

Beautiful Walks from the Blue Ball Inn

Walk No. 7

COAST AND VALLEY WALK

Countisbury, Glenthorne, County Gate, Brendon, Rockford and Wilsham

10 MILES APPROX.

Walking time – 5 hours approx. (not including breaks)>

OS Sheet 64/74 Lynton and Lynmouth.

General information:

This walk is on either Rights of Way or Permissive Paths, (routes where the owner of the land has given permission for walkers to pass over their land but at the walkers own risk). Some of this route is on land belonging to the National Trust; all of it is within Exmoor National Park. The walk includes a variety of scenery with excellent views of the coast, moorland, farmland or woodland. The first half of the walk takes a route eastwards along the Coastal Path, passing along the tops of cliffs, through woodland and Rhododendron. There are magnificent views of the coast and, weather permitting, across the Bristol Channel to South Wales. The half way mark is at County Gate (approximately two and a half hours). Where there is a National Exmoor Park Information centre which sells soft drinks, ice cream etc. The second half of the walk covers very different terrain, returning via the village of Brendon and the East Lyn River valley as far as Rockford; then climbing back up to Countisbury via Wilsham. Due to the hilly character of the area the route involves steep uphill and downhill walking and travels over a variety of surfaces from soft grassy paths to rough stony tracks. Strong shoes or boots are therefore recommended!

The Route:

Starting at the Blue Ball Inn. (Grid reference 747496). On leaving the hotel cross the road to the car park opposite and go through the small gate in the right hand corner following the sign to “Countisbury church and Coast Path”. Go up the road to the church and through the churchyard noticing the avenue of old yew trees, and follow the path to the left around the base of the Church tower. Continue ahead and go through the gate onto the open moorland on the cliff top. Turn right and follow the track running uphill across the grass. Pass a sign after 100 metres indicating the coastal path to Lynmouth and continue to a further sign stating – “Coast path, Lighthouse”. This is marked with an acorn, the logo used for the South West Coastal Path as it travels from Minehead in Somerset around the coast to Poole in Dorset.

Follow this sign. To the left is a good view of Lynmouth, the Cliff Railway, the harbour and Hollerday Hill. Continue ahead on the coastal path as it goes around the edge of the headland; the very steep cliffs dropping away on the left hand side of the path are some of the highest in England.

When a protective fence around a particularly deep cleave in the cliffs is reached a further coast path sign to “Lighthouse ½” will be met. Follow this route as it turns

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slightly to the left across grassland passing further signposts to “Lighthouse”. The route then leaves the Cliffside and is easily followed as it first bears around the top of a combe and then descends to the bottom of the combe to join the surface road to the Lighthouse. Turn right here following the sign “Coast Path, County Road”.

Continue uphill on the road until, nearly at the top of the hill, the road goes round a hairpin bend to the right with a rough stony track ahead signposted “Coast path”. (Grid reference 759503).

Follow this track which, as it cuts through an old bank, gives a good view up the coast to Porlock Bay, Bossington Hill and Hurlstone Point. The track then drops down to a white gate with a stile beside it. Go over this and then take the flight of steps in the bank opposite signposted “Coast Path”. The route follows the coastal path as far as Glenthorne, passing on the way the heads of various combes with names such as Chubhill combe, Swannley combe and Pudleegurt!

Walking time from Countisbury to Pudleegurt is approx. one hour.

As the route continues along the coast there should be good views to the left across the Bristol Channel to South Wales – weather permitting. On the left hand side of the path there are woodlands dropping steeply down to the shore below. In places these show signs of having been “pollarded” in the past, a method of managing woodland to gain the maximum crop of wood from the trees. The trees that show evidence of this have a mass of limbs of similar size growing from a point on the trunk several feet above ground.

Shortly after passing through a hunting gate with a National Trust sign “Glenthorne Cliffs” the coastal path has had to be diverted due to a cliff fall. The diverted section turns steeply up to the right and continues ahead at a higher level which gives an opportunity to enjoy the views – stretching from Countisbury head behind and up to Hurlstone point ahead. After passing the ruins of a small circular stone lookout the diverted path descends to rejoin the original route. The rocky outcrop on the left below is aptly named Desolation Point!

The path continues around the top of Dogsworthy Combe and then Wingate Combe. Here there is a signpost, follow the blue way marked sign to “Sisters fountain and County Gate” – still on the coastal path. The path climbs gently uphill through an area of rhododendrons which, beautiful as they are in the spring, are destructive to most other plants. As the track reaches the top of the slope there is a division of pathways – follow the blue way marked right hand path signed to “Culbone and County gate”. Pass another little stone lookout with a seat inside and also some small seats in the walling on the right of the path. These were made for the occupants of Glenthorne House to take rests while walking in the grounds.

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The path comes out onto the driveway of Glenthorne house, turn right following the blue way marked sign to "Culbone". Walk up the driveway, past the attractive lodge cottage and through the entrance gate posts topped by a pair of stone Boar heads! After going through the gates turn immediately left down a steep path signed and blue way marked to "Culbone". Continue down the hill, through a hunting gate, to the bottom of the combe where will be found the Sisters Fountain.

The stone cross and grotto was one of a series of estate ornaments constructed by the Rev. Halliday, the original owner and designer of the Glenthorne estate.

Walking time from Countisbury to Sisters Fountain is approx. two hours.

