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Walking with Coleridge and Wordsworth

A self guided walk in the Quantock Hills



Discover the valleys, woods and streams that inspired Romantic poets
Visit the home of a wide variety of wildlife and plants
Find out how human activity has helped the land over 200 years
Explore how landscape and literature shape ideas of beauty in nature

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the stories of our landscapes
discovered through walks







Contents

Introduction	4
Route overview	5
Practical information	6
Detailed route map	8
Commentary	9
Credits	34

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Walking with Coleridge and Wordsworth

Discover connections between literature and the landscape in Somerset's Quantock Hills

Introduction

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, or so the saying goes. So what makes a view beautiful? Who says that a hilltop panorama, a leafy glade, an open moor, a bubbling brook or gently rolling fields are beautiful?

Actually our ideas of what makes the natural landscape picturesque have been quite strongly influenced by how people have written about them in literature.



View from Black Hill
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

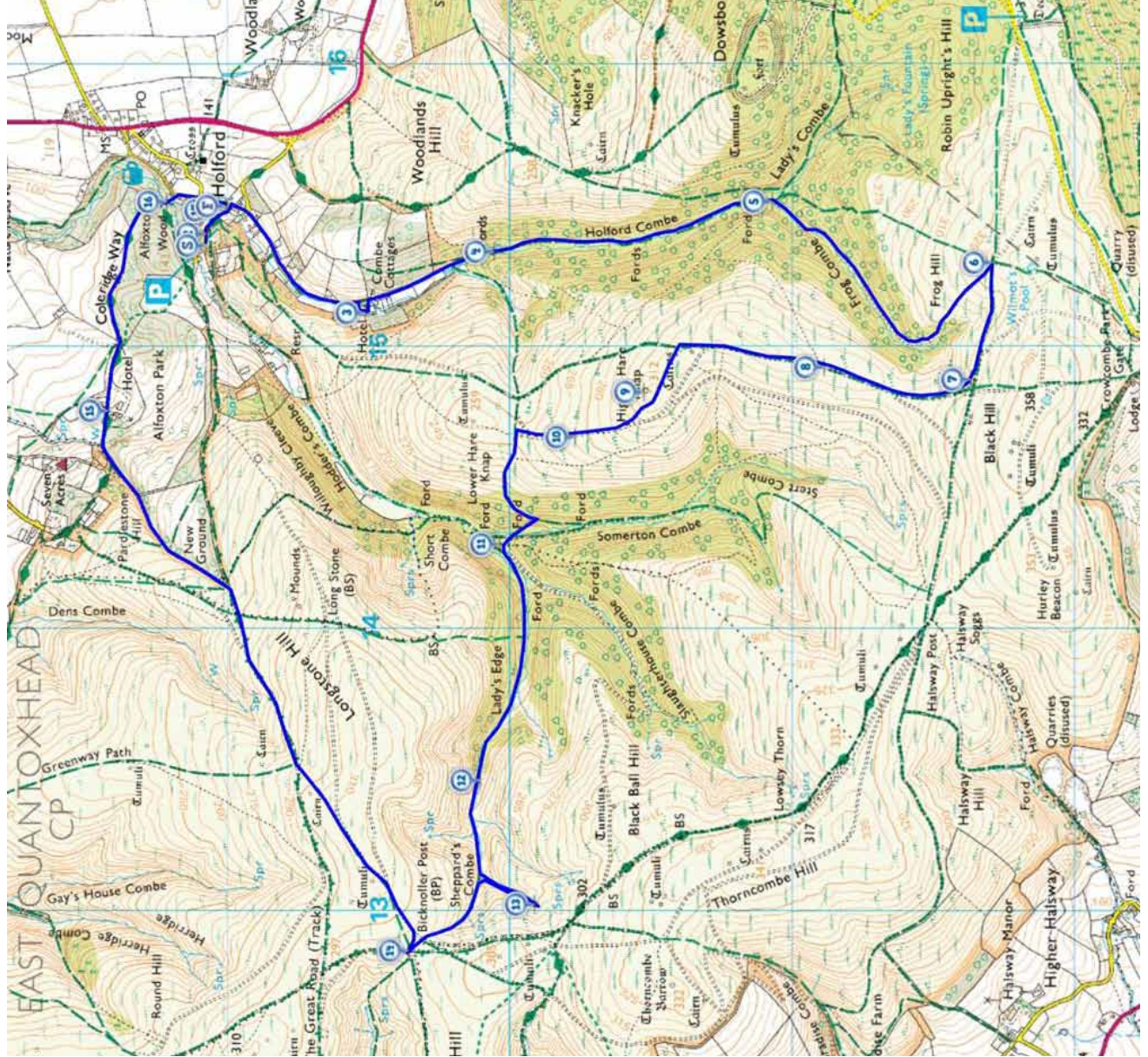
In the late 1790s, the Romantic poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth spent a year in the Quantocks, getting inspiration for many of their most famous works from their walks in this lovely area. This walk takes you in their footsteps, visiting many of the valleys and woods, streams and waterfalls, hilltops and viewpoints that they explored.

See just what inspired them. Discover how some aspects of the landscape have changed and others have not changed in the last two hundred years. Uncover evidence of human activity in a landscape that looks natural and think about what makes a view beautiful.

Route overview

Stopping points

1. Holford village green
2. Holford bowling green
3. Combe House Hotel
4. First glade in Holford Combe
5. Glade at the top of Holford Combe where it splits into Lady's Combe and Frog Combe
6. Solitary tree above Frog Combe
7. Junction of tracks, Pack Way
8. On the ridge of Black Hill
9. Higher Hare Knap
10. Path between Higher Hare Knap and Lower Hare Knap
11. Junction of Hodder's Combe, Somerton Combe, Slaughterhouse Combe and Sheppard's Combe
12. Partway up Lady's Edge
13. Spring off Lady's Edge
14. Bicknoller Post
15. Alfloxton House
16. Footbridge over Holford Glen
17. Ruined mill, Holford Glen
18. Holford village signpost



Practical information

Location	Quantock Hills, Somerset, Southwest England
Getting there	<p>Car - access via the A39 between Bridgwater and Minehead. Follow the directions below. A free car park at the start of the route beside Holford bowling green.</p> <p>Bus - served by buses running between Bridgwater and Minehead (one bus every 2 hours). Nearest stop at The Plough Inn.</p> <p>Train - the nearest station is Bridgwater (11 miles away)</p>
Start point & postcode	Holford village green, TA5 1SB
Directions to start	<p>Follow the A39 to The Plough Inn then turn left if coming from Bridgwater, right if coming from Minehead. Follow the brown sign for Combe House Hotel.</p> <p>After about ¼ of a mile bear left along the lane. At the next junction bear right, following the fingerpost marked Car Park 150 Yards, Alfoxton and Hodder Combe. Follow the lane through the trees up to the car park on the left. Holford village green is on the right.</p>
Finish point	Holford village
Distance	7 miles
Level	Challenging – hilly with several steep ascents and descents. There are a few small streams to jump across.

