

Ramblers Route in depth

Laud of the Ring

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A decade in the making by local Ramblers, the Mendip Ring encompasses the area's finest natural wonders and remnants of its colourful past. We walked the highest section of this new long-distance trail, where an extraordinary World War II decoy still lurks in the hill-top grass



walk it!

TIME/DISTANCE: The full Mendip Ring is 188km/117 miles long and takes between nine and 15 days to complete, depending on your fitness level. It begins at Ashcott Corner, and recommended breakdowns are detailed on the Mendip Ring website (see below). The walk in this feature covers leg 8a, between Burrington Combe and Rodney Stoke, which is 13½km/8½ miles and takes approximately 4 hours to complete.

DISTANCE: OS Explorer 141; Landranger 182.

FURTHER INFO: www.mendipring.org.uk

Ramblers Routes
Britain's best walks from the experts

ROUTE
09

Scattered across the heather-wreathed slopes of Black Down, the highest point in the Mendip Hills, is a series of grassy hummocks. At first glance, you might easily mistake these mysterious bulges for ancient barrows or signs of the Roman lead workings that once decorated Somerset's history-rich uplands. But Black Down's man-made mounds are really a much more recent addition to the landscape.

Had you been in a German bomber circling over the Bristol Channel during the last bitter years of World War II, you would have seen what looked like a city on the edge of the Somerset Levels. There were streets and railways picked out in flickering lights, and dim red pinpricks that might have been the stoking of steam locomotives. On a dark night, this luminous map would have looked very much like an aerial view of Bristol. In reality, though, it was a sophisticated decoy town operated from underground bunkers and strategically positioned in this lonely

part of the Mendips to draw fire away from the South West's largest city.

The turfed-over remains of the Black Down bombing decoy are just a small part of the colourful past of Somerset's Mendip area. It was with the ambition of showcasing these heritage highlights that the Mendip Ramblers created the Mendip Ring – a 188km/117-mile long-distance path that traces the boundaries of the area, from Cheddar and Glastonbury Tor in the west to Frome and Bruton in the east.

"Most of Mendip is a microcosm of the rest of the country," says Margaret Nuth, who was the historical and archaeological researcher for the route. "As you walk the Mendip Ring, you're going backwards and forwards in history all the time. Every few

Clockwise from above: enjoying the view from the trig point at Beacon Batch, the summit of Black Down and the highest point of the Mendip Hills; stunning scenery to admire on the way up to Beacon Batch; walking up to Beacon Batch; a Mendip Ring marker added to a public footpath waymark



yards your footfall is going from Tudor England to the Industrial Revolution and back again to the time of the Normans.”

But the Mendip Ring isn't just a walk through time – it's a colourful compilation of the West Country's scenic high points. The route takes in the ethereal landscape of the Levels and moors, the green folds of Glastonbury Tor, and a line of golden-bricked Somerset villages in nine spectacular sections. With only a day to spare for exploring this new long-distance walk, though, I made a beeline for the lushest and most dramatically contoured leg of the Mendip Ring, beginning at a lay-by overlooking the steep limestone sides of Burrington Combe.

Luminescent limestone country

Whenever you see grass so green that it's almost luminescent, you can be pretty sure you're in limestone country. Burrington Combe glowed psychedelically in the mid-morning sunlight as I left the car and searched among the foliage, frothing over the top of the gorge, for the first

“Legend has it Augustus Montague Toplady was inspired to write the 18th-century hymn *Rock of Ages* while sheltering under a rock in Burrington Combe

Mendip Ring marker. Legend has it that the fabulously monikered Augustus Montague Toplady was inspired to write the popular 18th-century hymn *Rock of Ages* while sheltering under a rock in Burrington Combe – and it certainly feels like a place that could ‘save from wrath and make me pure’. I dawdled briefly above the gorge, admiring the divine view, before following the marker (blue-arrowed stickers added to the regular public footpath waymarkers) north towards the brooding bulk of Black Down.

Talking earlier to Mike Plaskitt, one of the leading forces behind the creation of the Mendip Ring, I'd learnt that all of these markers were placed by volunteers from the Mendip Ramblers working party after several years of concerted planning.

“It was Bob Berry [MBE], the leader of our work party, who first came up with the idea of a ring round the boundaries of Mendip,” Mike told me. “So we started off with a map, drew a circle around Mendip and tried to find footpaths that matched the border as closely as possible. Our working party convenes most Tuesday mornings, and when we didn't have other work to do, we went out and mapped and signposted the Ring.”

