres at Lype Hill, over four-fifths the height of the highest ground to the west, they have a tamer and more cultivated feel with undulating country-

side, rounded hills and for the most part gentle valleys. The coast east of Minehead is fairly flat, with low cliffs that seem to be perpetually crumbling into the sea. There is little open moorland here, just a few patches near Dunster and south of Wimbleball Lake; most of what there was has been taken up for forestry. Away from the coast, the villages have a quieter, lower-key feel than those on central and western Exmoor, and the small towns on the southern fringe, Wiveliscombe and Bampton, are cheerful and well-provisioned. The area rewards getting off the through routes, and it contains the only sizeable bodies of water in the region along with intricate switchback country and hidden villages and hamlets.

The Brendon Hills are divided from the third segment, the Quantocks, by a lowland vale that runs from Taunton to the coast at Watchet and carries the A358 road as well as the enthusiast-run West Somerset Railway. As well as Watchet itself, a historic harbour and fishing town, this hinterland is dotted with fascinating villages and hamlets that belie its superficially less interesting appearance. The Quantocks are a well-defined line of hills stretching north-west from near Taunton, made up of open moorland, combes and woods. In the south and east the hills build slowly from rolling farmland, while the western and northern sides rise fairly abruptly from the surrounding countryside. Settlements are scattered around the edge of the hills and only two roads intrude for any distance, making for a small-scale and contained upland walking area.

### Exmoor National Park

Visitors from overseas might be puzzled to find an area designated a 'National Park' containing fields, farms, forestry plantations, villages and even small towns, where life goes on much as in any other part of rural England. British National Parks are nationally protected, not nationally owned, and their aim is to strike a balance between conservation of the landscape and ecosystems, the social and economic well-being of residents, and enjoyment and understanding by visitors. There are planning restrictions in National Parks that prevent urban sprawl and inappropriate developments in the countryside, but there is also recognition that thriving local communities are essential to maintaining the fabric of the landscape.

Exmoor was one of the first ten areas to be declared a National Park, in 1954. Its boundary was drawn quite tightly around the uplands, including the Brendon Hills and the coast between Combe Martin and Minehead, but leaving out the Quantock Hills because of the intervening valley where the landscape was judged not to be of such exceptional quality. The same reasoning was applied to the southern edge, so for instance the villages of Brayford, Molland, North Molton and East and West Anstey are outside the boundary. The Quantocks, too small to be a National Park in their own right, were declared Britain's first Area of Out-

### The Exmoor Perambulation

The Perambulation is an organised 31-mile circular walk that takes place in June around the boundaries of the old Royal Forest, a tradition that dates back to the thirteenth century. Part of the walk is on private land, providing an opportunity to walk on parts of Exmoor that are usually closed. The walk has frequent checkpoints as well as refreshments halfway and at the start and finish, and there is an option to finish at the halfway point with transport back to the start. Details are normally posted on the Exmoor National Park and Channel Events web sites.



Exmoor ponies on Winsford Hill

standing Natural Beauty (now National Landscape) a few years later. The area west of Combe Martin is now part of another National Landscape, the North Devon Coast, which extends to the Cornish border. If the Park's boundary is ever revisited it might be hoped that it is expanded to include roughly the area covered on the web site.

Most of the land on Exmoor and the Quantocks is in private ownership, though the single largest landowner is now the National Trust. The National Park Authority, the Crown Estates and the Forestry Commission all have substantial landholdings, and negotiation with private landowners means that much of the high moor is open to the public as 'access land'. The Exmoor National Park Authority is based in Exmoor House in Dulverton, while the Quantock Hills is managed by Somerset Council and has a small base in Fyne Court, a National Trust property at the southern end of the hills. The National Trust's main centres of operation are at Hunter's Inn near Parracombe, the Holnicote estate office on the A39 near Selworthy, Dunster Castle, and for the Quantocks Fyne Court.

## Plant and animal life

A detailed discussion of the wildlife and flora of Exmoor and the Quantocks is far beyond the scope of this booklet, but there are a few animals and birds that the non-naturalist might want to look out for. Two animals compete as the iconic symbol of Exmoor. The red deer features on the National Park emblem and the Exmoor flag, and the herd of around 3,000 is one of the last original populations in England. Deer can often be spotted on the open moorland, on Exmoor as well as on the Quantocks where they have been reintroduced; in autumn,

listen for the belling of stags in rut, and look for them defending their herds from rivals. The other animal that is an inseparable part of the moor is the Exmoor pony, a native breed that is well-adapted to life in harsh conditions. Ponies can also be found roaming free on the Quantocks, but they are of more mixed origin than the 'pure' Exmoors. Goats live in a wild state in the Valley of the Rocks area near Lynton. Smaller denizens of the region include otters (on Exmoor), badgers and foxes, the last two common if rarely seen; rabbits and a few hares; adders, slow-worms and toads, plus nearly all the British bat species. Insect life is also rich: look out for bloody-nose beetles, Devil's coach-horses, dung beetles and the occasional stag beetle on the ground, and various species of dragonflies, butterflies (including the rare high brown and heath fritillaries) and moths on plants or in the air.