Conditions

Some very steep slopes so take strong walking boots or shoes. You should also consider a walking stick and weatherproof clothing. The route can be slippery in wet weather and take care in the boggy sections. Close all gates you use and don't leave litter behind.

Suitable for

Dogs - keep on a lead as there is grazing land for horses, sheep and goats. Beware of wild ponies and deer

Refreshments

Combe House Hotel, Holford (Stop 3 or 18) is the only place on the route serving food and drink - cream teas, lunches, evening meals (Tel: 01278 741382)

Alternatively consider preparing / buying refreshments beforehand - there are many places to stop for a picnic

Facilities

No public toilets on the route

Other info

The route is spectacular all year round but the heather is most colourful in spring and summer

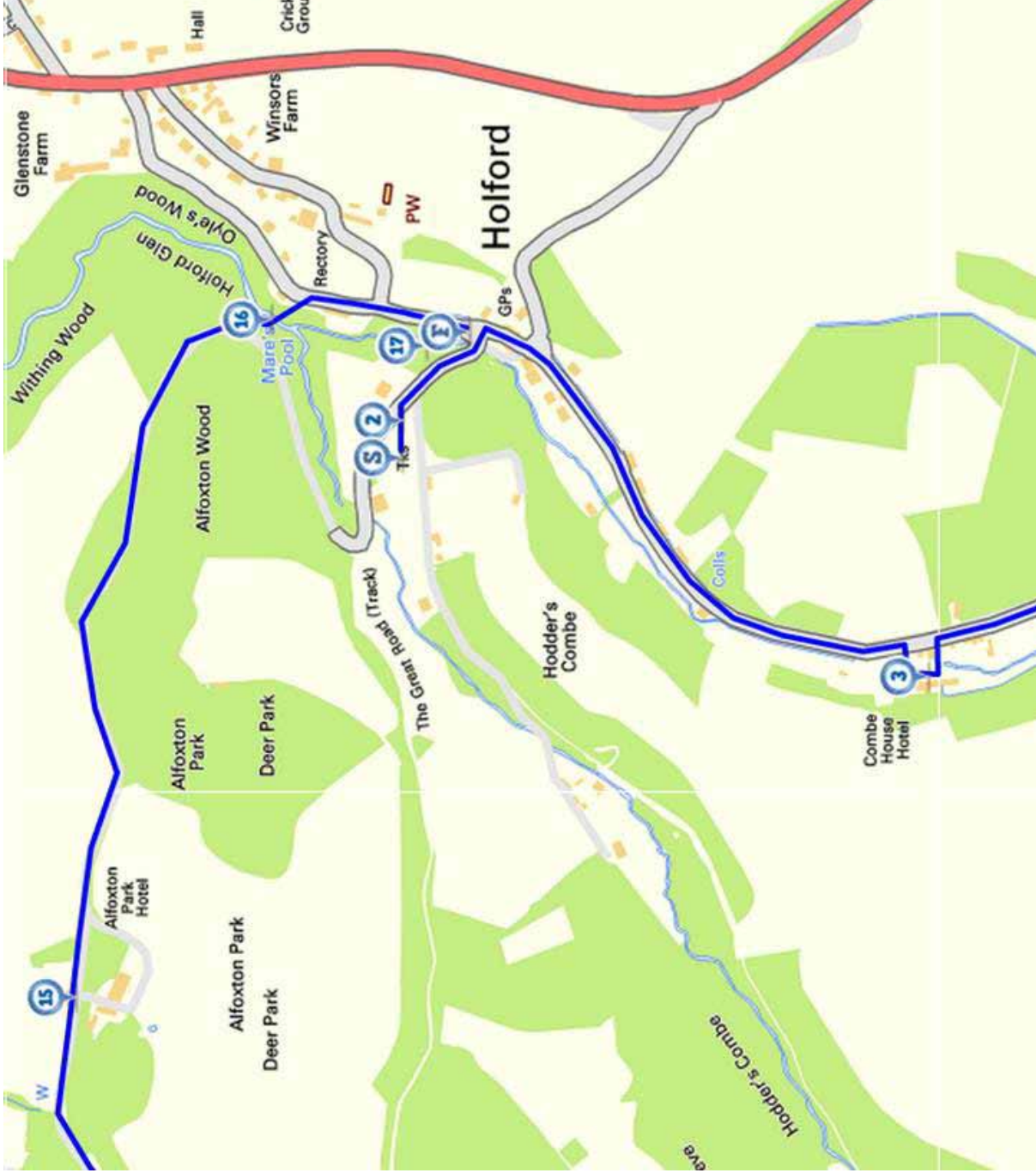
Be careful around wild deer, especially May - June during birthing season and October rutting season

Coleridge Cottage is located at Nether Stowey, 3 miles from Bridgwater. It is run by The National Trust. For opening times and further information Tel: 01278 732662

Tourist information

Bridgwater Tourist Information Centre, Bridgwater House, King Square, Bridgwater TA6 3AR (Tel: 01278 436438)

Detail of start and end of route



1. Welcome to the Quantocks

Holford village green

My name is Peter Coates. I'm an environmental historian at the University of Bristol. One of the reasons I like living and working in Bristol is that so many beautiful open spaces are readily accessible. Less than two hours away are the Brecon Beacons and Black Mountains of south Wales. To the northeast are the Cotswolds. To the southwest lie two national parks – Exmoor and Dartmoor.

But the Quantock Hills are my favourite place when I need to get out of the city. If traffic is flowing smoothly on the M5 I can be here in about an hour. I've been visiting the Quantocks for twenty years. I try to come at least once a year. I never get tired of walking up the valleys and onto the upland plateaus. I think the immediately recognisable shape of these hills has something to do with their special appeal.

These hills are of enormous literary significance. At the very tail end of the eighteenth century, England's two most famous Romantic poets lived here for a year when they were both in their mid-twenties. This was a vital formative period for these young poets.

As Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth rambled over these open hills and through these atmospheric woodlands, they were inspired to write some of the best known poems in the English language, including 'Kubla Khan', 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', 'Frost at Midnight', 'Christabel' and book *Lyrical Ballads*.



Windswept tree at Bicknoller Post /
braided stream at Dingly Dell
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

This is how Wordsworth remembered the summer of 1797 in the last book of *The Prelude*: “*That summer, under whose indulgent skies, upon smooth Quantock’s airy ridge we roved, unchecked, or loitered ‘mid her sylvan combes*”. I became deeply absorbed in this area’s history and geography recently, when I organised a residential workshop to study the changes in the region’s landscape.”

On this walk, we will think about three main things. Firstly, how upland scenery, open countryside and panoramic vistas have strongly influenced our notions of what is beautiful in nature. Secondly, how there is a deep association between great poets and this beautiful place and how understanding this strong literary link can help us to enjoy the landscape more. Thirdly, how the landscape has been shaped and enriched enormously by ordinary human activity, despite its wild appearance.

This is a circular walk that starts and ends in the small village of Holford. The walk is recommended for more experienced walkers. Though the hills are of modest height, the starting point is near sea level, so there are some sharp climbs and descents. There are also a number of shallow stream crossings where you have to take care not to slip. I hope you enjoy the walk in this lovely and inspiring landscape.



Thatched row of cottages in the picturesque village of Holford
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 1

Stay at the green beside the car park (signposted Bowling Green) for Stop 2.

2. A distinctive landscape

Holford bowling green

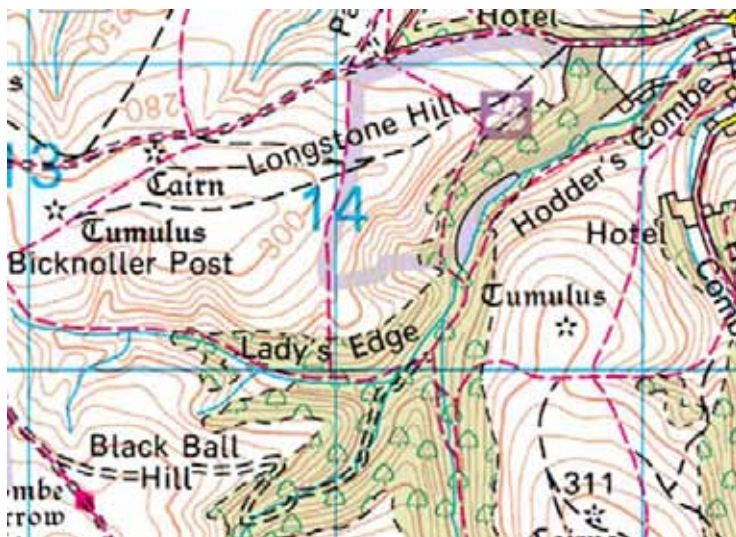
The Quantock Hills here in western Somerset only cover a small area, just 19 kilometres long and about 6 kilometres wide. But despite its modest size, the hills contain incredible scenic variety and biodiversity.

These hills aren't as high as those found in the better known places of southwest England, such as Exmoor and Dartmoor. But they're famed for their panoramic views.

The value of the Quantock Hills was officially recognised in 1956, when it became a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). This was the first designated AONB in the whole of England.



The Quantocks, an area of high ground surrounded by lowlands
© Ordnance Survey maps, licensed to RGS-IBG



A section of the Quantocks, the close contours denoting steep sided valleys
© Ordnance Survey maps, licensed to RGS-IBG

The Quantocks feel almost like an island because they are quite distinct from the surrounding lowlands. Look at an Ordnance Survey map and you'll see clues as to why. The orange lines that you see on these maps are called contours. They join places which are at the same height above sea level.

On a map of this area, you will see many contour lines very close together and this indicates steep slopes. Adjoining these close contours, you will also see areas with relatively few contours, which are the plateaus – or flat areas – and these are located on top of the hills.

So, the main characteristic of the Quantocks is steep-sided, thickly wooded valleys and relatively open, heathland plateaus on top of the hills.

The deep, narrow valleys are known as 'combes'. This can be variously spelt as combe, coombe and coomb. The word comes from the Middle English 'coombe' or 'cumbe' and in turn, that word was derived from the Old English word 'cumb', which itself has Celtic origins. It is also related to the Welsh word 'cwm'.

This distinctive landscape of combes is not unique to the Quantocks. It is found across Britain in places such as the Cotswolds. It is also reflected in place names across South and Southwest England – such as Coombe Bissett in Wiltshire and Coombe Keynes in Dorset – which denote the position of these villages in or on the edge of a combe.



From the open heathland above you can see the steep-sided combes covered in a dense blanket of woodland
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

On this walk, we will go up and down several combes and learn about their physical characteristics, their vegetation and their wildlife. And not least, we'll learn about the ways in which they have been used by people in the past and present.

Directions 2

From the bowling green, follow the lane through the village. At the junction with a white fingerpost, turn right, which is signposted Holford Combe. Pass cottages on either side. At the next junction of lanes, continue straight on, signposted Combe House Hotel and No Through Road. When you reach the hotel, turn right into the grounds and stop in the car park.

3. A smelly industrial site

Combe House Hotel

This whitewashed row of buildings is the Combe House Hotel. It's a lovely spot for a hotel but the building hasn't always been a hotel. Strangely enough, it is a former industrial site!

It was originally built as a tannery in the 1820s. Oak bark is an essential ingredient in the tanning of cow hides to produce leather and the tanners harvested bark from the oak trees further up the combe. Workers were housed in the cluster of now very picturesque cottages that you see opposite the hotel.



The Combe House Hotel
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

During tanning's heyday in the late nineteenth century, the woods and streams of the Quantocks supported perhaps as many as 12 tan yards. A century ago, the guidebooks still referred to this as Tannery Combe rather than Holford Combe as it's known today.

The oak woods were one thing. Another reason that tanneries congregated in this vicinity was the availability of water – plenty of clean, fast-flowing water. This tannery here at the Combe House Hotel harnessed the power of fast-flowing Holford Brook. It did this by diverting water into a narrow canal known as a leat. The leat is no longer there, but the brook itself runs through the hotel grounds.

