



WALKING

HORNER WOOD AND THE DUNSTER PATH

WORDS by Sue Viccars
PHOTOS by Andrew Hobbs



As well as writing individual walks for magazines and leaflets, over the years I've been commissioned to write many collections of walks to be published in book form, mostly in the South West but with a couple of forays 'north' (the official guide to the Pennine Bridleway, for example, and a book on the Wychavon Way). Commissions for books describing a number of walking routes often come with the proviso that each must have a different theme – archaeology, legends, natural history and so on.

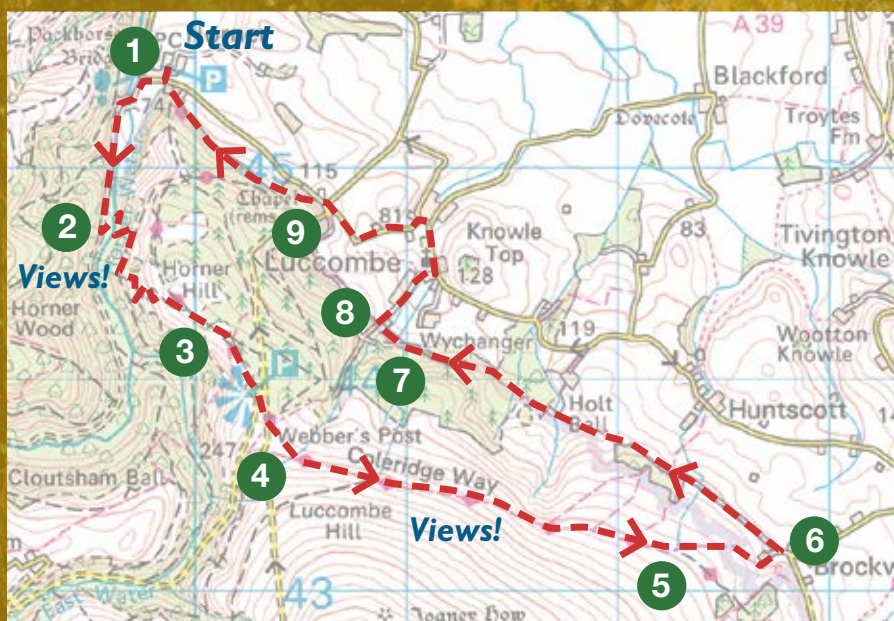
This provides a framework for the author to work to, in that geographical spread of routes across the area in question (be that a National Park or a county) has to be balanced, and themes nicely spaced out, too. And then there's distance, and estimated time to complete the walk (affected by terrain, how many walkers, fitness, ability and so on), and level of difficulty (about which there can be

several opinions!), and where to park, and the question of whether the stiles are OK for dogs, where the loos are, and the nearest café or pub, and local transport options – as well as making sure to avoid busy stretches of road or patches of bog... there's a surprising amount to think about and plan!

So, every now and then, it's really nice to get the chance to describe a walk that doesn't have a particular theme, or a special reason behind its inclusion in a book or magazine, but is there, quite simply, because it's just beautiful – and that's enough! So in this issue I am describing a really lovely 'kicking through the leaves' walk for autumn. It includes many of the best locations within the National Trust's Holnicote Estate, and it makes the most of wonderful colour in Horner Wood (a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a National Nature Reserve/ NNR) as the leaves turn golden brown; it also offers stunning views from the

Dunster Path (*top*) across the Porlock Vale towards the sea. All the ascent comes at the start, but you can sit down at the Jubilee Hut (*above*), drink in the views over the Horner Valley and catch your breath.

The return route along the lower edge of Luccombe Hill and through the pretty little village of the same name is easy, but keep an eye on where you are along the path so that you don't miss the junction described at Point 7. If you do miss the right fork mentioned here, just keep going on your original path, soon crossing a stream on a broad bridge to reach a path crossroads; turn right on a restricted byway and through a gate to reach the cottages at the top of Luccombe reached at the end of Point 7. Alternatively, if you want to miss out Luccombe completely and shorten the walk by a tiny bit, keep ahead at the path crossroads to rejoin the main route at Chapel Cross, reached at the end of Point 8 (see map on page 52).



