

Circular Walk Two - Castle Neroche

Exploring Taunton Deane



General Information

Distance of Walk: 5.5 kilometres

A walk from ancient fortifications high on the Blackdown Hills, through woods and along green lanes which are often very muddy!

OS map - Explorer 128, Taunton and Blackdown Hills

Terrain - Quite steep gradients and muddy paths.

Parking - Car park at Castle Neroche. From Taunton take the B3170 and turn left at the crossroads 4 kilometres past Corfe. After a further 5 kilometres turn left where it is signed to the Nature Trail. The car park is 400 metres up on the left just past the right hand bend.

Refreshments - The nearest pubs are at Staple Fitzpaine (Geyhound Inn) two kilometres to the north and Buckland St. Mary (Eagle Tavern) two kilometres to the south.

Landscape character of the walk - Blackdowns Scarp (see point of interest no. 1)

Directions

- A** Leave the car park, following the waymarked track into the woods, and turn right to follow the track along the top of the forest at first (steep drop to the left) before bearing left to descend steeply.
- B** Continue down hill following the red waymarkers to a wooden gate at a junction with a stony track. Go straight on, following the bridleway into the forest (ignoring the red waymarkers).
- C** Turn left onto a stony track leading to Curland village. Continue on the track until it joins a tarmac road. Keep straight on to the village.
- D** On reaching the road turn left and go through the village of Curland, taking the left-hand lane at the triangle immediately after the Old Post Office.
- E** Just past a road on the left and opposite the Equestrian Centre, go over a stile and continue close

to the right-hand hedge through two fields. In the top left corner of the second field climb the stile and then follow the left-hand edge of two more fields.

- F** Go over the stile in the left-hand corner of the second field and follow the hedge around for a few metres. Then go over a stile and down a track past the church on your right until the track joins the road, via two gates.
- G** Turn left at the road and keep straight on, ignoring the turning on the left. After 50 metres go left through a wooden gate and ascend the steep rocky path through the forest. Keep straight ahead, going across the first major cross track and follow the steep track signed 'short-cut to the car park'.
- H** At the top of the hill go straight ahead to the view point on the left and through the bank to the car park. (*Bear right to explore the ramparts.*)

Points of Interest

- I Blackdown Hills**
These hills extend broadly from Wellington in the north to Honiton in the south, and from Cullompton in the west to Chard in the east. They are formed primarily of a thick and extensive outcrop of the largely non-calcareous Upper Greensand, dating from the Cretaceous period (70 - 135 million years ago). Below this are impermeable rocks, and above, a thin layer of clay with flints and cherts. Rising to 315 metres at Staple Hill, the Blackdowns are characterised by a dramatic, steep and largely wooded scarp slope facing north and a gently sloping plateau to the south which is deeply dissected by the valleys of the rivers Culm, Otter and Yarty.

The geology and the presence of spring water and impeded drainage has given rise to a notably diverse pattern of plant communities, many of which can be seen at various nature reserves managed by the Somerset Wildlife Trust. Castle Neroche is one of a number of important

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archaeological sites on the Blackdowns; others include the great earthworks of the Iron Age hillfort at Hembury, to recently discovered evidence of Roman iron smelting. The area is still sparsely populated - there are few settlements and no towns in what is now designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The land is generally of low agricultural value, restricting farming to mainly dairying and the rearing of stock. A distinctive feature of the Blackdowns are the mature beech hedges and avenues along many of the lanes and tracks (see point 4).

2 Castle Neroche

The outer circle of earthworks, built at the edge of the steep scarp slope at about 260 metres above sea level, are thought to be the remains of an Iron Age hillfort, perhaps 2,600 years old. Later, during the time of William the Conqueror, it became a Norman stronghold, with a motte and bailey castle within the inner ramparts. Even before the Norman conquest, Neroche had become a Royal Forest.

King Ina had one of his many palaces in South Petherton, and the Wessex Princes would have hunted in the forest. At the time of the Domesday survey (1086), Neroche, and many of the parishes around it, belonged to King William's half brother, the Count of Mortain, who occupied the castle at Montacute. It was one of five Royal Forests in Somerset, the others being Exmoor, Selwood, North Petherton and Mendip. These were extensive hunting preserves of the king and aristocracy, and the rights of commoners to the land were severely restricted. Although much of the area was wooded, Neroche was largely a forest of open grassland. Its precise extent fluctuated and decreased steadily after the 12th century, and there were major encroachments in the 17th century before it was finally carved into fields in 1833 by an Enclosure Act. Much of the woodland is now managed by the Forestry Commission, and there is open access.