At the upper end of the hotel, near the parking area, is a water-wheel – quite a dominant feature – rusty but still impressive. The first water wheels here powered the mill that ground up the oak bark and it may also have been used to drain the very smelly and putrefying tanning pits. This particular wheel, which was cast in a foundry in nearby Bridgwater, is 26 feet high and was erected in 1893. Next to the wheel, if you look carefully, you'll notice a slightly battered, mildewed sign that tells you quite a bit about its history.

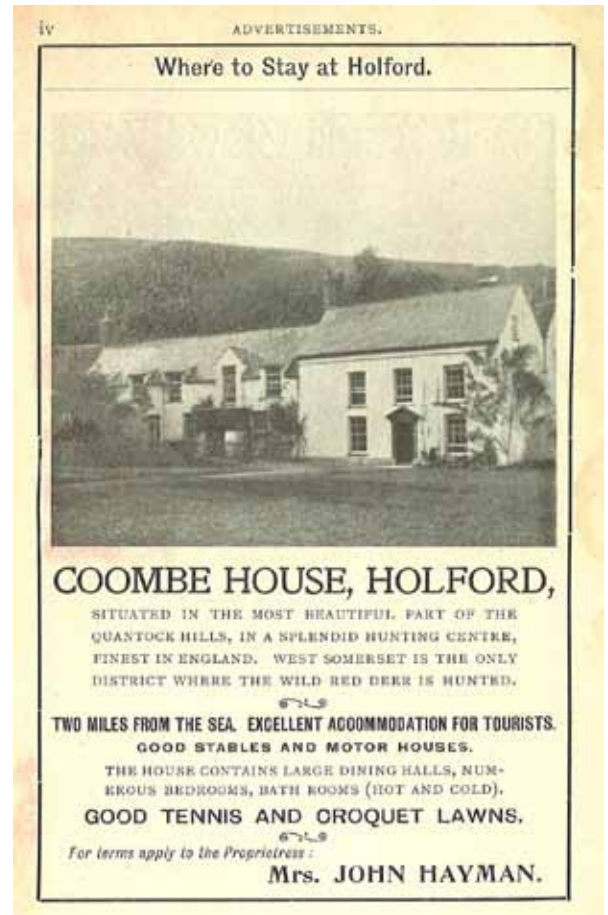


Cogs of the water wheel at Combe House Hotel
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

After the tannery shut down, the wheel continued to provide power for a variety of other tasks – things such as cracking stone, sawing wood, grinding wheat and chopping apples for cider. It even powered a machine for polishing the shoes of hotel guests! The wheel finally stopped turning in 1953.

The building was converted into a hotel around 1900. A full-page advertisement for the hotel features in the first edition of Beatrix Cresswell's guide to The Quantock Hills: Their Combes and Villages. This book was published by the Homeland Association for the Encouragement of Touring in Great Britain in 1904. So this hotel is a really good example of how a landscape of industry can become replaced by a landscape of leisure.

Holford Brook is much cleaner today than it would have been during the heyday of tanning . In the late nineteenth century, large volumes of filthy and smelly water – the effluent of the hide washing and tanning process – would have been pumped back into the stream below the tannery! Hardly a picturesque rural stream!



Advert for Coombe House in The Quantock Hills: Their Combes and Villages (1904)

Directions 3

Opposite the old wheel is a passageway between the cottages that takes you back onto the lane. Turn right up the lane. After a short way, the tarmac surface ends and it becomes a track. Go through the gate and continue following the footpath. Stop by the stream at the first glade.

4. Dingly dell

First glade in Holford Combe

This is Holford Combe. As you have already heard, a combe is a steep and wooded valley and this is a typical example. It is an enchanting dingly dell with a stream running brightly over pebbles. There are also open, sun-dappled glades carpeted with soft, juicy grass. And there are densely wooded slopes.

This is an example of increasingly rare semi-natural broadleaf woodland. Rowan, birch, holly and hazel trees flourish here. With alder and willow occupying moister ground. But the dominant tree you see is called western sessile oak.



One of the glades in Holford Combe
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

These woodlands are part of a Site of Special Scientific Interest (a so-called Triple SI). Also a Grade 2 Nature Conservation Review site. They are internationally important as well, listed as a Special Area of Conservation under the European Commission's Habitats and Species Directive. Sessile oak woodland provides habitat for many bird species, including summer migrants such as the wood warbler, pied flycatcher and redstart. Only five other AONBs in England and Wales support a higher proportion of ancient woodland.



Sessile oak is mixed with common oak in Holford Combe
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Under this thick roof of leaves, it's cool and pleasant for walking even on the hottest and stickiest of summer afternoons! These glades are the product of grazing by free-ranging deer and sheep. They're perfect for picnics.

They've also attracted the attention of film and video makers, who look at these woods and see Sherwood Forest! Round about here, parts of the video were filmed for the 1991 smash hit Everything I Do (I Do It For You) by the Canadian rock singer, Bryan Adams. These woods were selected for the accompanying video by Julien Temple, the film maker who lives in the Quantocks.

Brian Adams isn't the only celebrity whose presence has graced this neck of the woods. Kevin Costner was here too, though you won't find their names engraved on the trees! Scenes for the 1991 film Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves, which featured Adams' power ballad and starred Costner, were also filmed here.

Then in 2001, Julian Temple released a film about the relationship between Coleridge, Dorothy and William Wordsworth during their sojourn in these hills. It's called Pandaemonium and is rather wacky, but brilliantly atmospheric, and much of it was filmed on location in the Quantocks.



Both Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves and Everything I do (I Do It For You) were filmed in Holford Combe
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Directions 4

Continue on the footpath up Holford Combe. There are several paths which wind either side of the stream. It doesn't matter which you follow as long you continue gently upwards through the combe. After three-quarters of a mile – which should take the average person about 15 minutes – there is a glade. This is the top of Holford Combe, where it splits with Lady's Combe on the left and Frog Combe on the right. Stop in the glade where the combes split.

5. Gunpowder woods

Glade at the top of Holford Combe where it splits into Lady's Combe and Frog Combe

We're now at the top of Holford Combe where it splits into Lady's Combe on the left and Frog Combe on the right. I've never seen a frog here at the base of Frog Combe but what you do find here where it merges into Holford Combe is a faint reminder of the area's human history. Despite their wild and unmanaged appearance, these woodlands are not untouched. The Quantocks have a rich past as a working and inhabited landscape. The oaks on these slopes were regularly coppiced to provide a sustainable supply of wood for products such as broom handles and hurdles (a hurdle is a sheep pen). In other words, timber was felled in such a way that the tree could regenerate from the stool.