FACTFILE

MAP

OS Explorer 9 Exmoor; OS Landranger 181 Minehead & Brendon Hills

START

Horner Green SS898454

DISTANCE & TIME

6¾ miles (10.9km); 3.5 hours

PARKING & TOILETS

NT car park, Horner (members park free, non-members £3 all day)

TERRAIN

Woodland tracks, moorland paths (some rough underfoot), steep ascent through Horner Wood at start

REFRESHMENTS

Horner Tea Gardens are open 10am-5pm, until early November.

T: 01643 862132.

Horner Vale Tearoom is open 11am-5pm until the end of September.

T: 01643 862506.

NOTE

To access the start of the walk leave the car park via a narrow path to the right of the toilets; at the lane turn right to reach Horner Green.



THE ROUTE

1 From the green set off down the level track along the valley bottom (signed Horner Wood), soon crossing Horner Packhorse Bridge over the Horner Water (it has been suggested that the name 'Horner' comes from the Saxon hwrnwr, meaning 'snorer!'), then passing through a gate into the Horner Wood NNR. The packhorse bridge dates from the late-medieval period, and (rather nicely) is known locally as 'Hacketty Way Bridge'.

2 Turn left over the first footbridge, signed Tucker's Path and Webber's Post, and ascend steadily to pass another signpost (return loop to Horner left). Zigzag very steeply up through the trees to reach a path crossroads (crossing the Windsor Walk). Keep straight across (Tucker's Path to Webber's Post).

Continue to ascend very steeply, with increasingly good views across the treetops (*below*), eventually reaching open ground. Ahead stands the wooden Jubilee Hut (*bottom*). It's a great place to recover from the climb, with wonderful views towards Dunkery Beacon across the wooded valley. (Some of the seats are dedicated to people and organisations who have played a significant role on Exmoor.)



3 On meeting the path (the line of the Coleridge Way/CW) in front of the Jubilee Hut, turn right. At a fork keep right, now on a permitted bridleway (*below*), parallel to an easy access path, to reach the car park and viewpoint at Webber's Post. At the edge of the car park turn left to meet the road, and cross over; immediately bear half right across grass under conifers to reach the next road.



4 Cross over to reach the edge of open ground (parking area). Bear right across it, heading for another Coleridge Way sign that comes into view ahead.

At the sign keep ahead between bracken and scattered mountain ash, to reach a path T-junction. Turn left on the Dunster Path (CW, signed to Wootton Courtenay) (*below*), which runs along the contours of



Luccombe Hill with stunning views, soon straight down Porlock Vale towards the sea and Bossington Hill (*below*).



The limewashed tower of Selworthy's Church of All Saints stands out clearly (*below*), as does the tower of St Mary the Virgin at Luccombe. This glorious path descends gently across the slopes of Dunkery Hill, catching glimpses of houses at Wootton Courtenay ahead.



Ignore odd paths heading off left, and then pass a signed bridlepath.

5 At the next bridlepath (signed to Wootton Courtenay) turn left. Descend towards woodland, soon bearing right. At a sign keep downhill on the permitted path, avoiding the house at Higher Brockwell, through a glade of silver birch. Descend alongside a hedgebank to reach a bridlepath junction (*below*) outside the gates to the house: Brockwell is signed ahead.



6 Turn sharp left on the bridlepath to Horner, and follow it along the lower edge of Dunkery Hill through beautiful woodland, often between beech hedgebanks and moss-covered walls



(above). Occasional bridlepaths feed onto the track from left and right, before deer fencing flanks the path on the right; a lovely view of Selworthy church appears over a gate. Pass a sign for the Exmoor Society's Woodcock Gardens, and continue through the woodland.

Cross a stream, after which the vista broadens as the path runs along the lower end of Hollow Girt, a shallow combe heavy with bracken and gorse. The last bridlepath right is signed to Holt Ball; our path soon follows a lovely old hedgebank then bears left, slightly uphill, before levelling.

