



## The Exmoor Herepath: background and walking notes.

### Some background

Herepaths are Saxon army roads. They are associated particularly with King Alfred, who set up a network of military roads and fortified towns or *burhs* to defend against Viking incursions, though some are undoubtedly older. A *here* is an armed host; Ine, king of Wessex from 688 to 726, defined it as a group of more than 35, and the term could be applied to Viking raiders as well as to the Saxons themselves. Some routes followed earlier paths such as the Bronze Age ridgeway over the Brendon Hills. Unlike Roman roads they are not necessarily straight, nor paved, as they just needed to allow a war band to move quickly without becoming bogged down or too strung out. Herepaths seem to have been used for farming and transporting goods in addition to their military purpose, though in places the herepath (usually on high ground) is distinct from the road used by livestock and carts (lower down). Some herepaths included smaller connecting paths between highways.

On Exmoor the spelling 'harepath' is often used, in line with the pronunciation (the short section south of Wheddon Cross is so-named on the Ordnance Survey map). I have kept to *herepath* as it is the more common spelling in historic literature and reflects the Old English (*herepaþ* or *herepæþ*).

In Somerset there is a tradition of a herepath running from Bristol to Pawlett, then across the River Parrett on a ford at Comwich, over the Quantock and Brendon Hills, on to the top of Exmoor, and to the *burh* at Pilton near Barnstaple, with a branch heading down to the sea near Porlock. The main source for the route as far as Bessom Bridge near Wheddon Cross is William Greswell, vicar of Dodington on the northern edge of the Quantocks, who devoted a chapter of his book *Dumnonia and the valley of the Parret* to the subject (reference 1 below). Later writers have proposed routes across Exmoor and to Barnstaple. These notes follow the route of the herepath from Comwich to the road south of Wheddon Cross, then take a conjectured secondary route to the sea at Porlock Weir.

The precise routes of herepaths can be debatable, particularly as they could follow earlier Bronze Age paths or Roman roads (*stræts*), as well as being confused by later investigators with non-military Saxon tracks (*wegs*) and later trade routes. While herepath or harepath place-names are an obvious clue, other here- derivations need not refer to a road but could be connected to an encampment or the site of a raid. A further complication is that in later times the name 'herepath' may have been applied to any long- or medium-distance road maintained at public expense. One clue provided by William Greswell and G. B. Grundy [2] is

that parish boundaries were often made to coincide with the herepath, but any proposed route needs to be treated with caution in the absence (as here) of archaeological evidence. My purpose is to identify a walking trail that approximates to the route that various historians have conjectured, not to throw any new light on a path for which the evidence is limited and often vague. Each section of the walking notes is followed by source notes about the relevant part of the herepath.

Most of the places referred to in the sources can be found on the modern 1:25000 OS map. Where they are not (as with some of Greswell's locations) I have attempted to locate them on early 20th-century 6" OS maps.

### Sources

These are the sources I have used to inform the route. If you want to read further some are available online, the Microstudies and Exmoor Reviews are held by the Exmoor Society in Dulverton, and others are available from Dulverton Library.

- [1] Rev. William Greswell, *Dumnonia and the valley of the Parret: a historical retrospect*. Barnicott & Pearce (The Wessex Press), Taunton, 1922. Chapter 9: A Saxon Herepath.
- [2] G. B. Grundy, The ancient highways of Somerset. *The Archaeological Journal* 96, pp226-297, 1939.
- [3] G. B. Grundy, The ancient highways of Devon. *The Archaeological Journal* 98, pp131-164, 1941.
- [4] Charles Whybrow, *Antiquary's Exmoor*. Microstudy C1, Exmoor Press, Dulverton, 1970.
- [5] Hazel Eardley-Wilmot, *Ancient Exmoor*. Microstudy C2, Exmoor Press, Dulverton, 1983.
- [6] Hazel Eardley-Wilmot, *Yesterday's Exmoor*. Exmoor Books, Exeter, 1990. Chapter 3: Early Roads.
- [7] Hazel Eardley-Wilmot, New light on old travel routes: Comwich Causeway and the Harepath. *Proceedings of Somerset Archaeology and Natural History Society* 134, pp187-193, 1990.
- [8] Vanessa McMullen, A walk along the Harepath. *Exmoor Review* 34, pp. 24-5, 1993.
- [9] Jennifer Macdonald, *Travel and the communications network in late Saxon Wessex: a review of the evidence*. DPhil thesis, University of York, 2001.
- [10] Peter Pay, In search of Exmoor's elusive Harepath. *Exmoor Review* 54, pp. 36-9, 2003.