One of the sites used for charcoal burning
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Coppice oak was also burnt to make charcoal, which nowadays is mostly used for barbeques. All around these woods are the remains of charcoal burning activities. A survey by English Heritage about ten years ago identified no less than 100 charcoal burning platforms in the complex of combes formed by Holford Combe and its near neighbour, Hodder's Combe.

If we were walking through these woods in the autumn in the days of Coleridge and Wordsworth, the air would be scented with wood smoke. A large amount of charcoal was destined for the blast furnaces of the ironworking industry. Some was also used in local smithies and foundries for metalworking, also for making glass. But one of the main customers for Quantocks charcoal was the Royal Navy, which used it to make gunpowder. For centuries, the oak coppices were felled on a forty-year rotation cycle. Regular coppice management ceased in the early twentieth century. This lack of management explains why many of the oaks around here have such a bizarre, irregular shape!

Directions 5

Follow the path to the right up Frog Combe. The path climbs gradually and towards the top it gets steeper. You eventually emerge above the trees. Continue following the path upwards. Stop by the solitary tree by the track.

6. Monarch of the combe

Solitary tree above Frog Combe

In this neck of the woods in upper Frog Combe, depending on the time of day or the season, you may see quite a few specimens of Britain's largest wild mammal: the red deer. If you're lucky, you might see a whole herd of them.

During the day, particularly if it's hot, they tend to 'lie up' in dense stands of bracken or in the thickest woods down in the combes. But they leave their shelter and resting places in early morning and late evening. For much of the year, stags and hinds live in separate groups but they join up for the rut in late September/early October.

In the early twentieth century, the Quantocks was the destination of choice for British stag hunters. The red deer here were truly Monarchs of the Combe, growing bigger than other British deer thanks to the easy living of comparatively mild southwest England. In the guidebook to the Quantocks I mentioned earlier, published in 1904, the Combe House Hotel was advertised as being strategically located amidst the finest stag hunting country in England.

Though the Quantocks and its red deer are virtually synonymous, bear in mind that today's population did not originate here. They were transplanted from nearby Exmoor in the mid-nineteenth century, specifically for the pleasure of the chase. So whatever your views on hunting may be, remember that without these sportsmen there'd be no red deer today in the Quantocks.

Nowadays, if you stay at the Combe House Hotel, you won't meet any stag hunters. The Hunting Act that came into force in 2005 banned all hunting of wild animals with dogs. But under an exemption clause, a stag can be stalked and flushed from cover using no more than two dogs at a time, provided that the animal is then shot immediately and not chased.



Red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) in the Quantocks
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Directions 6

Turn right along the track, which is called Pack Way. Just over the brow of the hill, the track splits. Stop at this junction.

7. The road that was never built

Junction of tracks, Pack Way

We've finally left the trees behind us and have emerged onto the ridge. Here we're surrounded by unenclosed heathland. Here, near the round summit of Black Hill, on Pack Way, is a fine example of the sweeping panoramic vistas for which the Quantocks have become celebrated. The grey-brown Bristol Channel spreads out to the north, dotted with the islands of Flat Holm and Steep Holm. On a clear day, you can see the mountains of the Brecon Beacons on the Welsh side. This is exactly the sort of spot that Wordsworth had in mind when he recalled roving around on "smooth Quantocks airy ridge".



Pack Way – used by walkers, cyclists and horse riders – but which could have become a road
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Pack Way hasn't really changed much since Coleridge and Wordsworth rambled here – but it could have been different. In the early 1970s, there was a proposal to convert this traditional track into a metalled road that would run along the spine of the Quantock Hills. Those in favour of the proposal argued that vehicle access along a sort of Skyline Drive would allow a greater number of people to enjoy the hills, especially the old, the young and the infirm that couldn't walk up here.

I'm not sure how much momentum built up behind this proposal. But at the end of the day, the views that prevailed were those of the people who felt that the peace and quiet of the area would be spoilt, replaced by the noise, congestion and litter associated with the city. Opponents insisted that the area's beauty and views were best enjoyed by those who arrived on foot or on horseback.

Though it's off-limits to motorised vehicles, the path that runs along this ridge on which we're standing – Pack Way – is probably the most heavily used artery in the whole Quantocks area. It's increasingly popular with mountain bikers in particular. How to cope with the pressures of growing recreational demand and how to balance access with conservation of biodiversity are two of the biggest challenges facing the AONB service that manages these hills.

Directions 7

From the junction, take the right fork on the path along the ridge of Black Hill towards Higher Hare Knapp, with the Bristol Channel in the far distance. Either side of this path are areas of heather, stop here.

8. Purple and yellow

On the ridge of Black Hill

As you head north along the ridge towards Hare Knap – that’s in the direction of the Bristol Channel – you get a really good feel for the characteristic vegetation of the unenclosed hilltop plateau. It’s a mix of bell heather, western gorse, cross-leaved heath and whortleberry (better known as bilberry). In summer, when the heather and gorse are in bloom, it’s a glorious riot of purple and yellow, wonderfully set off by the fresh green of the bilberry plants.

For local inhabitants, these heathlands were not just a place to graze their cattle and sheep. They provided various resources for their lives.



Colourful heather and gorse
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Peat, which they cut out of the turf (known as turbarry), was a source of fuel. The gorse – also known as furze in the West Country – provided kindling for fires and for heating bread ovens. And heather provided stuffing for mattresses. And the berries, of course, provided a welcome supply of seasonal fruit for jam.



Burnt heather stalks left after swaling
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Look around for patches of open ground more or less bare of heather and gorse with a very low covering of bilberries. This is evidence of the persistence of the ancient practice known as swaling. Swaling involves controlled burning to reinvigorate the heather by burning off the older, woodier plants – you’ll see lots of dead bits of woody heather stalk lying around here. And this burning off of the older, woodier parts of the heather promotes the growth of fresh green shoots. On dry days in springtime, members of the AONB service are all busy swaling on these hilltops.

Directions 8

Continue along the path which follows the ridge of Black Hill towards Higher Hare Knap. Where the path splits, keep left. Stop at the stones marking the top of Higher Hare Knap.

9. Blot on the landscape?

Higher Hare Knap

From here, at the top of Higher Hare Knapp by this pile of stones known as a cairn, you get an absolutely spectacular view of the squat towers of Hinkley Point nuclear power station down on the shoreline of the Bristol Channel.

