

Circular Walk Nine - Staplegrove and Norton Hillfort - Exploring Taunton Deane



General Information

Distance of Walk: 8 kilometres

This is a fairly easy walk from Staplegrove, over Rag Hill and Norton Hillfort with views to the Quantock Hills, and then back along Norton Brook and the line of the old Grand Western Canal.

OS map - Explorer 128, Taunton and Blackdown Hills.

Terrain - Gently undulating.

Parking - Walkers may park in St Johns Church Car Park on Manor Road.

Refreshments - At the Staplegrove Inn and the Ring of Bells at Norton Fitzwarren.

Landscape characters of the walk - This varied walk passes through Urban Fringe into landscape described as Low Vale which, in parts of the Deane, rises to 100 metres.

It is gently undulating, and the higher ground is often accentuated by copses. Scattered throughout are small pockets of mainly broadleaf woodland and numerous orchards. The agricultural land is generally of good quality, and composed of pasture, arable and market gardening. The underlying geology is predominantly marls.

After Norton Fitzwarren, the walk follows the River Flood Plain, the low lying catchment area of the River Tone. In Taunton Deane this corridor of land extends from Wellington in the west to Burrowbridge in the east where the Tone meets the River Parrett. The land is well treed with open river edges and with extensive flood plains which are liable to occasional flooding. The soils are mainly alluvial and clay with some overlying peat.

Agricultural land use in this area is mainly permanent grassland suitable for stock rearing and dairying with some cereals where the flood risk is low.

Directions

A A footpath starts about 80 metres west of Staplegrove Church where a path signed 'Lower Burlands' leads over a stile and goes alongside a field to another stile. Continue ahead to another stile on the left, and right to a fourth stile. Descend the field to a stile and sleeper bridge. Continue along the track, through a metal gate and over the stream and then over a stile to the road.

B Turn left and pass Yarde Farm and Langford to meet the main A358.

C With caution, cross the main road and turn right. In 25 metres there is a small kissing gate on the left leading onto a footpath to Norton Fitzwarren. Past a row of cottages the path gradually ascends to Norton Hillfort. At the top turn left and follow the well defined path around the central mound until you reach the waymarker. Turn left and follow the right of the two paths down to the road. Cross this road and continue through the churchyard and down the tarmac road to the village.

D Turn right at the main road and then left into Station Road. At the end of this road turn left to follow a path to a railway footbridge. Cross the bridge, go through the kissing gate and over the stile on the left.

E Turn left and continue parallel to the railway to a stream. Keeping the stream on your left, follow the path to a lane, going over stiles and through kissing gates.

F Turn left onto the lane which soon meets the main Silk Mills Road. Cross carefully and go up the lane opposite, following it round to the left and then turning right towards the Natural England HQ. Just past this, instead of continuing on the path ahead, turn left along a narrow track between fences and go over a stile to join another footpath on a raised bank. Turn right to walk parallel with the railway line.

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G After half a kilometre pass the allotments and cottages to join the main Staplegrove Road opposite Taunton School. Turn left and go over the railway bridge and then left along Bindon Road. After 250 metres pass Dowell Close on the right, then turn right through the barriers along the footpath to the main road.

H Cross the road and take the path to the right of the Village Hall until you reach a gate. Do not go through it but go left inside the wall to a metal gate and continue ahead to Manor Road. Turn left and walk inside the play area and then go through a gate to continue along this road back to the start.

Points of Interest

1 The Grove, Staplegrove

This broadleaf woodland on either side of Manor Road was formerly common land allotted in the Enclosure Awards of 1851 for the recreation of the inhabitants of the parish. There is a wide diversity of tree species including oak, willow, alder, cherry, ash, elm, lime, horse chestnut and sycamore. This, together with the shrub and ground layers, helps to attract a variety of

birds, mammals and invertebrates. Watch out for treecreepers, jays and bullfinches and occasionally siskins and redpolls. In the 1970's The Grove suffered from Dutch Elm Disease and after many elms had been felled a replanting scheme was undertaken by Staplegrove Parish Council, who now own the site.