Hare Path with Dunkery Beacon in the distance

## Combwich to Elworthy

●/● 17 miles, 6 hours 15 minutes. Ascents of 600 metres and descents of 400 metres.

Using two cars or a taxi the walk can easily be broken into two or three sections.

Terrain: Roads, tracks and paths, some potentially muddy fields.

Access: Start at Combwich. There is no bus service, so either park or arrange to be dropped off at the village car park (ST 260 424, TA5 2QZ) then walk downstream to the start. The finish is at the crossroads of the B3224 and B3188 near Elworthy. If you are leaving a car at Elworthy there is some space on the B3224 just to the east (c. ST 087 347).

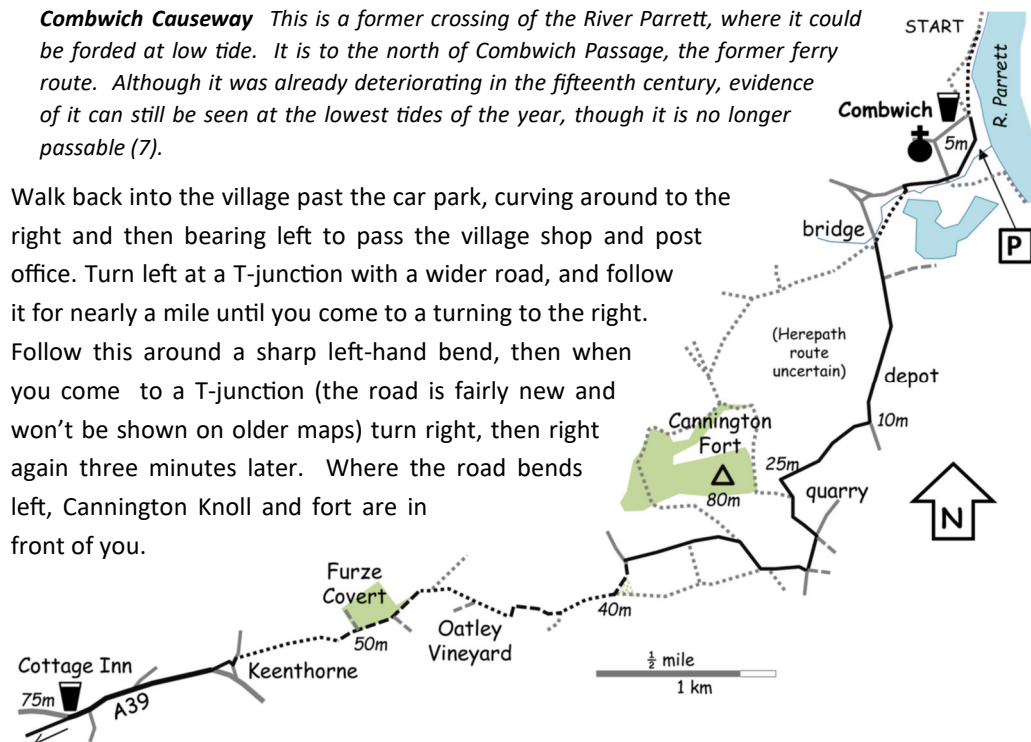
Map: The route is on OS Explorer sheet 114 Quantock Hills & Bridgwater, except for the final mile which is on OL9 Exmoor.