Hinkley has dominated the view from here since construction began in 1957. The first reactor came on line in 1965. Construction of Hinkley B began in 1967 and it came on line in 1976. On a bright afternoon, when the sun is shining toward the north, their pale, bluish-green colour of the towers really stands out.



Hinkley Point nuclear power station from Higher Hare Knap
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Hinkley Point has been earmarked for expansion as part of a nationwide plan for a new generation of power stations to meet our escalating energy needs. But is there an alternative to Hinkley Point C? Some argue that wind farms offer an eco-friendly and low impact alternative source of energy. But viewed strictly in terms of their visual impact, some believe that large white wind turbines would be just as intrusive as Hinkley's towers. What do you think? Would you prefer an expanded nuclear power station at Hinkley Point or an enormous wind farm?

Directions 9

From the cairn, follow the grassy path downwards towards Lower Hare Knapp. Stop part way down this slope.

10. From crops to heather

Path between Higher Hare Knap and Lower Hare Knap

As Lower Hare Knap comes into view, there's another opportunity to reflect on changes in the landscape. Between the 1790s and the early 1820s, Somerset was badly hit by economic recession. Food was in short supply at this time. And you can still see this harsh reality written on these hills.

Patches of common land were temporarily enclosed to grow potatoes, but mostly to grow rye. Rye flour was mixed with wheat flour to bake bread. And rye straw was also used for thatching – thatch being the most common form of roofing material before 1800.



Exmoor Ponies grazing below Higher Hare Knap
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

These so-called outfields – which were also cultivated sporadically during the Middle Ages and early modern era – have now reverted to open heath. Most of them are to be found on the western slope of the Quantocks – in other words, the other side. But the narrow plough ridges and furrows and the banks of these old fields can still be traced here on the shoulder of Lower Hare Knap, between 200 and 300 metres in altitude. They can be most clearly seen when cast into sharp relief by the low angle of a late winter sun.

Much easier to spot, if they happen to be around, are groups of hardy Exmoor ponies, which thrive on this moorland vegetation rather than the lush grass which we assume that ponies and horses would prefer.

Directions 10

Follow the path downwards. Rather than climb up again to Lower Hare Knap on the right, continue straight downwards towards Somerton Combe. After a short distance the path enters the trees of the combe. The path is very steep so take great care. Stop by the stream at the bottom.

11. Mud, mud, glorious mud

Junction of Hodder's Combe, Somerton Combe, Slaughterhouse Combe and Sheppard's Combe

Having dropped down from Hare Knap, we're now standing at the point where three combes meet and merge into Hodder Combe. This is a damp, boggy area. In the autumn, during the mating season – known as the rut – boggy areas like this in the lower combes become wallows – wallows for stags. The stags roll around in the peaty mud and get completely coated. When the peaty mud dries, this gives their hides a black appearance.



A stag wallow in Hodder Combe
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



A stag wallow in Holford Combe
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

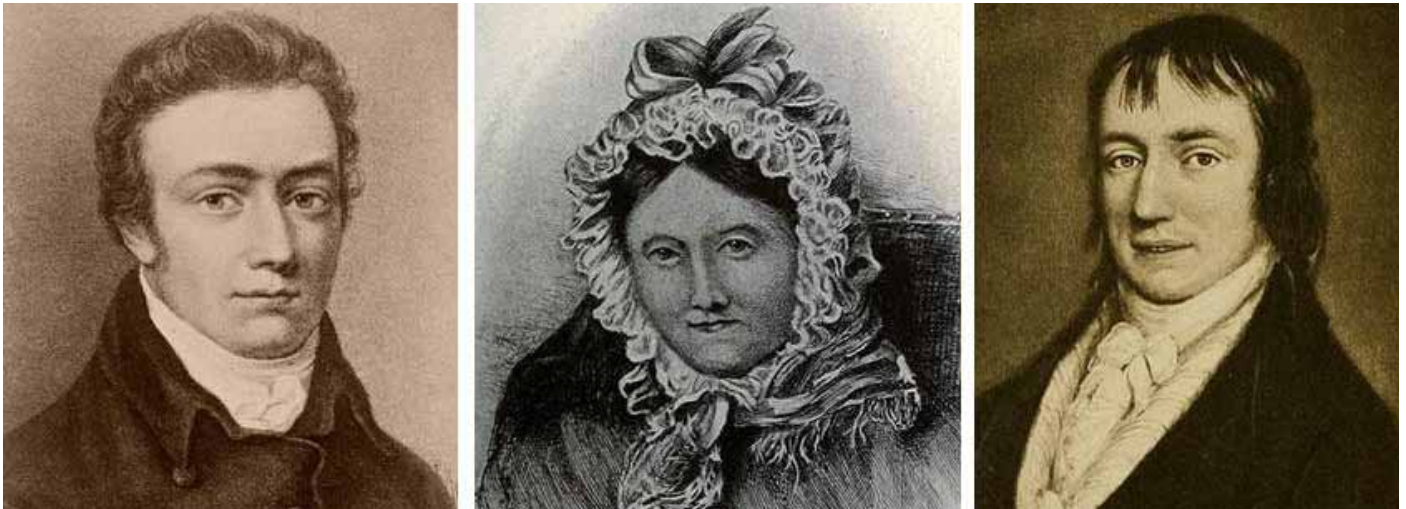
Why do they do this? Well, it could be because they'll look more frightening to other stags and gain an advantage by being more scary. A more likely explanation, though, is that they urinate in the mud and then roll round in it to make sure that they are coated in musky pheromones – this makes them more attractive to female deer, known as hinds. In the springtime, these hinds join the stags in these wallows. Rolling around helps all deer – male and female – to moult their winter coats.

Directions 11

Hodder Combe is downstream. Face upstream and there are three combes – Somerton Combe on the left, Slaughterhouse Combe in the centre and one on the right. Walk a short way up Slaughterhouse Combe, which leads up Lady's Edge. Wherever there is a split in the path, follow the right fork. The path rises gradually up Lady's Edge with the stream on your left. After a short distance, the trees thin out. Stop as the path emerges into the open.

12. Wandering lonely as three clouds

Part way up Lady's Edge



From left: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Dorothy Wordsworth, William Wordsworth
Wikimedia Commons (Creative Commons Licence)

As you heard earlier, if you'd been out on this walk in 1797 or 1798, you might have encountered three now famous people: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and William's sister, Dorothy. In their case, the old saying that 'two is company, three is a crowd' doesn't seem to have applied. 'Three people, but one soul' is how Coleridge described them.