2 View towards the Quantocks

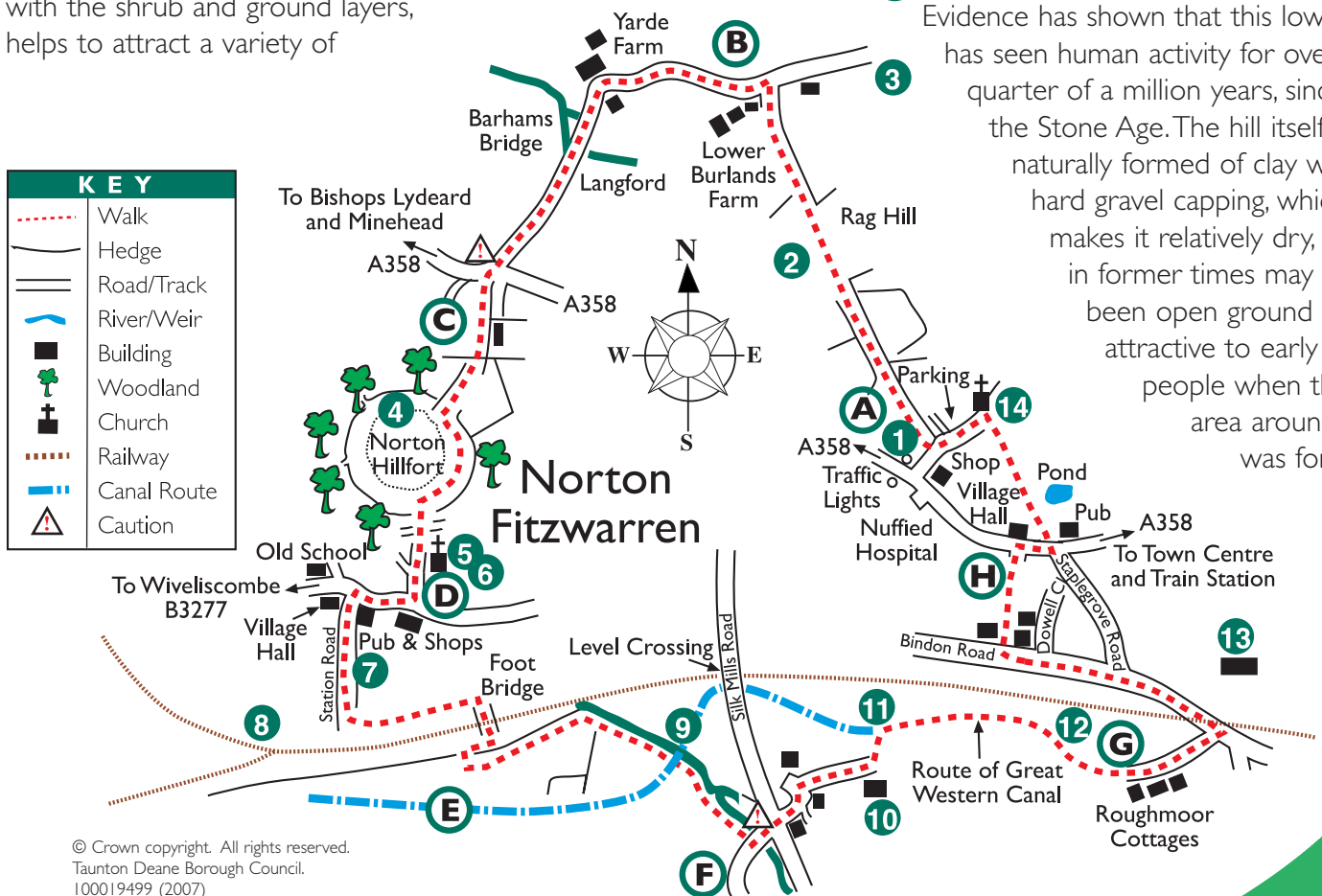
From this elevated position (45 metres) known as Rag Hill there are good views to the north of the Quantock Hills (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty), a narrow ridge of Devonian slates rising to 386 metres at Will's Neck. These represent the eastern end of a belt of Devonian rocks collectively known as Old Red Sandstone, which extends from the coast near Ilfracombe eastwards to embrace Exmoor and the Brendon Hills.

3 Staplecombe Vineyard

A short detour along the lane will allow you to walk among the vines and sample the wines that this small family run vineyard has been producing since 1994. (Open summer afternoons. Tel. 01823 451217)

4 Norton Hillfort

Evidence has shown that this low hill has seen human activity for over a quarter of a million years, since the Stone Age. The hill itself is naturally formed of clay with a hard gravel capping, which makes it relatively dry, and in former times may have been open ground and attractive to early people when the area around was forest.