Refreshments: In Combwich, on the A39 (Cottage Inn), off the route in Nether Stowey, and at Triscombe. The nearest refreshments to Elworthy are in Monksilver, Stogumber and Raleigh's Cross.

Start on the bank of the River Parrett half a mile north of the car park in Combwich, just before Combwich Clyce.

**Combwich Causeway** This is a former crossing of the River Parrett, where it could be forded at low tide. It is to the north of Combwich Passage, the former ferry route. Although it was already deteriorating in the fifteenth century, evidence of it can still be seen at the lowest tides of the year, though it is no longer passable (7).

Walk back into the village past the car park, curving around to the right and then bearing left to pass the village shop and post office. Turn left at a T-junction with a wider road, and follow it for nearly a mile until you come to a turning to the right. Follow this around a sharp left-hand bend, then when you come to a T-junction (the road is fairly new and won't be shown on older maps) turn right, then right again three minutes later. Where the road bends left, Cannington Knoll and fort are in front of you.



**Combwich to Cannington Knoll** From Combwich the path is noted as passing to the west of Cannington Knoll, where there is a hill fort (Greswell says the path was easily visible when he was writing). This is one of the sites conjectured as being Arx Cynuit or Cynwit, where in 878 a small army led by the Saxon ealdorman Odda defeated a larger force of Vikings and killed their leader, Ubba. Greswell puts forward a good argument for the location being Cannington, as does the historic fiction author Bernard Cornwell to support the location chosen in his novels; an alternative that is widely quoted is Wind Hill fort near Countisbury. The route is unlikely to have crossed the waterlogged ground to the north of the fort, so I am assuming it went south from Combwich over what is now Bolham Bridge and then turned right across the southern side of the knoll (old maps show a westwards path immediately to the south of the hill, but there is no right of way there now). The walking route (of necessity) skirts too far to the south.

Follow the road for another ten minutes, then just past a house turn left on a signposted track. Use the map to follow this past Knoll Green, Oatley Vineyard and Furze Covert, then arrive at a road at Keenthorne. Turn left here, then right at a T-junction, and right on to the main road. Walk along it for ten minutes to the Cottage Inn.

**Oteley Oak, Swang Gorse and Keenthorne** are mentioned by Greswell as being on the route (1).

From the inn, continue along the A39 for a minute or two, then fork left on a broad, straight road, soon passing through speed derestriction signs. In ten minutes come to a crossroads (the path to Nether Stowey turns off right here), and in another fifteen minutes or just over to a second crossroads. Continue ahead, then fork right towards Rams Combe. Now keep to the right until you pass Over Stowey church. Turn left a T-junction with a small ornamental stone building opposite, then in a couple of minutes bear left on a (possibly overgrown) lane just before a house. When this meets a road, turn right then shortly afterwards left. You are now on the Stowey (stone way) road up on to the top of the Quantocks.

**Over Stowey and the Stowey road** The Stowey road was part of the herepath (1). The herepath would have predated the church, but there was a fort at Over Stowey. Greswell refers to a field called Castle Ground that I can't find on the 6" OS map.