The Quantocks' symbol is the buzzard, a common sight across the region, normally seen soaring high up where its superb eyesight allows it to see the smallest of prey on the ground. It is also frequently spotted resting on posts or tree stumps. Peregrine falcons breed on the Exmoor cliffs, but they are less often seen: compared with buzzards they have more pointed wings, a faster and more direct flight, and they are occasionally seen making an arrowlike 'stoop' to capture prey. A third large bird of prey, the red kite, is sometimes seen in spring and summer; it has a distinctive forked tail. Short-eared and barn owls are sometimes seen near dusk quartering the ground for prey, while tawny owls are frequently heard but rarely seen.

The secluded cliffs also support a variety of seabirds, and although places such as Porlock Weir and Marsh are good bird-watching locations, a trip in a small boat is really needed to appreciate them. Guillemots often 'raft up' just offshore, but to have a chance of seeing puffins you will need to take the excursion to Lundy from Ilfracombe or Bideford. Skylarks are frequently encountered on the open moors, usually announced by their song before they are seen, and you may come across lap-

## Indomitable ponies

The Exmoor pony is an old native breed, of all British horses perhaps the closest in appearance and characteristics to the hill pony of pre-historic times. Documented references to the ponies go back to the tenth century, and the Domesday Book mentions *equae indomitae* and *equae silvestres* (untamed horses and woodland horses) on Exmoor. The ponies are strong and sturdy, come in various shades of bay, brown and dun, and have thick coats and characteristic hooded or 'toad' eyes. They roam freely but they all have owners, they conform to a breed standard, they are rounded up and marked, and they are fed in the winter. Several attempts have been made over the years to 'improve' these tough little horses for riding or haulage, but they have all resulted in less hardy animals and the herds on the moor have reverted to type. Exmoors are not particularly sought-after as riding ponies or profitable to breed, and their numbers dwindled to an endangered level during the Second World War. They are however highly valued for grazing the moorland as they have a varied diet that includes brambles, thistles and gorse. There are now over 500 ponies on Exmoor in twenty or so herds, as well as a few thousand spread across other parts of Britain and Europe, and as far afield as New Zealand, Canada and the Falkland Islands. Ponies can often be seen on North Hill, Winsford Hill, Haddon Hill, off the A39 between Porlock Hill and County Gate, and around Lanacombe. A good place to find out more is the Exmoor Pony Centre just north of Dulverton.



## The Exmoor Beast

Sightings of a big cat on Exmoor, possibly a puma or panther (melanistic leopard), have been claimed for over half a century. Sheep killings have been blamed on the animal, most notably in 1983 when the Royal Marines were called out in an attempt to shoot it. A likely explanation is that a big cat made its home on the moors after being released from captivity, something common in the 1970s when the law on keeping dangerous animals was tightened. Some experts and enthusiasts believe that the descendants of escaped or released cats still live in the area, while others are more cautious and doubt that pumas or panthers will have bred in the wild. The Exmoor Beast has given its name to an annual cycling challenge as well as a strong beer from Exmoor Ales in Wiveliscombe.

wings, curlews, cuckoos, nightjars and, in the winter, flocks of fieldfares. Exmoor is something of a haven for birdlife, particularly the cuckoo, whinchat and yellowhammer which have all declined elsewhere, although the picture is not all rosy and the ring ouzel has almost disappeared from the region while curlew numbers are falling. Ravens are not uncommon, distinguished from crows and rooks by their larger size, more soaring flight and deeper 'kronk' call compared with the crow's harsh caw. Finally there are plenty of pheasants and red-legged partridges, reared for shooting; the former can be a nuisance on the roads particularly when they are first released in the summer.

In the combes and valleys and hanging onto the coast can be found the characteristic Atlantic rainforest, dominated by oak with some ash and holly. Higher up, oak does less well and the few that do grow tend to be stunted; the woods are generally younger with birch, alder,



Minehead

whitebeam and thorn most common (thorn trees, sometimes with wind-sculpted shapes, are frequently encountered dotted around the moorland and more exposed parts of the coast). There is also substantial artificial planting along roadsides and field boundaries, often beech with occasional pine. Commercial conifer plantations are located on the Quantocks, above Dunster, around Dulverton and above Porlock Weir. The open moor is characterised by heather and gorse with bracken ('fern') in more sheltered spots, and thorn and other small trees gradually encroaching where they are left unchecked. The more waterlogged areas such as the Chains are too wet to support heather, and are dominated instead by sedge and cotton grass accompanied by various mosses and bog plants. Moorland, bog, coast and woodland are all rich and nationally important habitats. Rhododendrons add a splash of colour and winter greenery here and there, but they are invasive introductions and efforts are being made to eliminate them or at least keep them under control.

