

Circular Walk Seven - Orchard Portman

Exploring Taunton Deane



General Information

Distance of Walk: 7 kilometres

A varied country walk from Thurlbear to Orchard Portman, with good views across the Vale of Taunton and to the surrounding hills. This walk is particularly good for those interested in trees.

OS map - Explorer 128, Taunton and Blackdown Hills

Terrain - Gentle, with no steep gradients. Can be very muddy in parts.

Parking - By the side of the road at Thurlbear. From Taunton take the B3170 towards Corfe and, after crossing the motorway, take the first turning on the left. After two kilometres turn left to Thurlbear.

Refreshments - There are none along the route, but the Half Moon Inn at Stoke St Mary is just over a kilometre from Thurlbear.

Landscape characters of the walk - Limestone Scarp

The steep-sided hills at Stoke St Mary, Thurlbear and Netherclay are part of a ridge of limestone that runs from the north-east, where the land rises from 50 metres, to the south-west where it joins the Blackdown escarpment at about 200 metres. The ridge is split along a fault line, reoccurring near Hatch Beauchamp to continue north-east adjacent to West Sedgemoor. There are two distinct soil types. Along the ridge line are the Jurassic limestone and clay soils which are unique in the Deane for their high pH.

At the foot of the ridge are the Permo-Triassic reddish mudstones. The high alkalinity of the calcareous soils allows a diverse range of trees and ground flora species. The area has the highest incidence of wild service tree and small-leaved lime. Much of the soil is shallow, moist and slippery, and generally unsuitable for farming, hence the scarp is heavily wooded. Orchard Portman lies within the **Low Vale** area, which in parts of the Deane rises to 100 metres. Scattered throughout the vale are small pockets of broadleaf woodland and many orchards. Ash and oak are the dominant woodland and hedgerow species. The

agricultural land is generally of good quality suitable for mixed farming and market gardening.

Directions

A From Thurlbear Church and farm follow the road to Court Garden Cottage. At about 150 metres from the cottage there are two field gates on the right. Go through the right-hand gate and follow the hedge on the left to the road. Cross to continue along Netherclay Lane past the farm and other buildings and over a stream.

B Keep on the track ahead through the field and with the wood on the right. On leaving the field fork left (do not go into the wood) and follow the track above the valley. At the T-junction by the oak tree, turn right down the hill. On reaching the road by Mill House turn right.

C Walk ahead along the road for one and a half kilometres until you reach a track on the left signposted to the church.

D Go over the stile opposite the church track. Bear diagonally left across the field just to the right of a telegraph pole, to a bridge that leads onto a road. Cross carefully to go over a stile in the hedge opposite. Follow the stream on the left through the fields until in sight of Broughton Farm.

E Go through the gate ahead which is to the right of the farm, and turn right beside the stream. After passing through the next gate on the right, immediately turn left and continue through the fields keeping by the left-hand hedge for one and a half kilometres to Greenway Farm. At the road turn right to walk back to Thurlbear.

Points of Interest

I Church of St. Thomas, Thurlbear

Inside this modest church, built mainly of Blue Lias with Ham Stone dressings, there is a Norman font and two complete Norman arcades with circular piers dating from the early 12th

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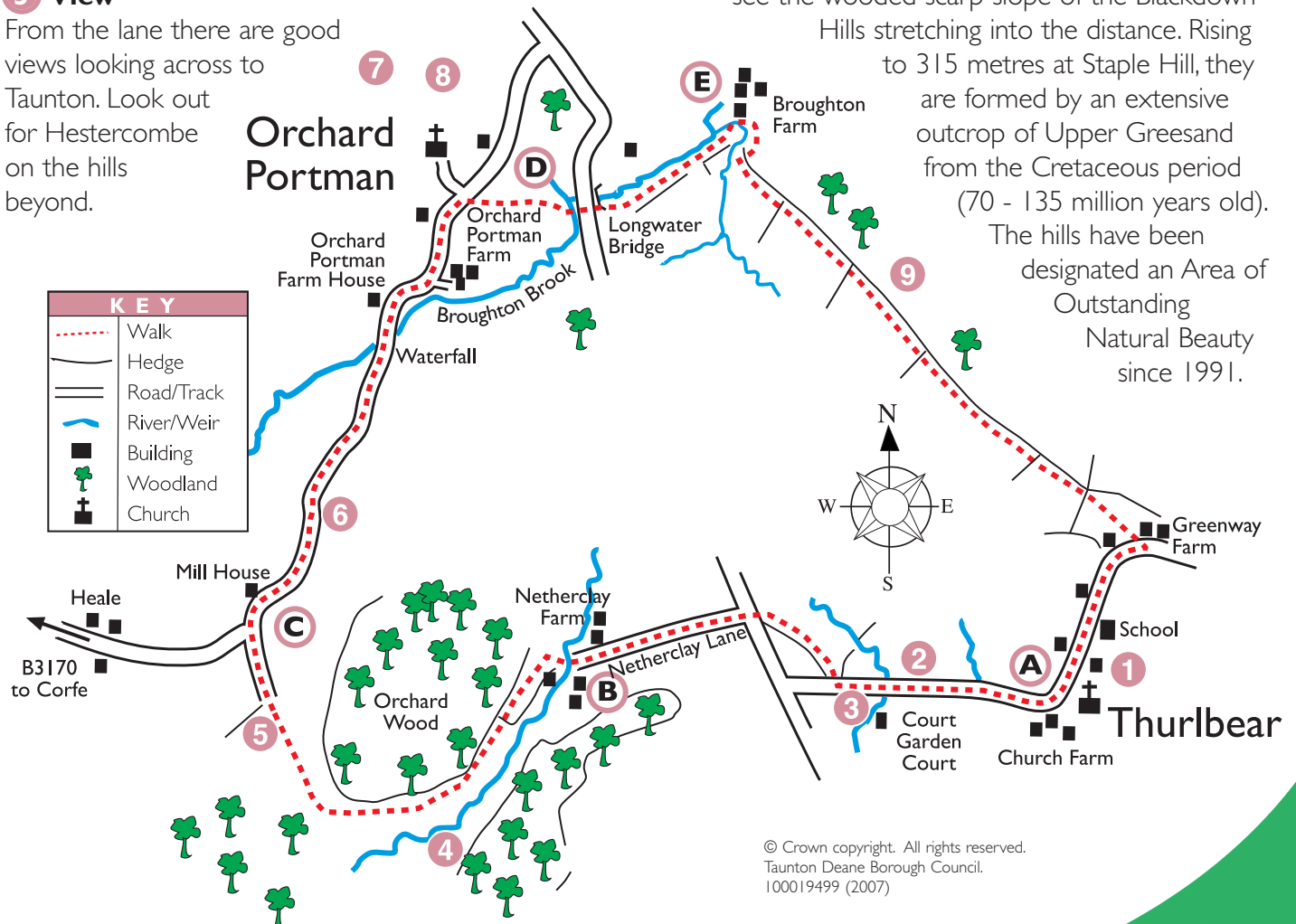
century. This shows that a Norman church was here with aisles - a rarity - and that the width of the aisles was not altered to satisfy later medieval taste. The chancel was rebuilt in the 14th century and the tower built in the 15th century.