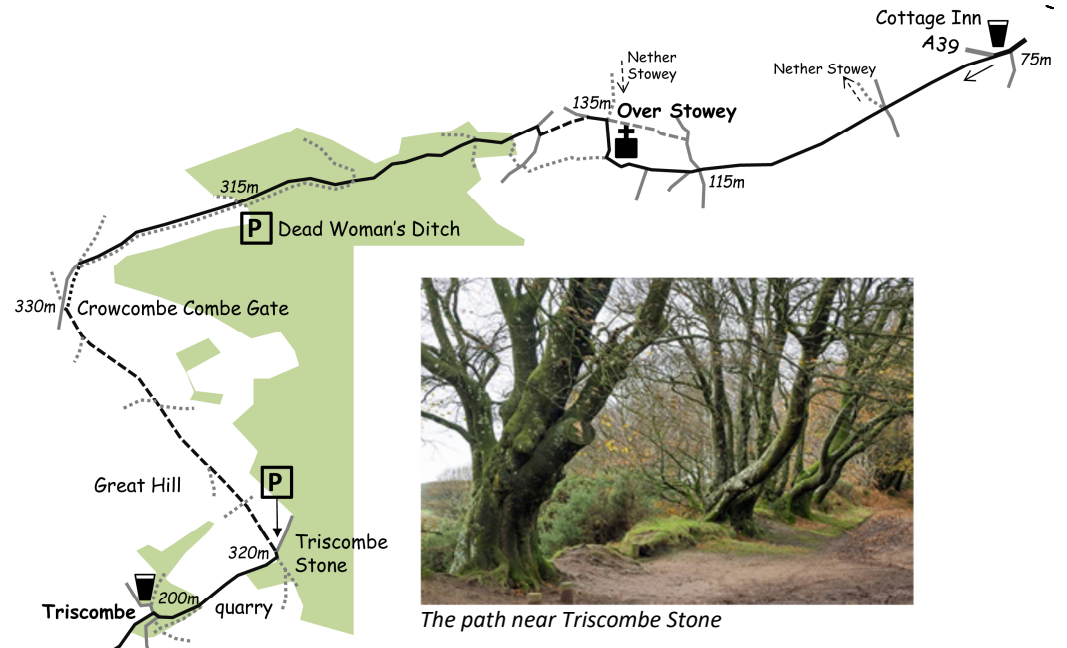
In a little more than half an hour of continuous ascent you will come to the Dead Woman's Ditch car park, a large open area on the left with a sign board (see walk 45 for an explanation of the name). A track now continues parallel with the road, on its left. Twenty minutes from Dead Woman's Ditch come to a pair of trees protected by a fence, and turn left here on a broad track. This is the ridgeway that runs along the top of the Quantocks.

**Ram's Combe, Crowcombe Gate and on to the Quantocks ridgeway** The route along the Stowey road past the head of Ram's Combe, Crowcombe Gate and on to the ridge seems straightforward. Greswell's 'wide drove between beech hedges surmounted by gorse' is not difficult to find today. He suggests that Great Bear Path, joining from Dowsborough, is probably a corruption of 'herepath'. The route of the Ridgeway is described by Grundy (2); it is the obvious route along the spine of the Quantocks today.

In about half an hour arrive at the car park at Triscombe Stone (the stone itself is not particularly conspicuous). Turn right on to a roughly-surfaced lane which takes you downhill past a small quarry. At the bottom, pass a thatched cottage and the Blue Ball inn, then keep left to head gradually downhill; fifteen minutes from the inn you will arrive at Red Post on the A358.

**The ridge to Red Post** *Greswell indicates that the path passed close to Triscombe Stone and the Blue Ball before heading to Red Post. I have simply followed the modern track and road down to Red Post.*

At the main road, turn right then immediately left on the road towards Crowcombe Station. Cross the railway, then ignore turnings first to the right then the left as the road goes through bends. Less than five minutes after the second bend, turn right on to a side-road. This narrow lane heads through trees before coming into the open. When it bends sharply left, continue ahead through a farm. Go straight on at a crossroads; watch for traffic on this narrow lane. The lane starts fairly straight, then dips down into a stream valley before rising again. At a T-junction where there is a single-storey lodge house, turn right then left towards Elworthy. Pass a road on the right to the Vexfords, then a couple of minutes later bear right on a signposted path. This takes you past Hartrow Manor, where it becomes a track; when it



The path near Triscombe Stone

### Elworthy to Wheddon Cross

The next section of the Herepath follows the B3224. The road itself is too busy for comfortable walking and there isn't a straightforward alternative on footpaths.