## History and settlement

Exmoor and the Quantocks have been populated to some extent for nearly ten millennia. Evidence of early occupation includes a few standing stones, a much larger number of burial mounds, and occasional inconspicuous stone circles or quadrants such as the ones on Withypool Hill, above Hawk Combe and north of Challacombe. There are plenty of fairy legends from the area, which as in Ireland are likely to originate in Celtic stories inspired by earlier peoples with poorer technology but superior stealth and woodcraft. Iron Age (Celtic) settlement is most conspicuous through the presence of ring forts; some of the best-preserved include Cow Castle, Brewer's Castle, Mounsey Castle and Oldbury Castle all on the River Barle, Wind Hill above the East Lyn, Shoulsbury Castle near Challacombe, Bat's Castle near Dunster, and Dowsborough on the northern Quantocks. There is limited evidence of Roman occupation, including the Beacon fortlet at Martinhoe, Old Burrow near County Gate, and possibly Rainsbury close to the south-eastern tip of Wimbleball Lake.

The area was relatively slow to be affected by the Saxon invasions. King Ine of Wessex seems to have been fighting to keep his boundary at Taunton as late as 722. Will's Neck on the Quantocks may have been a frontier at one time; it means ridge of the Wealas or Welsh, the Saxon name for the Britons. Nevertheless Exmoor was incorporated into Wessex shortly after 800, and in 878 a small Saxon army defeated a larger force of Viking invaders at a disputed location close to the north coast (see the boxed text).

### The elusive battle of Arx Cynuit

In early 878 a party of around a thousand Viking raiders landed on the north coast and besieged a group of Saxons, led by the ealdorman Odda, in a hill fort known as Arx Cynuit or Cynwit. Having no water supply and fearing slaughter if they surrendered, the Saxons attacked at dawn and won a resounding victory, killing the Viking leader Ubba and capturing his raven banner. The importance of this battle for the survival of Saxon Wessex was second only to King Alfred's defeat of the main Viking army under Guthrum later in the same year. Nevertheless, the site of Arx Cynuit is the subject of much speculation, and Chulmleigh and Kenwith in Devon, Wind Hill near Countisbury, and Cannington Knoll have all been proposed. Countisbury is currently favoured, but if the aim of the attack was to divert Saxon forces away from Guthrum's army, or simply to find rich pickings to plunder, Cannington makes better sense. Both Wind Hill and Cannington Knoll can be approached on footpaths if you want to explore.



Many of the farms and villages that exist today originated in the Anglo-Saxon period, though few buildings are now left that have Saxon origins. Some of these original villages have been abandoned, testament to the difficulty of making a living on the moor. Badgworthy fell into decline in the fifteenth century (drawing on local legend the writer R. D. Blackmore uses it as the base for his Doone outlaws) and Ley Hill near Luccombe in the sixteenth, while Radworthy near Challacombe and Clicket in the Brendon Hills lasted until the nineteenth.

Norman motte and bailey castles can be found in Bampton, Nether Stowey, Parracombe and most notably Dunster, where the castle was gradually extended and modified, becoming a fortified manor in the Tudor period. In medieval times Dunster was the largest settlement in the area and an important port and market town, though its importance waned as the River Avill silted up. During the sixteenth century Dulverton, another market town that had experienced mixed fortunes during the medieval era, took over as the region's principal hub.

### Lorna Doone

Exmoor's epic romance *Lorna Doone* was written by R. D. Blackmore in the 1860s. It tells the story of two main characters: Lorna, kidnapped as a little girl and brought up by the Doone outlaws at Badgworthy, and her would-be husband John (Jan) Ridd, a young Exmoor farmer whose father was killed by the Doones at the start of the story. Set on Exmoor in the seventeenth century around the time of the Monmouth rebellion, it paints an atmospheric and intimate if harsh picture of life on the moors. Blackmore knew the area quite well (his grandfather was rector of Oare) and he blends history, folklore and romance so cleverly that his characters have become woven into the identity of Exmoor, blurring the line between fact and fiction (and helping the local tourist industry).

Watchet grew up as a port both for fishing and for ferrying commodities to and from South Wales and elsewhere, and Bampton to the south evolved from being a market town and Devon's rival to Dulverton to becoming a centre of stone quarrying. In the nineteenth century the fashion of taking holidays by the sea led to the growth of the coastal resorts, particularly Minehead, Lynton and Lynmouth, and further west Ilfracombe and Combe Martin.

Today the main economic activities in the region are tourism and livestock farming, though as recently as the early 1900s Exmoor had significant

quarrying and mining, with much of the stone and ore leaving via Watchet. Upland farming is principally sheep and beef cattle, with some dairying on the more fertile lowland. There are a few pockets of fruit and vegetable growing and a limited amount of arable farming, while pheasant shoots provide a significant source of income for some landowners. Exmoor and the Quantocks have some grand country houses and imposing inns, along with a rather genteel feel to places such as Lynton, Dulverton and Dunster; nevertheless this is not a particularly wealthy area and it is vulnerable to anything affecting farming incomes and tourist numbers, as was demonstrated by the foot and mouth epidemic of 2001.