2 Black Poplars

This native tree is nationally rare (approximately 10,000 trees have been recorded in Britain) but Taunton Deane has a relatively high number. It can reach a height of 30 metres, growing rapidly before reaching maturity in about 100 years. Many of the old specimens have been pollarded, ie they have been regularly cut at a height at which animals cannot reach the new shoots, leaving a permanent trunk from which a succession of poles can be harvested. Black poplars are usually found growing in the alluvial soils of river flood plains, and have traditionally been planted beside wet ditches, farm ponds and wells and on parish boundaries. They are dioecious, ie male and female flowers are on different trees. Nationwide, however, less than 5% of trees are female.

3 View

From the lane there are good views looking across to Taunton. Look out for Hestercombe on the hills beyond.



4 Woods

These areas of woodland on the foothills of the Blackdowns, although substantially replanted, have existed since at least medieval times and may contain fragments of the primeval forests that once covered much of the country. As long as 1000 years ago, England's woodland cover was already only 15% of its land area. By the 20th century it had reached a low of 5%. Now it has increased, but remains low, at 8%, with just over one million hectares of England covered - around two billion trees! Here, the woods are managed by the Forestry Commission, through their agency Forest Enterprise, and there is open access.

5 Parkland Trees

To the west of the church at Orchard Portman stood a great mansion, built in the mid 16th century and demolished in 1843, which was the ancestral home of the Portman family. Surrounding it was a large park, and many of the old trees here are remnants of it.

6 View

Look back, as you walk towards Orchard Portman, to see the wooded scarp slope of the Blackdown Hills stretching into the distance. Rising to 315 metres at Staple Hill, they are formed by an extensive outcrop of Upper Gressand from the Cretaceous period (70 - 135 million years old). The hills have been designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty since 1991.

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7 Taunton Racecourse

Built on the site of the gardens of Orchard Portman House, this is the youngest racecourse in Britain.

8 Church of St. Michael, Orchard Portman

This church dates from Norman times. It has been much influenced by the Portman family, who erected their chapel as the south aisle in c.1450 (demolished 1844). The tower was rebuilt in c.1540. Note the restored Norman doorway with chevron moulding in the north wall, and also the late medieval stained glass in the upper lights of the window. The yew tree in the churchyard is thought to be 1,000 years old.

9 Hedgerow Trees

Walking back towards Greenway Farm, note the abundance of mature trees in the hedgerows. Most are either oak or ash, but notice also the black poplars. 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, as here. Since the 1950's the number 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. Landowners 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. The retention of dead trees, such as the one in this hedge, is also encouraged where possible for their unique wildlife value.

Sources of information and further reading

The Buildings of England - South and West Somerset
Nikolaus Pevsner - Penguin Books

Listed Building Database
Taunton Deane Borough Council

Geology and Landscape of Taunton Deane
Taunton Deane Borough Council

Black Poplar leaflet
Taunton Deane Borough Council

Great British Trees - *Jon Stokes - The Tree Council*

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

Website of the Forestry Commission
www.forestry.gov.uk

Inventory of Ancient Woodland
Nature Conservancy Council

Somerset Parks and Gardens
James Bond Somerset Books

British Regional Geology, South West England - *HMSO*
Website for the Countryside Agency

www.countryside.co.uk

Somerset Landscape Scheme leaflet
Somerset County Council

Deane Tree Plan
Taunton Deane Borough Council

If You Require Further Information Please Contact:

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Bengali

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Hindi

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