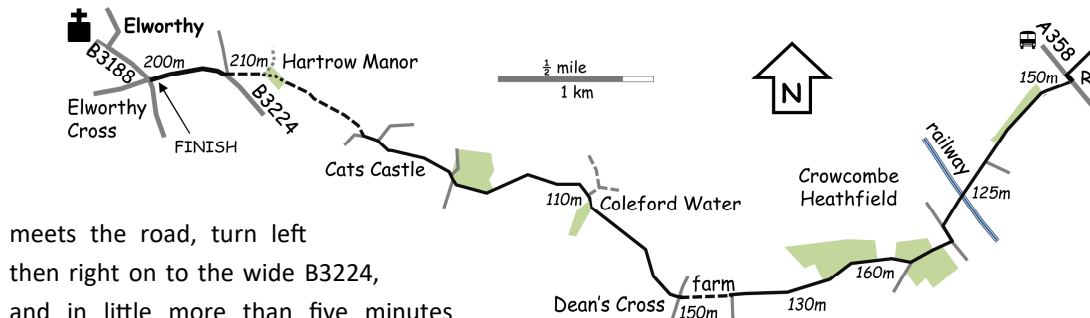
**Along the B3224** *There is little reference to the actual route but it seems to diverge slightly from the road in some places. At Brendon Hill it is noted as passing Naked Boy's Stone (4), which is on the parish boundary; presumably it then follows the boundary back to the road. The boundary also diverges from the road by about 150m at Withiel Hill. There is a possible anomaly at Ken-nisham Forest, where the Exmoor Historic Environment Record suggests that the Herepath passes SS 9648 3642, where there was a dig. This seems an unnecessary diversion (over 500m) from the road and the boundary, so it could be part of another path.*

meets the road, turn left then right on to the wide B3224, and in little more than five minutes come to Elworthy Cross. The herepath now follows roughly the line of the top road for ten miles to Summerway Cross.

**Red Post to Elworthy Cross** *Greswell describes the route in detail as far as Cats Castle, starting with the wide road to the railway and then narrower Binford's Lane and Dean's Lane to Coleford Water, followed by Cutborough Copse and Cats Castle. The next point referred to is Elworthy Barrows (actually a hill fort). There is a possibility that the route via Elworthy Cross is incorrect, though it joins the B3224 which soon afterwards becomes the parish boundary. Grundy (2) describes the route of the Brendons Ridgeway as being slightly further south, heading from Deans Cross or thereabouts to just south of Willett, then back up to Hartrow House (Manor). This is partly off rights of way and partly on the B-road, so regardless of historic accuracy Greswell's version is the better walking route.*

### Wheddon Cross to the coast

The next walkable section of the Herepath starts near Wheddon Cross. If you are using the bus the following route avoids simply walking along the B3224. From the inn in Wheddon Cross take the A396 towards Minehead and Dunster. In less than a minute turn right at a memorial, then right again on a lane towards Putham. In just over five minutes the lane turns left; turn right on a bridleway. Cross a farm track then continue for another 12-15 minutes to arrive at kennels (Pitleigh). Take the track to the right to come to the main road. Turn right to Summerway Cross, where a broad lane forks off to the left.





- 11.9 miles, 4 hours 25 minutes. Ascents of 410 metres and descents of 760 metres. Add 1.4 miles and 90 metres of ascent (and about 35 minutes) if starting from Wheddon Cross. The walk can be broken at Exford.

Terrain: Mainly surfaced roads and stony tracks, some potentially muddy paths.