3 View

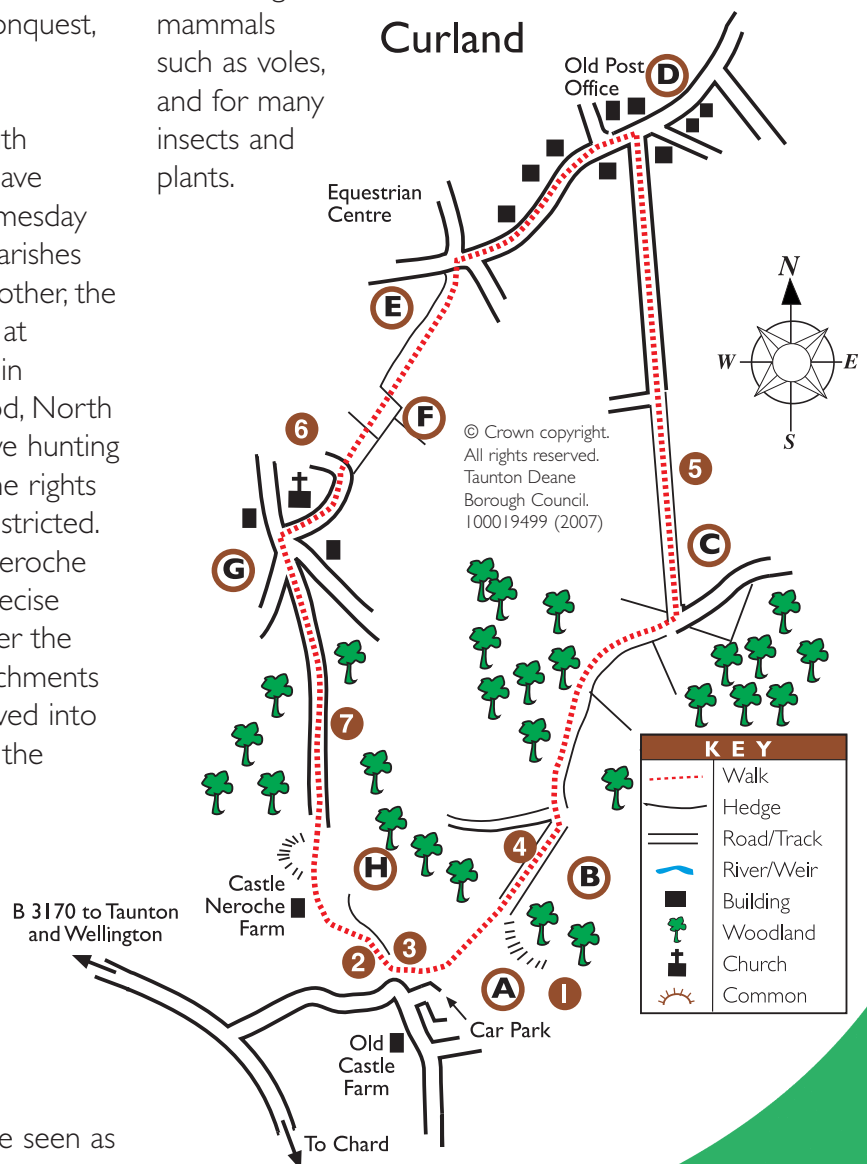
There are panoramic views from Castle Neroche across the Vale of Taunton to the Quantock Hills.

4 The Blackdown Beeches

The mature beech hedges and avenues, here seen as

remnants within the recent coniferous plantations, contribute to the distinctive character of the Blackdown Hills. They are generally on top of earth banks which are often badly eroded. They were planted as hedges to form boundaries, act as wind-breaks and contain stock. It is thought that the magnificent trees of today are the result of years of neglect following the demise of hedgelaying.

Management of these big trees will aim to keep them for as long as possible as features in the landscape, until they begin to thin out as the older trees die, leaving rows of mature specimens. Where spacings between trees allows, infill planting can then take place. The traditional craft of hedgelaying is being encouraged where possible to manage these younger trees. The ancient trees provide important habitat for wildlife such as nesting holes for birds, wasps and bees, and roost sites bats. The banks are good for burrowing mammals such as voles, and for many insects and plants.



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5 Hedgerow Trees

Walking towards Curland, notice the many mature trees in the hedgerows. Hedges have been part of the English landscape for well over 1,000 years. In the mid 18th century there were more hedgerow trees than ever before or since. These trees were a good source of timber, often providing the large or curved pieces needed for buildings or ships. Many trees were pollarded, the wood often being used by tenant farmers. Since the 1950's the number of hedgerow trees has decreased dramatically as vast amounts of hedgerow has been grubbed out and the remaining hedges have been cut annually by mechanised hedge trimmers, preventing new trees from growing up. Land owners are now being encouraged to keep old hedges, plant new ones, and allow trees to develop in them by tagging young saplings. Somerset County Council offers grants, through the Somerset Landscape Scheme, to facilitate this.

6 Church of All Saints

This now redundant church was rebuilt in 1856 on the site of an earlier church. It occupies a prominent position on top of a hill, with good views across to Staple Fitzpaine and beyond to Taunton. The original bell was re-hung and is said to date from 1320.

7 Green Lanes

With the advent of motorised vehicles, the number of so-called green lanes has diminished rapidly. These tracks have great cultural and historical value. They may represent routes that have been in use since

pre-historic times, perhaps trodden by the original occupants of the hillfort. The antiquity of the hedgerows and banks that often enclose these lanes makes them valuable wildlife habitats.

Sources of information and further reading

The Countryside Agency website
www.countryside.gov.uk

The Deane Tree Plan - *Taunton Deane Borough Council*

British Regional Geology, South-West England - *HMSO*

www.neroche.net/history

Somerset Parks and Gardens, A Landscape History
James Bond - Somerset Books

The History of the Countryside
Oliver Rackham - Phoenix Books

The Blackdown Beeches, leaflet
Taunton Deane Borough Council

Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape
Oliver Rackham - Weidenfeld and Nicolson

Somerset Landscape Scheme, leaflet
Somerset County Council

Staple Fitzpaine and the Forest of Neroche
RA Sixsmith

The Green Lanes of England
Valerie Belsey - Green Books

If You Require Further Information Please Contact:

The Heritage and Landscape Team,

Taunton Deane Borough Council,
The Deane House, Belvedere Road,
Taunton, TA1 1HE
Tel: 01823 356491

Email: heritage.landscape@tauntondeane.gov.uk
or parks@tauntondeane.gov.uk

www.tauntondeane.gov.uk

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heritage.landscape@tauntondeane.gov.uk

Bengali

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Chinese

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Hindi

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