A substantial part of western Exmoor was declared a Royal Forest at some point in the early Norman period. 'Forest' simply means an area set aside from settlement and farming, generally for hunting, and the area was never heavily wooded in historic times. An abandoned plan to grow oaks on the high moor (they are a poor choice of tree for windswept uplands) led to the forest being sold off in 1818. The greater part became the property of John Knight, a wealthy ironworks owner from the West Midlands, who worked tirelessly (if not always successfully) to make the land more productive; his legacy can be seen in the area around Simonsbath, the heart of the old Royal Forest, where he built roads, established farms, planted miles of beech hedges, and created the enigmatic Pinkery Pond. Elsewhere on Exmoor large private estates dominated from the medieval period through to the mid-twentieth century, notably those of the Luttrells (Dunster), Aclands (Holnicote) and Sydenhams (Dulverton and Monksilver). More recently there has been a shift towards smaller landholdings, as well as ownership by public and voluntary bodies such as the National Park Authority, the Forestry Commission and the National Trust.

### Town or village?

Why are Dulverton and Bampton towns while similarly-sized Porlock and Nether Stowey, and larger Combe Martin and Bishops Lydeard, are villages? The answer lies partly in the historic grant of a Royal Charter to hold a market or fair, with associated powers for collecting taxes and establishing a court to settle disputes, and partly in the modern administrative formality of having a town council and mayor. Bampton received its charter in 1258 and still has an annual fair, though you are more likely to pick up some local produce and a few trinkets than livestock or a clip of wool (though Exmoor ponies still feature). Dulverton's charter dates from 1306, but it appears to have lapsed by Tudor times and another was granted in 1556 for the 'town and borough' of Dulverton. Dunster was already a borough and port in 1197, receiving its charter in 1253, but its importance declined in the sixteenth century as the River Avill became too shallow to accommodate ships. As with Nether Stowey, also a former market town, it no longer has a town council and it is now widely regarded as a village.





Pinkery Pond

## Names of places and features

Place names in the area have a mix of Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and to a lesser extent Norman or Middle English influence. The most common Celtic-derived word encountered throughout Devon and Somerset is *combe* (*cwm*, pronounced 'coom'), a generally steep-sided valley, often wooded and with a stream in its bottom. A combe may also be known as a *cleave*, a Saxon word meaning a cutting or cliff (so often referring to one side of the combe), though along with the alternative spelling *coombe* this term is more common further south. Occasionally the name of a combe has become so associated with a village, hamlet or farm that the combe itself is distinguished by repetition, as in Triscombe Combe and Smallacombe Combe. Several place-names also have Celtic origins, such as Minehead (*mynedd*, a mountain or prominent hill), the Quantocks (*cantuc*, a circle of hills), Brayford and the River Bray (*bre*, a hill), the two Hangman hills (*an maen*, a headland), Dunkery (*dun creagh* or *dun cerrig*, a rough hill), Horner (*hwrnwr*, snorer, the sound of the river), Cow Castle (*caer*, a fort), and the river Exe (*isca*, water). Tarr (as in Tarr Steps) may derive from *tochar* or *toher*, a causeway.

### The Exmoor Dark Sky Reserve

Exmoor was designated as Europe's first international Dark Sky Reserve in 2011. The lack of major towns or roads means that light pollution is minimal, and streetlights in many locations are switched off after midnight. There are many spots on the high moors far from artificial light that make for good stargazing, including Haddon Hill, Webber's Post, Anstey Gate, Brendon Two Gates, Dunkery Beacon, County Gate and Holdstone Hill. An annual Dark Skies Festival is held at the end of October.

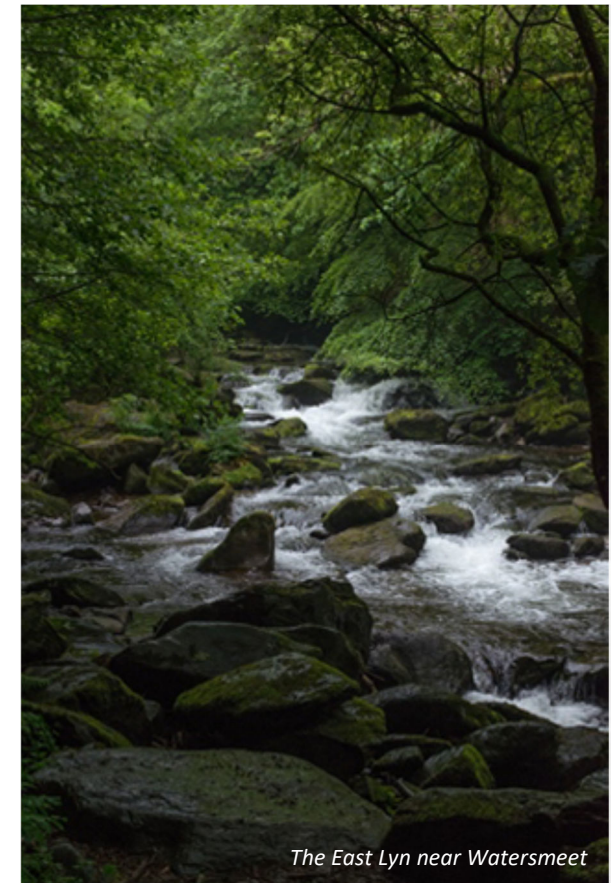
Most names relating to settlements or farming are Anglo-Saxon or more recent in origin. Towns and villages dating from Saxon times are often denoted by '-ton', simply meaning a settlement (a *barton* is a major landholding predating the Norman manor or court). Place names ending -cott or -cote (an isolated cottage) and -worthy (a smallholding or small farm) also have Saxon roots. The latter are often shortened in pronunciation, as in Badgworthy ('Badgery'), Radworthy ('Raddery'), and Woolfardisworthy ('Woolsery'), though not Clatworthy. ('Pinkworthy' is a mapmaker's error; Pinkery is the correct form, from the Celtic *pen creagh* or *pen cerrig*). The river names Barle (*beorgwella*, a hill stream) and Lyn (*hlynn*, a fast-flowing torrent) are also Saxon, as are many generic words denoting landscape or agricultural features: stoke (a clearing made for farming), -bere or -beare (a wood), leigh (a glade or meadow in a wood), -hayes or -hayne (an area enclosed by hedges, more common in mid and east Devon), dean(e) or dene (a vale or wide valley), stowey (a stone way), and -hoe (a hill overlooking the sea).