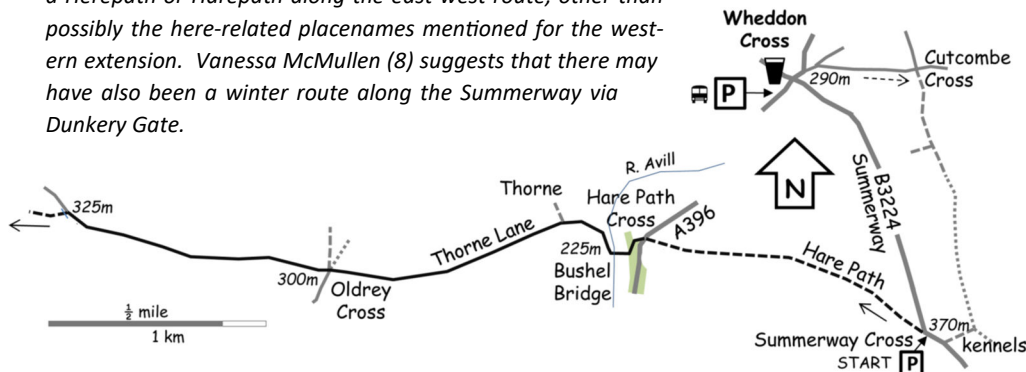
Access: Start from Summerway Cross on the B3224 a mile SSE of Wheddon Cross (SS 930 376). Either arrange to be dropped off, or with two cars there is a small layby at Summerway Cross. By bus, start from Wheddon Cross. With careful planning it is possible to park at Porlock Weir and take the bus to Wheddon Cross via a change in Minehead.

Map: OS Explorer OL9 Exmoor. The final section from Pittcombe Head is also on Croydecycle map 02 Porlock.

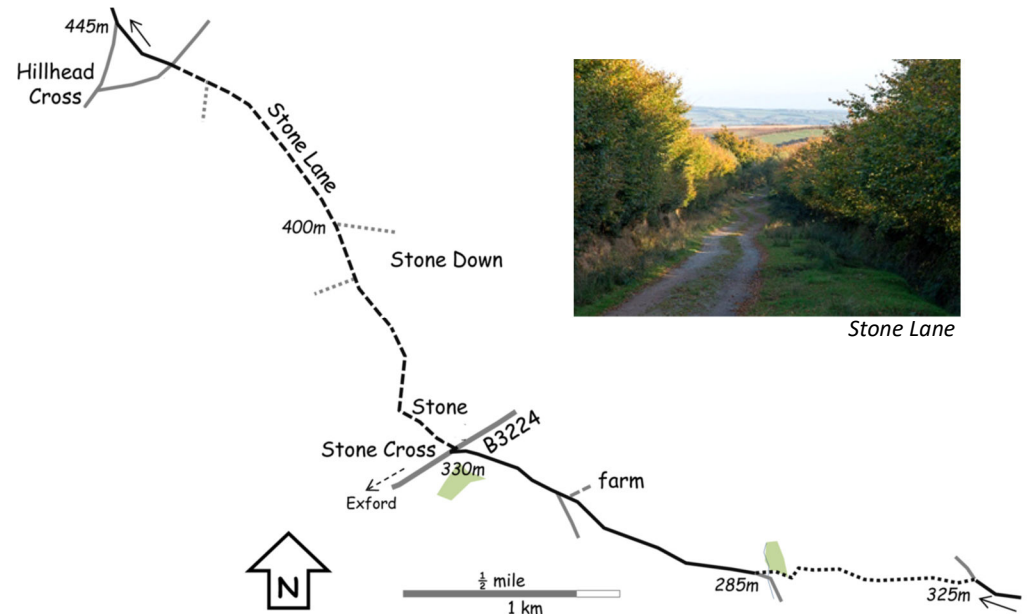
Refreshments: Pubs and seasonal tea rooms in Wheddon Cross, Porlock Weir and nearby Exford.

Start the walk from Summerway Cross. Follow the broad, unsurfaced lane, marked as a by-way, that forks away from the road; this is named Hare Path on the map. In nearly a mile this crosses the A396 at an angle, at Hare Path Cross. It continues as a narrow but surfaced road, Thorne Lane. You will soon drop down to Bushel Bridge, in Saxon times a ford across the River Avill, before the road rises and straightens out. It is easy to imagine a Saxon host marching along this basically straight road, perhaps on its way to intercept marauding Vikings in the Porlock Vale.