Mike described the section I was walking that day as one of his favourite parts of the Ring, partly because of the knockout views from Beacon Batch atop Black Down. On a clear day, you can stand on the summit of the Mendips' highest point, and sweep your eye round from Bristol and the sluggish curves of the Severn ▶



“There are signs of the major events in our history: the indigenous people, the Roman and Norman invasions, Black Death, Reformation, industrialisation...

Estuary to Weston-super-Mare glittering in the distance and the shadowy hills of Exmoor beyond.

With its waving purple moor grasses and scattering of spiky gorse bushes, Beacon Batch has more in common with Exmoor than it does with the green cleft of Burrington Combe or the lush hills that roll south towards Cheddar. The smell of crushed heather and peaty soil warmed by the sun followed me as I turned reluctantly away from the trig point and began the gentle descent to the road at Charterhouse.

En route, I passed a line of intriguing mounds that might equally have been relics of the decoy town or part of Black Down's Bronze Age round barrow cemetery. The ghosts of history are everywhere you turn on this walk – it's

just dating them that's the problem.

“If you walk the whole Ring, you'll find signs of most of the major events in the history of our country,” says Margaret. “You've got the early indigenous people, the Roman and Norman invasions, the Black Death, the Reformation, industrialisation and the two wars. There are three things that are unique to this area, though: one is the Levels and Moors; the second is a man-made feature, Glastonbury Abbey, which seems to hang in the public psyche; and the third is the Monmouth Rebellion, which affected a lot of people in Somerset.”

Golden gorges and cider

My route doesn't visit Glastonbury Abbey or touch on the areas affected by the

Monmouth uprising (an attempt to overthrow James II in 1685), but it does offer the most glorious bird's-eye views down onto the Somerset Levels – an area that would have been swimming in several feet of water last winter, but now basks serenely in the golden summer sunshine. The walk sticks to summits and ridgelines for most of its duration, dipping down only to follow the floor of another deep combe into the centre of Cheddar Gorge.

I stopped here to wolf down my sandwich and admire the wild goats grazing the steep sides of the gorge with gravity-defying ease. A group of white-faced cavers passed us, probably off to explore the river-forged tunnels, where Britain's oldest complete human skeleton, ►

Clockwise from top left: a view en route from Burrington Combe to Beacon Batch; trig point at Beacon Batch; walking down from Beacon Batch; out of Long Wood and through a high pasture; in the National Trust land of Black Rock at the top of Cheddar Gorge; through a meadow with limestone dry-stone walls; crossing a stile in Long Wood



Cheddar Man, was discovered back in 1903. Tourists in walking boots pootled happily up and down the path, a reminder that this was the first time that day I'd met other walkers. Still, as I shook off that soporific post-lunch feeling with a bracing climb up Cheddar Cliffs, the tourists were quickly left behind. Soon it was just me breathing in the sun-soaked views – give or take a few curious cows.

I continued my way down a ruler-straight drovers' road – one of many that are common in the Mendips, and relics of the days when Somerset farmers had to herd their sheep and cattle through the hills to market. Mine took me to the edge of the uplands and left me staring starry-eyed over a broad ridge, where the ground fell away down to the glistening Levels. From here I could see the

Clockwise from top left: a well-deserved refreshment break at Cheddar Gorge; walking through Black Rock; a couple of curious cows; on the southern escarpment of the Mendips with the jelly-mould shape of Glastonbury Tor in the distance; walking to the southern side of the Mendip Hills

“Rodney Stoke is a ‘Thankful Village’ – one of the few communities in Britain that lost none of their inhabitants in the First World War

jelly-mould shape of Glastonbury Tor, a site as wreathed in pagan spirituality as it usually is in mist. Cheddar Reservoir peeked out from behind the sweeping hills to the west, and beneath me the villages of Rodney Stoke and Draycott were snoozing in the afternoon sunshine.

Rodney Stoke is a ‘Thankful Village’ – one of the few communities in Britain that lost none of their inhabitants in the First World War. I was feeling thankful for a different and entirely selfish reason, though, as I followed an elegant avenue of trees off the edge of the Mendip ridgeline and down through woodland towards the village church.

All good Somerset walks should end with cider. Sipping a half-pint of pure gold at the Rodney Stoke Inn, I found myself dreaming about the rest of the

Mendip Ring: about the Levels beneath Glastonbury, Wookey with its magical caves, the glorious cathedral at Wells, the pretty streets of Frome – and everything in between.