You may also come across splats, goyals and lynchets. A splat is a small rivulet that typically runs across a road or path rather than in its own bed, but the term is also used for small fields or parcels of land as in Tudball's Splats near Withypool. A goyal is a small combe or gulley, while a lynchet is a ridge following the contour of a hill caused by strip ploughing.

The only Norse name of significance in the area is Lundy. *Lund-ey* either means puffin island or island with a grove or copse; the former is much more likely given Lundy's lack of trees, and the presence of presumably large numbers of puffins in the era of the Viking incursions. Norman and Middle English influence is generally limited to landowners' names added to the name of villages or farms, as with Wootton Courtenay, Sampford Brett, Brompton Ralph, Stoke Pero and Bratton Fleming.

## Getting to the area

The area covered in exmoorwalker.uk can be approached via the M5 motorway (junctions 23-27) or the A361 North Devon Link Road. The main 'entry points' are the A39 along the north coast, the A358 which runs from Taunton along the vale between the Quantock and Brendon hills, the B3224 'top road' and its extension which branches off the A358 and crosses Exmoor east to west, and the A396 between Tiverton and Mine-



The East Lyn near Watersmeet





Exford

head. The quickest way from the motorway to far western Exmoor is often to take the A361 to the second junction for South Molton, then turn on to the A399 towards Ilfracombe.

The nearest airports are Exeter and Bristol, from where it is possible to hire a car or transfer to the rail network by bus or taxi. By train, head to Taunton on the intercity service, or Barnstaple on a branch line from Exeter. Onward travel from these stations is slow. From Taunton, buses go to Watchet, Dunster and Minehead, and to Wiveliscombe, Bampton and Dulverton. Barnstaple buses go to Parracombe and Lynton, as well as Ilfracombe and Combe Martin. Few buses run on Sundays (the Taunton to Minehead route is an exception).

### Where to stay

Exmoor and the Quantocks have a good range of accommodation to suit most budgets. There are hotels, inns and guest houses, farm B&Bs, self-catering cottages, a few apartments in the towns, a small selection of hostels, bunkhouses and bothies, and caravan and camp sites. A directory for Exmoor is provided at [www.visit-exmoor.co.uk](http://www.visit-exmoor.co.uk), and for the Quantocks at [www.quantockonline.co.uk](http://www.quantockonline.co.uk). There are also several commercial and community sites with accommodation listings and booking facilities for the area.

There is no single centre that is an obvious choice for exploring the region, and with a car you have the choice of staying in any of the towns and villages with accommodation as well as at more isolated farms and inns. Driving times are fairly slow on narrow lanes and even main roads, so if you stay near the edge of the area allow at least an hour to get to the opposite side (between Lynton and Watchet for example, or Bampton to Porlock). Travel can be slower in summer traffic, particularly on the coast, while in winter the high moor and its villages