One of their biggest thrills was to trace streams to their source springs and they meticulously recorded this information. They referred to this kind of activity as 'making studies'. Although they were poets, this sounds exactly like a geography fieldtrip!

This poking around at the sources of springs was part of Coleridge's preparations for an epic poem. As Coleridge later reflected in *Biographia Literaria* (1817):

"I sought for a subject that should give equal room and freedom for description, incident, and impassioned reflections on men, nature, and society, yet supply in itself a natural connection to the parts, and unity to the whole. Such a subject I conceived myself to have found in a stream, traced from its source in the hills among the yellow-red moss and conical glass-shaped tufts of bent."

This poem was going to be entitled 'The Brook'. Dorothy Wordsworth refers to it quite a few times in her journal. Unfortunately, what might have been one of his greatest works never made it beyond the drawing board.

It's amazing how completely innocent pursuits such as roaming the hills and 'making studies' can be misinterpreted. Local residents weren't just sceptical of these activities, they were downright suspicious. The respectable folk of the Quantocks suspected the worst of these exotic literary visitors, who spoke French and held radical views. Some of these anxious locals thought that their wild-eyed walks – often at night – were connected to preparations for a French invasion up the Bristol Channel. In fact, a government agent was despatched to investigate rumours that they were looking for navigable rivers that French ships could sail up!

This may seem utterly ludicrous to us today. But, at the time, it was genuinely believed that French republicans might arrive anytime and try to topple the British monarchy! The French fleet was under instructions to destroy the city of Bristol. They had already tried to land troops on the coast of Southwest Wales. In the end, this feared invasion never materialised but local people never ever did fully understand what these wild-eyed poets were up to on their crazy walks!



View of the Severn from Quantock near Alfoxton
Watercolour by CW Bampfylde (c. 1735-1791)
© The Wordsworth Trust

Directions 12

Continue up Lady's Edge until you reach a small V-shaped valley on the left hand side. This small detour for the next stop is optional because the path is steep and can be overgrown. If you do not fancy going up there, stop on the path and listen to Track 13. If you want to brave it, follow the sheep track through the bracken for several minutes. Just above a clump of trees is the source of the stream – stop here - it's a boggy area which will squelch underfoot.

13. Boggy inspiration

Spring off Lady's Edge

We're now at the point where Lady's Edge becomes Sheppard's Combe. This is a little detour up a side valley to locate a spring that's reputedly the source of Coleridge's poem 'The Brook'. Whether or not this is the actual spring that inspired Coleridge, here's a fine example of an acid flush bog.

Acid bogs are formed when a type of moss called sphagnum (or peat moss) invades a watery area. In order to dominate, sphagnum changes the environment to make it less hospitable to other species, in particular through chemical processes that lower the pH of the water to very acidic levels.



Acid bog, off Lady's Edge
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



Sundew (drosera), specially adapted to bog conditions
Richard Webb, Geograph (Creative Commons License)

Although normal plants cannot tolerate acidic conditions, other species have evolved to thrive in such conditions such as larch trees (though there are none of these in the Quantocks), sundew and pitcher plants, blueberries and cranberries.

From a botanical standpoint, this acid flush bog represents the richest kind of habitat within the Quantock Hills.

Directions 13

If you made the detour up to the bog, you can either retrace your steps back down to the main path or clamber upwards until you reach Pack Way and turn right. From the main path, continue upwards through Sheppard's Combe until you reach the Pack Way. Stop near a wooden post on the flat area at the top where several paths meet.

14. Changing horses

Bicknoller Post

For the second time on this walk, we've emerged onto the ridge. This is Bicknoller Post, where a new wooden post – erected just a few years ago in 2008 – marks the location of a former building. Before this route was replaced by the lower road in the late eighteenth century – that's the route of today's A39 – the coaches coming up from Holford would change horses at this building before proceeding down to Williton and West Quantoxhead along what's called The Great Road.

Just beyond the post to the northwest, some fantastic views open up. The cliffs of Exmoor – which are dramatic, so-called hogs-back cliffs – are clearly visible. So too are the heights of Exmoor including Dunkery Beacon, the highest point in the National Park.



Bicknoller Post
© Andrew Mann



Sweeping panoramic views to the west from Bicknoller Post
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

On the coast you can see the resort of Minehead. The gleaming white structure is Summerwest World, formerly Butlins Holiday Camp.

Directions 14

From the viewpoint westwards over to Exmoor and Minehead, turn back eastwards. Go back past Bicknoller Post and then turn left along the track along the ridge with Longstone Hill on the right. Follow the path over the hill and you should see Hinckley Point straight ahead in the distance. At a path crossroads by a solitary tree, turn right across the top of Dens Combe. The track descends gradually. Follow the track to the edge of some woodland. Here the path divides into five. Straight ahead is a path marked no vehicles. To its left is a path along the top of the woodland. To its left is a path descending diagonally through the woodland. Take this path. After a short distance it becomes a tarmac driveway. Stop where the drive passes Alfoxtton House.

15. Romantic get-away

Alfoxton House

We're now walking up the driveway past a large country house. You can just glimpse the back of the house through the trees.

This is called Alfoxton House, the original part of which dates from the early eighteenth century; two side wings were added in 1805. It's set in a former deer park.

This is where William and Dorothy Wordsworth lived for a year starting in 1797. The reason they lived here is because they wanted to be near Coleridge, who was already living locally in Nether Stowey. So they rented this house for a year.



Alfoxton House c.1955
© The Francis Frith Collection www.francisfrith.com

The annual rent for what Coleridge called 'a gentleman's seat' was £23, which doesn't sound like a lot. But it is more than three times what Coleridge was paying for his rather grotty ploughman's cottage in the neighbouring village of Nether Stowey, where he lived with his wife and young son and an endless stream of guests!

The Wordsworths liked to call this place Alfoxden – a rather nice pun. Here, they entertained many notable literary figures and intellectuals who sought them out. Much of the landmark collection of romantic poetry, *Lyrical Ballads* (published in the autumn of 1798), which includes poems by both Wordsworth and Coleridge, was planned and composed here.

This house was also the scene of some pretty wild parties. The locals – understandably – were scandalized and there was a lot of speculation about whether Dorothy, who was clearly not his wife, was really his sister. Not surprisingly, the lease on Alfoxton House was not renewed, even though the Wordsworths would have loved to have stayed longer!