Mike and Margaret believe that the existence of a new long-distance route will encourage more walkers to come to Somerset and see the county's attractions – both the famous landmarks and the unsung scenic spots that few non-locals ever bother to explore. And when they come, which I'm sure they will, those walkers will find that it's not just Somerset cider that's pure gold. ■

walk *lowdown* overleaf

walk **lowdown...** Somerset

Nowhere does quintessential English countryside quite like Somerset, with its cow-grazed pasturelands, rambling green hills and postcard-perfect villages. Here's how to make the most of your visit...



Top five long-distance walks

- 1. The Mendip Way:** A spectacular 80km/50-mile route from Weston-super-Mare to Frome.
- 2. Coleridge Way:** Discover the landscape that inspired Coleridge on this 82km/51-mile trail through the sleepy Quantock Hills (above).
- 3. West Somerset Coast Path:** It's only 40km/25 miles long, but if you're looking for a weekend walk with knockout coastal views, this seaside trail from Steart to Minehead is the perfect choice.
- 4. Liberty Trail:** Follow in the footsteps of the rebels who marched to Lyme Regis to join the Monmouth Rebellion in 1685, with a 45km/28-mile walk from Ham Hill in south Somerset to the Dorset coast.
- 5. River Parrett Trail:** Explore the peaceful wetlands, apple orchards and woods around the River Parrett on this 80km/50-mile hike.

Parks and nature reserves

Exmoor National Park: This became Europe's first Dark Sky Reserve in 2011.

Mendip Hills: Home to Cheddar Gorge and Glastonbury Tor.

Quantock Hills: England's first official Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Blackdown Hills: This mosaic of ridges, river valleys and chocolate-box farmsteads certainly lives up to its AONB designation.

Westhay Moor National Nature Reserve: This wetland reserve is famous for its birdwatching opportunities.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ALAMY, FLPA, GETTY

Food and drink

Mention Somerset to a gourmand and the first word you'll hear is 'cider'. The county is famous for producing the gold stuff, and there are plenty of places around where you can taste and buy local varieties. Other specialities to pack in your lunchbox include Cheddar cheese and brioche-style buns known as Sally Lunn's.



Top visitor attractions

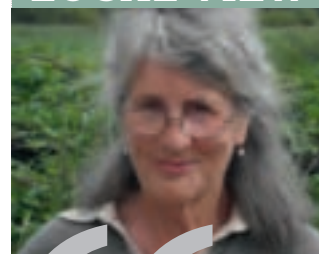
Cheddar Gorge (left): Discover an eerie world of stalactites, stalagmites and underground lakes.

Glastonbury Abbey: Once the oldest and richest abbey in England, this elegant building retains its majesty, even as a ruin. The 36 acres of parkland surrounding the site lend themselves to relaxed rambling.

Bath: With its Roman baths, exquisite Regency crescents and famous abbey, Bath is one of the UK's most visited cities. Longleat, Stonehenge and the caves of Wookey Hole are all nearby.

Dunster Castle: This castle is well worth incorporating into a coastal ramble around the Minehead area.

LOCAL VIEW



“The Glastonbury Tor, rising above the Somerset Levels, is the view that I cherish. It is especially evocative on a misty morning. Only the tower remains of the chapel of St Michael on the summit. It has been a vital landmark for travellers from the earliest times till today.

Margaret Nuth, local historian

Join a walk...

Sevenside Ramblers is organising a 13km/8-mile walk around Glastonbury on Sunday 31 August. Meet at Aldi in Bradley Stoke at 9am to join in.

LOCAL RAMBLERS GROUP

Somerset Ramblers (www.somsetramblers.co.uk).

BEST LOCAL GUIDEBOOK

Pathfinder Guides: Somerset, the Mendips & Wiltshire (£11.99, Crimson Publishing, ISBN 978 1854585295).

FURTHER INFO

www.visitsomerset.co.uk

Wildlife highlights

Polecat:

Returning to Somerset in 2005, these ferretty creatures have been spotted in the area around Collard Hill.

Otter: The streams and wetlands of the Somerset Levels are a haven for otters. Aim for a ramble at dawn or dusk for the best chance of seeing one.

Stoat: Look for them in open, grassy fields bordered by woods. You can tell a stoat from a weasel by its black tail tips.

Osprey: These large birds of prey haunt streams, rivers and lakes. They've been seen around the caves at Cheddar and on the Somerset Levels.