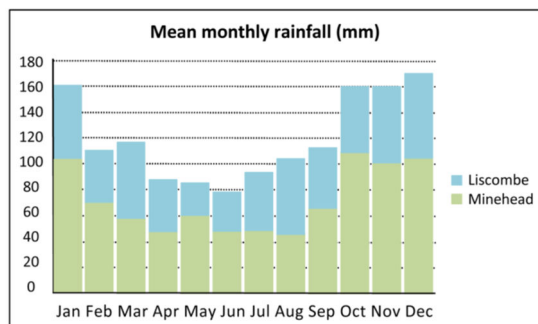
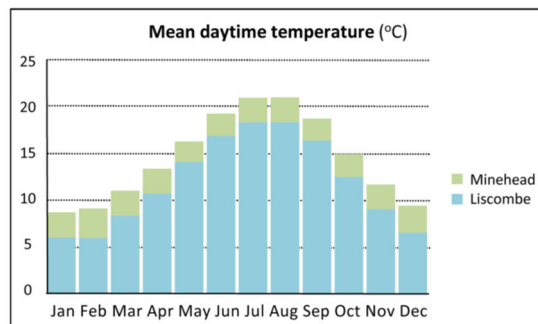
(and even sometimes Lynton and Lynmouth) can become cut off by snow. Minehead is a good location for those who like to have ready access to town facilities, but it is a small holiday resort with a different character from that of the surrounding area and it won't appeal to all; the same can be said of Ilfracombe. Lynton and Lynmouth, Porlock and Dulverton are good choices for Exmoor, as all are reasonably accessible and well-equipped with shops, pubs and cafés; for the Quantock Hills and eastern area, Watchet and Nether Stowey can be added to this list, and Combe Martin if you intend to keep to western Exmoor and north-west Devon. The villages high up on Exmoor, such as Winsford, Exford, Withypool, Simonsbath, Challocombe and Parracombe, also make attractive locations to stay and none are too far away from one of the larger centres. From the larger regional centres, Taunton is about 20 minutes from the edge of the Quantocks and Brendons and 45 from central Exmoor, Exeter just under an hour and Tiverton about 20 minutes to Dulverton, and Barnstaple half an hour from the north coast.

It is easily feasible to take a walking holiday or short break in the area without your own transport, although you will be somewhat restricted and a more careful choice of location is needed unless you want to make frequent use of pre-booked taxis. There is a limited bus service on Exmoor and many villages lack any service or have one or two buses per week. Minehead, Dunster, Watchet and Dulverton are among the most accessible centres (the first three also have the steam railway between April and October), and Porlock can also be worth considering. Lynton and Ilfracombe make good choices for the west of the region, particularly when the coastal bus route ('Exmoor Coaster') is in service. For walks 'from the doorstep' Dulverton and Lynton are particularly good, and Exford, Winsford and Withypool all have enough for a long weekend.



Fyne Court





Based on Meteorological Office data.

## Climate and when to walk

Exmoor, as for England generally, has a temperate maritime climate with relatively mild winters and warm rather than excessively hot summers, along with the possibility – or likelihood – of rain all the year round. The combination of high ground and a north-facing coast makes it slightly cooler and wetter than much of the South West, though the deep wooded combes are sheltered and have their own microclimates, and far less rain falls on the coast than on the uplands. The high ground of both Exmoor and the Quantocks can be bleak in winter, with chilling winds, waterlogged moors and a fair chance of snow settling and closing some of the roads. From late autumn to early spring driving from Porlock via Dunkery Gate to Dulverton can see the temperature drop by several degrees on the hills, then go back up again in the lower Barle

valley. In late summer I have come off hills shrouded all day in rain to find Dulverton pleasantly dry, and Bampton only a few miles further south basking in the sun. The charts above compare temperature and rainfall for Minehead, at sea level, with Liscombe, near Tarr Steps, at a height of 348 metres.

Most walks on Exmoor can be done all year round other than in extreme weather, but there is more chance of having to wait out heavy rain or gales in autumn and early winter, while particularly between January and early March there is a possibility of snow and ice making roads impassable. Some of the walks on the high moorland, particularly in the Withypool, Simonsbath and Challacombe areas and south of Malmsmead and Brendon, can become very waterlogged and difficult in winter. The Quantock Hills and the area between Minehead and Selworthy tend to be more free-draining. On the other hand not everyone will want to tackle strenuous walks without shade in the heat of summer; some of my favourite times for walking are in the spring, early autumn, and cold bright days in winter. Other factors to consider are how busy it will be and what facilities are available. The coastal towns and villages, as well as places such as Dunster, Tarr Steps and to some extent Dulverton and Fyne Court, can become very busy in the school summer holidays and other peak times, with more remote parts remaining fairly quiet throughout the year; I have done the walk between Molland and Twitchen on an August Saturday and seen only a handful of dog walkers and the occasional horse rider. Many village refreshment-houses are seasonal, so if you prefer to finish a walk in a café or tea-room you will have a more limited choice of routes (or need to drive to your chosen victualling spot) between October and Easter.

## Where to walk

The answer to this question must be anywhere in the Exmoor and Quantocks region, although the character of the walks will differ between the areas. The eight areas below follow the sections of the web site.

*The North Devon coast from Croyde to Lynton* The coast progresses from the sweeping sandy bays of Croyde and Woolacombe through the jagged slates of Morte Point, Bull Point and Ilfracombe and on to the massive sandstone hills east of Combe Martin. Atlantic rainforest begins inland between Combe Martin and Hunter's Inn. Highlights are almost too numerous to list – they include Baggy Point, Morte Point, Lee Bay, Ilfracombe, Watermouth, Berrynarbor, Heddon's Mouth and the Valley of the Rocks. Walks range from moderate in the west of the area to more strenuous in the east, but the reward is spectacular coastal scenery.