7 Just before the path crosses a stream – and starts to ascend under conifers,

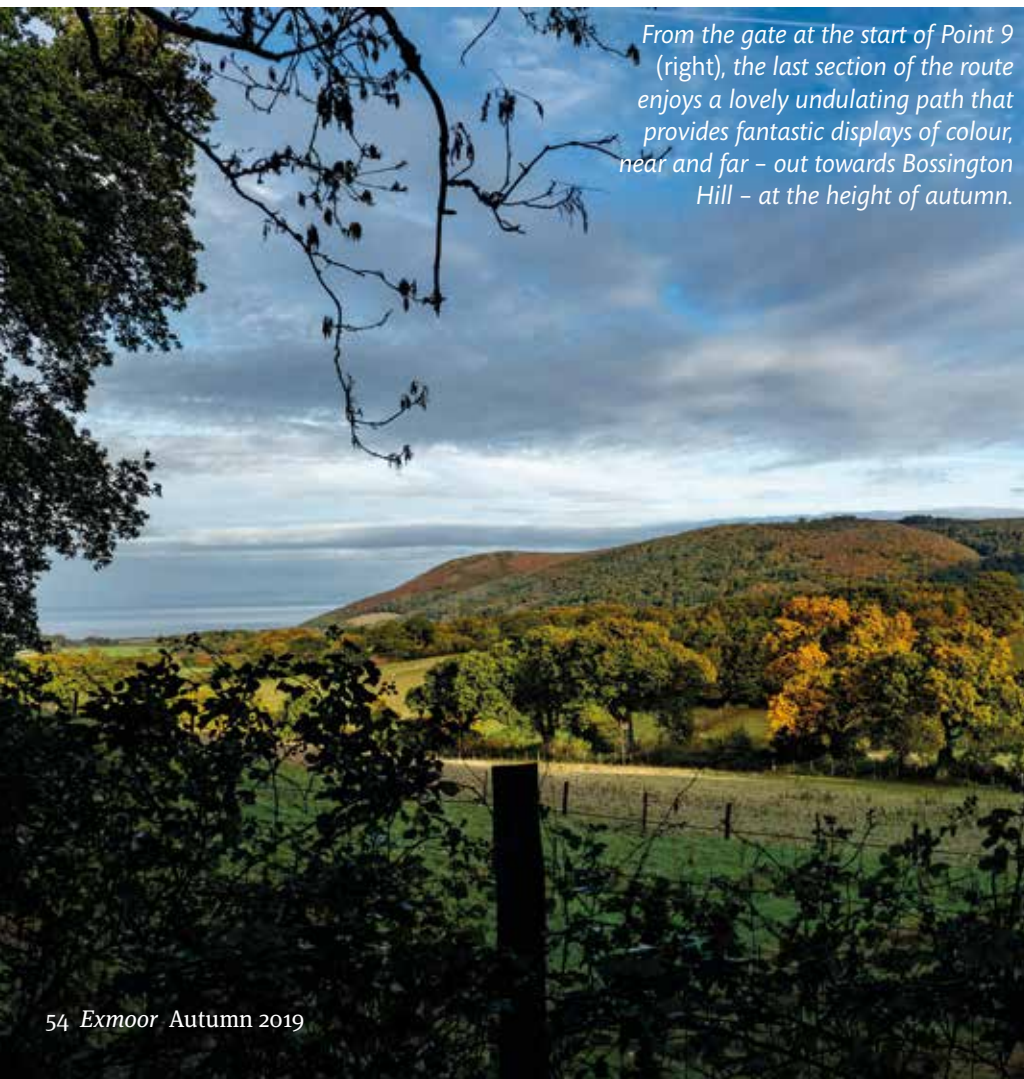
marked by a blue splodge on a tree – take a narrow path which forks right to cross the stream then runs alongside the deer fence at the lower edge of woodland to emerge between cottages at the top end of Luccombe.

8 Turn right, downhill. The narrow lane (above) descends past beautiful yellow limewashed cottages to reach the church (above, right). Follow the lane (Stoney Street) on to a T-junction and turn left, passing the village hall, phone box and little village green.

At the junction follow the road left, signed to Horner, and across the stream. The lane ascends gently to reach Chapel Cross; keep straight on.

9 After a few paces bear left off the road and through a gate (below) on a track (note the remains of foundations on the other side of the lane, site of the medieval St Andrew's Chapel).

Head along a broad track under tall conifers and sweet chestnuts, soon bearing right along the lower edge of Luccombe Plantation. At a split keep ahead along the bottom of the wood. Eventually meet a broader track at a T-junction and turn right, downhill. Pass through a deer gate and descend more steeply. Go through another gate to reach the lane and turn left, downhill, soon passing Horner Mill (built in the 1850s to mill imported corn) to regain the car park.



From the gate at the start of Point 9 (right), the last section of the route enjoys a lovely undulating path that provides fantastic displays of colour, near and far – out towards Bossington Hill – at the height of autumn.