Climb up the path after passing the fountain to join a track at the top. Turn right following the sign to "Nature Trail, County Gate and Black Gate". The route leaves the costal path at this point. After a further 50 metres there is another signpost, the Seven Thorns Crossway – follow the sign to "Black Gate ½ mile" continuing uphill until reaching a signpost on the left to "Black gate ¼". This is Combe Corner. (Grid reference 790491).

Follow this sign and continue climbing steeply uphill on the grass path to join the Countisbury to Porlock road at the top. The climb is made more bearable by the view back over the wooded valley to the sea with the rounded top of Sugarloaf Hill on the right and the remains of the Roman fortlet, Old Barrow, on the hill to the left. Cross the road at the top into the layby opposite, follow this round to the right until a signpost is reached on the left hand side in the gorse. Take the route to "County Gate", walking up a gentle slope of moorland with good views on either side until the car park at County gate is reached.

County gate is, as its name implies, the border between Somerset and Devon. Here there is an Exmoor National Park Information centre which, during the holiday season, dispenses food and drink as well as information! There is also a small picnic area and loos if required.

This is the halfway point on this walk and the walking time from Countisbury is approx. two and a half hours.

Leave County gate by the footpath in the South West corner of the car park by the Daily Telegraph memorial to J.H.B. Peel. Pause first to look at this memorial which shows the places of interest that can be seen from this point. The footpath leads off to the right of the memorial and is signed to "Brendon 2 and Malmsmead". Follow this narrow path through the heather until reaching a further signpost to "Brendon and Malmsmead". The track bears to the left and runs steeply downhill with a stone wall on the right hand side.

From the car park onwards there are lovely views to the left across the valley of the East Lyn River and over to Malmsmead Hill and Brendon common on the far side.

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On meeting the next signpost continue straight ahead following the indicator to “Brendon 1 ¼”. This takes the route through an orange way marked hunting gate, diagonally across a short stretch of rough ground and then drops downhill to cross over a small stream via a wooden footbridge. This bridge is well marked with both a orange and a yellow arrow! The path continues on the other side of the bridge passing through a field, way marked by orange marks on top of wooden posts. The route is well marked and, as it continues on its way parallel to the river valley below, there are good views looking ahead towards the village of Brendon. Continue ahead for a further mile until the path meets the road at Hall cross just above Brendon. (Grid reference 771484). Turn left and walk down to the bridge at the edge of the village.

Walking time from County gate approx. one hour.

In the village of Brendon there will be found a good pub, excellent cream teas and public loos.

The route of this walk however does not enter the village but continues up the road in the direction of Lynton and Lynmouth keeping the East Lyn river on the left. Shortly after the road bridge there is a recently restored packhorse bridge on the left. Take the first turning on the left after this little bridge following the sign to “Rockford 1 and Watersmeet 2 ½”. Continue ahead along this track which ends at a metal five bar gate at the edge of a field.

The route now follows a partially surfaced track across the field which leads to a cottage on the far side. Go through the gate beside the house, between the house and its outbuildings on the right and continue ahead. It appears to be a private entrance but is in fact a right of way and the correct route!

After passing through the grounds of this cottage and past another cottage on the right, Peace Cottage, the track continues along the edge of the river.

The well marked and easily followed route continues downstream for a further mile, passing Alderford Cottage on the way, until it reaches the hamlet of Rockford. Here it is possible to cross the river by a small footbridge if wanting to visit the Rockford Inn on the other side. The route of this walk, however, continues ahead on the right hand bank until, after the last cottage on the right, Rock Lodge, there is a junction of paths and a signpost. Take the right hand route signed “Countisbury 1 ½ via Wilsham”

Walking time from County gate approx. one and a half hours.

Following the yellow way marked Countisbury sign take the path uphill through the trees. This rises steeply, turns sharply right, goes through a five bar gate and then continues along the top edge of a steep field until a yellow way marked gate is reached leading into an old track with stone banks on either side.

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Look back as this field is climbed to see the church of St. Brenden in the distance. In the 18th century this church was moved from its original site at Cheriton above Farley water and rebuilt here.

Turn left and walk along until reaching the few houses that compromise Wilsham. The track ends at a gate, go through this, cross the surfaced road and continue ahead following the yellow way marks. As the track passes the last cottage on the right there is a signpost "Countisbury and Watersmeet" indicating the route ahead which follows a grassy track between old stone banks. The track ends at a metal gate, on the other side of which is a yellow way marked sign to Countisbury continue ahead across a stretch of rough grassland to a hunting gate.

Walking time from County gate approx. two hours.

The path goes downhill to the bottom of a wild and attractive combe, a recent acquisition of the National Trust, crosses a couple of small footbridges and then climbs steadily uphill to Countisbury reaching a wooden gate at the top on the edge of the main Countisbury to Porlock road. Although The Blue Ball inn is only a short way down the hill on the left the safest way to return home is turn right here and then cross the road to Barna Barrow car park opposite. Walk through the car park and out through the gate on the far side. Turn left and follow the path downhill keeping the stone wall on the left and heading towards the tower of Countisbury Church. Go through the gate and retrace the route taken at the start if the walk around the church tower and out through the church gate. A few more yards down the road and there is the welcome sight of the The Blue Ball Inn Walking time from County gate approx. two and a half hours.