**The Hare Path and Bushel Bridge** A viable walking route begins again at Summerway Cross (4). The Hare Path from Summerway Cross is straightforward; it crosses the A396 at Hare Path Cross (4) and continues to Bushel Bridge over the River Quarme (1). This is the only modern reference to a Herepath or Harepath along the east-west route, other than possibly the here-related placenames mentioned for the western extension. Vanessa McMullen (8) suggests that there may have also been a winter route along the Summerway via Dunkery Gate.



Ignore a crossing lane, but in another fifteen minutes turn left through a gate on a signposted broad earthen track. Follow this for a little over twelve minutes; the last section bends left then right. At a road, turn right and continue past Rocks Cottage until you meet the B3224



again, keeping an eye out for traffic. At the junction Exford is a mile to the left. The route continues ahead on Stone Lane, a well-defined restricted byway that passes through the hamlet of Stone before heading on to the open moor.

**Thorne Lane and Stone Lane** William Greswell becomes vague after Bushel Bridge; for following the route to Worthy, Hazel Eardley-Wilmot becomes the authority (and see also 8). It seems fairly clear that the path continues along Thorne Lane (7); Eardley-Wilmot then says 'across Stone Down', which I have taken to mean via Stone Cross and along Stone Lane.

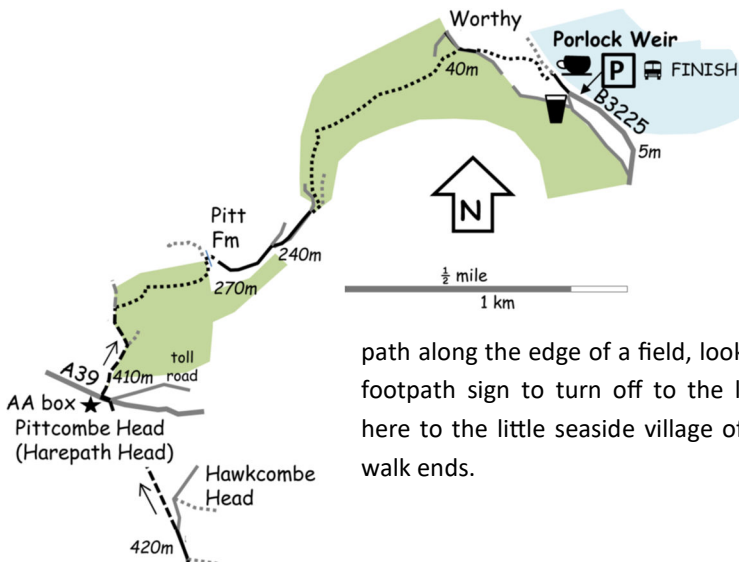
Soon after Stone Lane becomes enclosed by hedges again, arrive at a crossroads. Continue ahead here on a hard road, and continue slightly to the right at the next junction. You are now on the Exford to Porlock road, which you will follow for the next three miles at an average height of over 400 metres; for much of the way the road is on open moorland, so you will not need to walk all the way on tarmac. Descend to Chetsford Water and up again, then views open up to the right of the Dunkery ridge. A side road comes in from the left at Lucott Cross. A little further on the road goes over a cattle grid and becomes edged by a fence on the left. About 25 minutes later, the road veers right away from the hedge; continue ahead here on a wide track. This takes you to the A39 at Pittcombe Head.

**To Hawkcombe Head and Pittcombe Head** Eardley-Wilmot's next waypoint is Hillhead Cross, but her directions past Bendel's Barrows and Porlock stone circle suggest the most obvious route from the top of Stone Lane on to the Porlock road, about 300m north of Hillhead Cross. The route follows the modern road almost to Hawkcombe Head, forking left on the rough lane to Pittcombe Head. Pittcombe Head used to be called Harepath Head, and (7) cites other examples of former 'Harepath' names in the area.