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Some people may have settled briefly, setting up temporary camps while hunting. Others made permanent homes here, defending themselves with earth banks and ditches which can still be seen today. The Romans were the last to occupy the site. In the middle ages it was used as a deer park, and later some areas were used to quarry marl.

The wooded perimeter of the hillfort is owned and managed by Taunton Deane as a Local Nature Reserve. Among the wide variety of trees and shrubs here can be seen Wild Service (*Sorbus torminalis*), a rare native that is thought to be an indicator of ancient woodland.

5 Church of All Saints

Although much of the church was rebuilt in the 19th century, its 13th century origins can be seen in the tower, built of squared and coursed North Curry Sandstone with Ham Stone dressings. Inside, it is notable for its impressive 3/5 bay rood screen with double doors. This is long, relatively low, fan vaulted and canopied, and adorned with long projecting cornices to hold the loft. The lowest frieze illustrates the story of the Dragon of Norton Camp. In the nave are several fine, richly carved bench ends. The south west corner of the churchyard is said to have been a burial ground for gypsies.

6 Malthouse

This long red brick building with its twin drying kilns at the west end is all that remains of the Norton Brewery (1833 - 1899). The adjacent Norton Court is late 16th -early 17th century.

7 Former Taunton Cider Company

Started by Arthur Moore, an experienced cider maker who had taken over from the highly reputable Rev. Thomas Cornish at Spurways. In 1911 he started producing his own cider at Norton Fitzwarren, trading

as Palletts and from 1921 as the Taunton Cider Company. The venture grew to become one of the largest producers of cider in the country. It was bought out by Matthew Clark plc in 1995 and production moved to Shepton Mallet where over 40 million gallons of cider are now produced each year.

8 Railway Branchline to Minehead

From the railway footbridge can be seen the start of the branchline to Minehead, now operated by the West Somerset Railway from Bishops Lydeard. It is Britain's longest 'heritage' railway. For more details telephone (01643) 704996 or look at www.west-somerset-railway.co.uk.

9 Norton Brook

Meanders its way into the River Tone near Bishops Hull.

10 Roughmoor

Formerly Roughmoor Farmhouse, this late 18th century building is now the HQ for Natural England in Somerset, a Government agency that champions the conservation of wildlife and geology throughout England.

11 The Grand Western Canal

This embankment marks the course of this short-lived canal. Born of a plan in the late 1700's to build a waterway to connect the English Channel with the Bristol Channel (thereby saving the small wooden freightships from a treacherous journey round Lands End), the canal was not actually started until 1810 when work began on the 17.5km section between the limestone quarries at Lowdwells (near the Devon and Somerset border) and Tiverton.

It was not until the 1830's, once the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal had been opened, that work continued to take the canal across the 22.5

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hilly kilometres of Somerset to reach Taunton, employing mechanised lifts and inclines to overcome the steep hills. Opened in 1838, the Grand Western Canal Company did not enjoy the commercial success it had anticipated, and the building of the railway between Taunton and Tiverton ten years later quickened the demise of the canal, which was abandoned in 1867.

12 Frieze Hill

This area is set to become a new Community Orchard with funding from Taunton Deane Borough Council.

13 Taunton School

This independent school was founded in 1847 and moved to this Gothic style building designed by Joseph James of London in 1870.

14 St John's Church

Although the lower stage of the tower and the chancel arch are 13th century, the church was largely rebuilt when it was restored in 1857. In the churchyard is buried Jimmy Kennedy, composer of the 'Teddy Bear's Picnic' and 'Red Sails in the Sunset'.

Sources of information and further reading

The Grove, Staplegrove - *leaflet*

Norton Hillfort - *leaflet*

Listed Buildings Database

Church Trails - *leaflet*

The Geology and Landscape of Taunton Deane *book written by Hugh Prudden*

In search of The Grand Western Canal

Towers and Hunkypunks - *leaflet*

Deane Tree Plan

All the above are published by Taunton Deane Borough Council.

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

Somerset Cider and Apple Juice - *leaflet published by Somerset County Council*

Taunton School website

Somerset's Industrial Heritage - *Somerset Industrial Archaeological Society*

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Bengali

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Hindi

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