During the Second World War, American troops were stationed in a camp within this former deer park. Later, Alfoxton became a country house hotel.

In the 1980s, The New York Times sent over a reporter to review it for the benefit of American fans of romantic poetry. Though this house is still indicated on the Ordnance Survey map as a hotel, the hotel shut in 2005. The house is now in private ownership and it's unfortunately not possible to access the front.



Engraving of Alfoxden, Somersetshire by H Manesse
© The Wordsworth Trust

Directions 15

Continue along the driveway. Pass through the gate at the edge of the grounds and continue along the road towards Holford village. At one point, the road bends round to the right. Shortly after the bend is a footpath post on the left hand side pointing down into the woods. Follow this footpath steeply downwards. Stop on the footbridge over the brook.

16. Dorothy's waterfall

Footbridge over Holford Glen

We're now deep in Holford Glen standing on a footbridge over Holford Brook. This thickly wooded dell was a favourite haunt of Coleridge and the Wordsworths.

They often stopped here when shuttling between Alfoxton and Nether Stowey, where Coleridge lived with his family (now owned by the National Trust)

Dorothy Wordsworth was particularly fond of this cool, shady and secluded spot. A few days after arriving at Alfoxton, this is what she wrote to a friend:



New bridge over Dorothy's waterfall, Holford Glen
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

"There is everything here; sea, woods wild as fancy ever painted, brooks clear and pebbly villages so romantic; and William and I, in a wander by ourselves, found out a sequestered waterfall in a dell formed by steep hills covered with full-grown trees."

Early twentieth century guidebooks to the Quantocks refer to this as Dorothy's Glen. It's particularly lovely here in late April when the wild garlic that blankets the steep slopes is in bloom. But you can't see much of the brook below when the trees are in full leaf, though you can hear it bubbling down over the rocks. This brook represents the combined flow of the streams flowing down Holford Combe and Hodder Combe.

In her Journal, Dorothy mentions 'the' waterfall. So does Coleridge. In his poem 'The Lime-Tree Bower My Prison', he refers to the 'roaring dell'. And William wrote his poem 'Lines Written in Early Spring' at this spot. Unfortunately, you can't see it from this footbridge, though you can certainly hear it. It's still here, and literally just a stone's throw downstream. There are pictures in the old guidebooks and it was a popular turn-of-the-twentieth century postcard motif. This beauty spot could be viewed in the early twentieth century by walking across a rustic bridge slung across the glen, which is no more.

I did manage to find the waterfall recently but it's practically inaccessible and I really don't recommend that you try. The sides of the glen are very steep and slippery and I was lucky not to break an ankle descending the precipitous slopes. I was also lucky not to slip on the wet, mossy rocks of the brook itself. I'm sorry you can't get there but take it from me, it really is an impressive falls, surprisingly so for such a small stream. William Wordsworth agreed with me, describing it as 'considerable for that country'.



Dorothy's waterfall in the Cresswell guide and today
The Quantock Hills: Their Combes and Villages (1904) / Peter Coates © RGS-IBG
Discovering Britain

Directions 16

Cross the bridge and climb the wooden ramp on the other side. Turn right along the lane. At the junction is a gate on the right hand side. Stop beside this gate.

17. Silky ruins

Ruined Mill, Holford Glen

The building that you can see right in front of you here as you rest your arms on the wooden gate is an old silk factory. All that's left is its roofless shell. The original mill buildings date back to the sixteenth century. They were built and operated by Protestant immigrants from France known as Huguenots.

Here in Holford Glen, the Huguenots practiced their traditional craft of hand-weaving and dyeing textiles. Five small wheels in this glen powered the mills, which span raw silk imported from France. Also – according to local legend – from silk worms kept at Nether Stowey.



Ruins of the silk mill in Holford Glen
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

The mill was certainly still in operation in the 1790s because Dorothy Wordsworth refers to 'the manufacturer' by the stream in her journal. This particular building – the ruins of which you can see – has been dated to 1830. It was a dye house, though the upper level was probably used for weaving. Local plants, such as nettles and bracken, supplied colours for dyes.

According to some sources, it was later converted to the manufacture of blankets. At some point, it was abandoned or may have burned down. The building is marked as a Disused Silk Factory on the Ordnance Survey map of 1888. I find these ruins deeply romantic; they beautifully complement the picturesque scenery of the glen. And when you get back home after this walk, take a look at the video on YouTube for Everything I Do (I Do It For You). This old silk mill features as the backdrop for Bryan Adams' band. It's not far from Holford Glen to Sherwood Forest.

Directions 17

Follow the lane a short way to the junction. Stop by the white finger post.

18. Nature and culture

Holford village signpost

Whether you are already familiar with the Quantocks or a first time visitor, I hope you've learned something new and interesting on this walk.

Even though Wordsworth and Coleridge were here together for just one year, their impressions of this place and their writings have been influential ever since. As we have walked in the footsteps of two great English poets, through country that Coleridge praised as 'so divine and wild', we've seen how upland scenery, open countryside and panoramic vistas have strongly influenced our ideas of what is nature and wilderness.



The Holford signpost
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

We tend to talk about 'nature' and 'culture' in oppositional terms. But perhaps they aren't so far apart after all. In my work as an environmental historian, I try to bridge the gap between people and nature and the great divide between the cultural world on the one hand and the natural world on the other. This walk has revealed a strong connection between physical geography and romantic poetry. I strongly believe that literary links can help us to enjoy the landscape more.

We've also seen on this walk how a landscape that appears wild and natural has, in fact, been significantly shaped by humans, who have used natural resources for their livelihoods and industries, as well as for their pleasure and recreation.

Next time you're out on a walk somewhere in rural Britain, just stop to think about whether the landscape that you see is completely natural or whether it has been shaped by humans. If you see a view that you consider to be picturesque or beautiful, ask yourself why you find it attractive. If you were a poet or a writer, what would inspire you in the landscape that you see? Do you agree with Wordsworth and Coleridge that rambling around the countryside and writing poetry belong together like scones and clotted cream?

Speaking of scones and clotted cream, you might like to retrace your footsteps a short distance back up to the Combe House Hotel, which does scrumptious afternoon teas up until six o'clock in the evening. I'm sure you need some refreshment after this long walk!

Directions 18

From the sign post, you can follow the lane round to the right and back to the bowling green and car park. Alternatively you may want to go straight up the lane back to the Combe House Hotel for refreshments.

Credits

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