*The Exmoor coast from Lynmouth to Minehead* This stretch consists of two distinct uplands, one rising from Lynmouth to Countisbury Hill and continuing via wooded combes to Porlock Hill, while the other, from Bossington Hill to North Hill above Minehead, forms a more-or-less continuous ridge. Wedged between is the Porlock Vale, one of the few flat parts of coastal Exmoor. The twin Lyn rivers cut deeply into the hills providing stunning (and not always particularly strenuous) woodland walking beside rushing water; the East Lyn valley is one of the deepest gorges in England. Most of the walks in the area require some effort, though gentler routes can be found from Lynmouth, around Porlock and on North Hill.

*Western Exmoor* This area includes the high moorland around Simonsbath and the western fringes of inland Exmoor. The region includes archetypal Exmoor landscapes of rounded hills, open, often boggy moorland, and hill-streams gathering their strength. As well as classic moorland walks from places such as Malmsmead, Simonsbath and Exford it includes some lesser-visited areas on the fringes of the moor. Walks are not generally as strenuous as might



Watermouth and the Hangman Hills



## Five outstanding long(ish) walks

It is difficult to pick out just a few walks from the hundreds of possibilities in the Exmoor and Quantocks area, but if I had a week to fill with varied, fairly energetic walks from across the region these would be among my choices:

**Hunter's Inn and Combe Martin** From Hunter's Inn head along Trentishoe Water and rise to Rhydda Bank. Follow Ladies' Mile, turning off just before the end to cross Trentishoe Down. Continue across Holdstone Hill and descend Sherrycombe, heading for Knap Down, Netherton and Combe Martin seaside. Return on the Coast Path via Little and Great Hangman, back across Sherrycombe, then keep to the coast. Finally turn inland above Heddon's Mouth, descend into the valley and return to the inn (see walk 9, reverse part of 8, and the start of 7; 14.5 miles, strenuous). *Atmospheric Atlantic rainforest, coastal moorland, a quirky seaside village, magnificent coastal scenery and a welcoming inn.* Circular walk, bus access at Combe Martin, refreshments in Combe Martin and Hunter's Inn.

**Lynton and Lynmouth grand tour** From Lynmouth take the coast path to Countisbury. Head south over Trilly Ridge to Watersmeet, cross the A39, climb up to Myrtleberry Cleave and follow the path to Lynbridge. Take the Lynway towards Lynton then continue ahead and track around to South Cleave. Continue via Six Acre Wood to Lee Bay. Return on the coast path through the Valley of the Rocks to Lynton (see walks 14 and 15 on the web site; 11 miles, strenuous). *Spectacular coastal views, narrow path high above the sea, descent into river gorge, two tea-gardens in stunning settings, characterful twin towns, water-powered funicular railway.* Circular walk with various refreshment options, bus at Lynton and Lynmouth.

**Porlock to Dunster via Dunkery** There are easier routes between the two villages, but this is about the most scenic. Head via lanes and paths to Horner, follow Horner Water then zigzag up to Webber's Post, climb to Dunkery Beacon, descend to Wootton Courtenay, climb again to Wootton Common, continue east along the ridge, and drop into Dunster (the second half of walk 55 in reverse followed by the second half of walk 50; 12 miles, fairly strenuous). *Two historic villages, dense oak woods in a deep river valley, high moorland, far-reaching views, National Trust castle.* Linear walk connected (with careful planning) by bus, changing in Minehead; refreshments at either end.

**Dulverton, Tarr Steps and Hawkridge** From the bridge in Dulverton head through the town and past the church, then northwards on a green lane almost to Higher Broford. Turn left to pass Highercombe Farm and come to Mounsey Hill Gate. Cross Varle Hill and Ashway Side to Tarr Steps. Cross the river then keep left, following the road uphill into Hawkridge. Now follow the Exe Valley Way above the Barle back to Dulverton (see walks 63 and 64; 11.5 miles, moderate). *Historic market town, rolling farmland with fine views, edge of open moor, ancient clapper bridge, remote village, wooded river valley.* Circular walk, refreshments and bus access at Dulverton.

**The Quantocks spine** From Fyne Court head to Cothelstone Hill then on to the Quantocks ridge path to Will's Neck, Triscombe Stone and Bicknoller Post, before dropping down into Sheppard's Combe and Hodder's Combe to come to Holford (variant of walk 97; 11.5 miles, moderate). *Abandoned landscape garden, rolling countryside, high paths and downs, multiple viewpoints, deep combes, wooded stream valley and secluded village.* Linear walk needing connecting transport (a variation of the route can be done on weekdays using buses starting and finishing in Taunton); refreshments either end.

be imagined – the area is all fairly high up – but some routes include open, pathless moorland, and the going can be hard particularly when the ground is waterlogged; care is needed when choosing walks in winter or after heavy rain.

**Central Exmoor north of Winsford** This area stretches from Exford and Winsford north to Porlock and Dunster, including Dunkery Beacon, the Horner Water valley and Wheddon Cross. It is an area of high hills and deep wooded combes, including the extensive woods of the Holnicote estate around Horner. Wheddon Cross marks a double crossing-point, the watershed between the north-flowing River Avill and the southgoing Quarme, as well as the boundary between high Exmoor to the west and the Brendon Hills to the east. Walking varies between dense woods, ancient trackways and hamlets, and open moors on high hills, and routes can be relatively easy or as strenuous you want to make them.

