



Exmoor

Trentishoe



This is a three-mile walk around the roof of the north Westcountry world, in other words the far western eminences of Exmoor. And what makes the route seem so lofty and vertiginous, is its proximity to the sea. The walk is centred on Trentishoe, the tiny hamlet and parish perched high above the ludicrously steep sides of Heddon's Mouth Cleave.

Heddon's Mouth Cleave is the deep valley where Exmoor's hills suddenly divide halfway between Lynmouth and Combe Martin. Cleave is the name and cleave is the word - stand high on the western rim of Exmoor's rift valley and you get the impression that God used an axe when he created this dramatic place.

Trentishoe is the hamlet tucked behind the great shoulder that is the western jaw of the Cleave's mouth, and basically this walk makes its way around the hill staying more or less on the same high contour all the way. We parked at the place where the open acres of Holdstone Down give way at its eastern extremity to walled fields. At one point the walls make a large funnel shape - which I presume was designed for the corralling of sheep, or cattle or wild ponies - and this deep 'v' forms the entrance to Trentishoe Lane.

Down this we walk, though do not be put off by the idea of strolling along a highway, it's one of those car-an-hour byways. After a mile the little church of St Peter stands tucked away in its hollow. Austere and modest - as honest a house of worship as you're ever likely to find in Christendom. You get the feeling that the old folk who knelt here in this wild spot down through the centuries would have been more than earnest in their prayers.

Basic Hike: From Holdstone Down through Trentishoe to western slopes of Heddon's Mouth Cleave and back along the coast.

Recommended Map: Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure 9.

Distance and Going: Three miles, easy going.

Food and Drink: Hunter's Inn or at Combe Martin 15 minutes drive away.

Earnest but not, perhaps, honest – at least as far as the Customs men were concerned. In 1827 a Trentishoe farmer called Jim Hoyle was caught with no fewer than £1,180's worth of brandy hidden under his stable floors. Customs and Excise confiscated the 262 tubs of booze, but something within me is glad to report that lucky Jim escaped through a back window.

When we visited the churchyard was a waving mist of blue-bells and it's easy to miss the gravestone which marks the final resting place of David (Dick) Turpin. No highwayman this, but the church organist who passed away in 1979. We passed on down the road to a point just under Trentishoe where a path branches left off the lane. Soon we were regaining the few feet we'd just lost in altitude dipping through the hamlet.

And there, suddenly, is the great void of Exmoor's deepest ravine. We took a breather to enjoy the view and I recalled Henry Williamson's description of the place in his story *The Old Stag*:

«The wind screamed around Hunter's Inn... The sea was less than a mile away. The river flowed beneath the towering cleave, tameless and unclimbable, its sides grey and smooth with loose flakes of shale. All things in the cleave were hidden as the hounds of the storm bayed across the sky... Fed by a hundred torrents, the river rose many feet.»

The path now edges its way north toward the mouth of the great Cleave. Scree slopes on both sides of the valley spill their shale towards the river far below. Look south and the ravine cuts right into the heart of the moors. Look north and there, below, is the rocky mouth being smashed by a raging sea.

The writer S.H. Burton said the place seemed, «Well fitted to be the abode of legendary monsters... The walls are so steep - 700 feet high, with a gradient of 7-in-10 - that, particularly on the western side, little grows, despite the sheltered position that makes the Heddon Cleave the warmest valley in North Devon.»

Our high path now rounds the great shoulder above the beach, and curves off west towards East Cleave which is no more than a sea-facing indentation in the hill. Here it climbs again to reach the flatter summit where the field walls begin.

Now it's simply a matter of walking along the coast path to a place called North Cleave Gut, which I'm told contains the highest cliffs in England – even higher than those at Countisbury, which are generally regarded as the country's tallest.

It's an impenetrable and dangerous place - the domain of the peregrine falcon and not the hiker. So best admire it and then head inland around the edge of the fields to the parking place where we began.