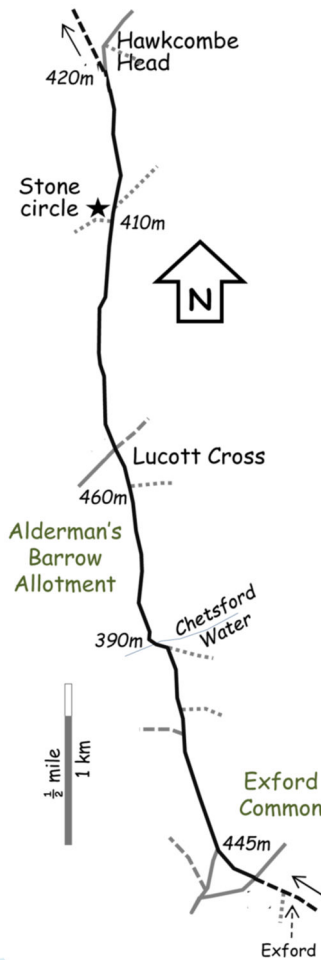
Briefly turn left here, then opposite an AA phone box take the bridleway to the right: go through the gate and follow the blue waymarks. Ignore the first track descending to the right; views across Porlock Vale soon open up. Little more than five minutes later follow the bridleway downhill to the right (the 'main' route straight on is a forestry track and is not a right of way). Keep right where a track leads off to the left, following the main way down and around to the left. Coming above a house and its well-kept garden, turn right on a track, ignoring the sign for Culbone via Smallacombe. Join a surfaced road, which in around five minutes comes to an oxbow junction. Take the right fork here, then in two or three minutes fork right on a signposted footpath. Keep left when it forks, following it down through wooded Worthy Combe to the hamlet of Worthy.

**To Worthy and the coast** Eardley-Wilmot describes the route as continuing past Pitt Farm and Yearnor Mill Bridge, then down Worthy Combe to the hamlet of Worthy. How the path then reached the coast is unclear, though Porlock Weir was a Saxon port and forms the logical terminus of this branch of the Herepath.

At the bottom turn right on a road, then in a minute or less take the coast path to the left. You will soon have views over the shingly beach and creek at Porlock Weir. Following the



path along the edge of a field, look out for an almost hidden footpath sign to turn off to the left: go down some steps here to the little seaside village of Porlock Weir, where the walk ends.



## The western continuation

The main herepath would seem to have continued west past Simonsbath and possibly on to Barnstaple. A detailed walking route isn't suggested here, but the sources are summarised below and could be used to identify suitable paths for a walk.

**Charles Whybrow's route** Whybrow's westward route (4), which is supported (though not in detail) by Greswell, would seem to break off the route described above somewhere around Rocks Cottage (before Exford) and join the path via Higher Combe to North Court. He then suggests it continues to Simonsbath where it splits in two, with one branch heading to Mole's Chamber and Bratton Fleming, and the other along the road to the Poltimore Arms and Brayford, meeting again east of Barnstaple Long Bridge (in Saxon times a ford). Eardley-Wilmott is sceptical about a continuation in this direction, but there is at least some circumstantial evidence that the path ran east of Exford; Hereliving and Hearlake may refer to the herepath, and there is a tradition of a herepath at Birch Cleave near Simonsbath and between Hearlake and Mole's Chamber. It would also seem contrary to King Alfred's plans not to continue the path to Pilton, on the River Yeo in Barnstaple, assuming that it was one of his fortified burhs. There is evidence on the ground for an old path of some sort between Simonsbath, Mole's Chamber, Shoulsbury Castle, Leworthy and on to Bratton Fleming, but in the Hereliving area it is less clear.

**The Ridgeway route** McMullen's proposed winter route (8) continues along the Summerway to Dunkery Gate, then joins the Ridgeway. Grundy describes the Ridgeway as heading up towards the Rowbarrows and on to Larkbarrow Cross (2). It then continues roughly along the line of the modern Macmillan Way past Pinkery Pond, Chapman Barrow, south of Parracombe and north of Kentisbury (3).

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