**Central Exmoor south of Winsford** This is the inland area south from Exford and Winsford, down to Dulverton, Anstey Moor and Molland. The area is dominated by the rivers Barle and Exe and to a lesser extent Dane's Brook, all of which converge within a short distance of Dulverton, Exmoor's 'capital' and an ideal walking base. The landscape is a mix of open moorland and high grazing land broken by the deep, often wooded river valleys. The most popular walking area is the triangle between Dulverton, Winsford and Exford, but the lesser-visited areas around Molland and the Ansteys are no less interesting. A few walks in this area cross open moorland without clear paths.

**The Brendon Hills to the sea** This is the area between the A396 and the A358, encompassing Minehead, Dunster and Watchet, and on to the Brendon Hills including Luxborough, Roadwater and south to the B3224 east-to-west spine road. This area takes in the rolling hills of the northern Brendons, the extensive woodlands around historic Dunster, and the relatively low-



Mounsey Hill Gate



## Just strolling

The steep or undulating nature of much of Exmoor and the Quantocks mean that a casual stroll can quickly turn into something more energetic, although there are plenty of locations where it's easy to wander for half an hour or more without being particularly equipped for 'walking'.

**Hunter's Inn and Heddon's Mouth** The steep-sided Heddon Valley looks forbidding to the casual stroller, but there are accessible paths running from Hunter's Inn along both sides of the river to the sea as well as along Trentishoe Water (see walks 9 and 10).

**Lynton and Lynmouth** The area around the twin towns is some of the steepest country in England, but there are also some fairly easy short walks. From Lynmouth, head up the East Lyn and back, possibly as far as Watersmeet (the riverside path, partly on the right bank heading upstream, is less undulating than the woodland one). From Lynton (and Lynmouth if the cliff railway is used) the Valley of the Rocks is a fairly easy stroll along a cliff path and back via a road (see walks 14 and 17).

**The Porlock vale** The only substantial area of flat coast within Exmoor National Park, the Porlock vale allows gentle strolling anywhere between Porlock, Porlock Weir, Bossington, Allerford and Horner (see walk 24 for ideas). The salt marsh is interesting to explore, though you can no longer walk all the way along the coast. Walking on the shingle beach can be tiring.

**North Hill and Selworthy Beacon** The high ground west of Minehead has an extensive network of paths. Parking in one of the many car parks off the Hill Road allows easy strolling around North Hill, Bratton Ball and to Selworthy Beacon and just beyond; it is easy to make up short walks between the original Coast Path and the road (see walks 26, 27 and 28). This is a good area for winter walking.

**Minehead, Dunster and Blue Anchor** The coastal strip from Minehead to Blue Anchor is flat, and short walks can easily be done to the east of Minehead, around Dunster village, between Dunster and Dunster Beach, and across to Blue Anchor (see walks 72 and 73). In season the steam railway can be used to do one-way walks between stations.

**Watchet and Washford** The old Mineral Line is now a footpath, allowing a gentle walk between Washford and Watchet, with a bus or seasonal rail connection to return. Watchet itself is also worth exploring (see walk 71).

**Dulverton and Bampton** Both of these small towns nestle among hills, but they are big enough to explore for an hour or so without encountering anything too strenuous (see walks 64, 68 and 83).

**Wimbleball Lake** A circuit of the lake is over 8 miles and far from flat (walk 80), but it is easy to make up short strolls from the car parks by the café, at Haddon Hill or on the north side of the lake.

**The Quantock coast** Stroll between Kilve and Kilve Beach, or head west along the coast and return via East Quantoxhead (see walks 90 and 91).

**Fyne Court** Several short routes are signposted around Fyne Court (see walks 98 and 99), a National Trust property (free to enter) with seasonal tea room; the longest, the mile-long Five Ponds Wood trail, is interesting and varied.



lying coast between Minehead and Watchet. The landscape is less dramatic than that of high Exmoor to the west, but it still makes for some scenic walking and interesting exploring. Routes are generally moderate (or easy near the coast), and away from Dunster and the sea they are usually quiet.

**Bampton, Wiveliscombe and the lakes** This area includes the southern part of the Brendon Hills, including Clatworthy Reservoir and Wimbleball Lake (both easily circumnavigated), as well as the rolling country between Bampton and Wiveliscombe. The landscape is farmland, woods and streams with small villages and hamlets, often attractive, interesting and off the beaten track. Walks are typically undulating rather than particularly strenuous.

**The Quantock Hills** The Quantocks make up a self-contained area of upland, designated as a National Landscape, stretching from the coast nearly to Taunton. The uplands are generally well-defined with streams cutting in from north, east and west; the southern edge fades gradually into the Taunton Vale. The central part of the Quantocks is heavily wooded, while the northern section is high, free-draining moorland cut by combes. Only two roads cross the hills and the villages nestle into their edges. Easier walks follow the ridges and combes; harder ones cut across them.

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