

## Moors for the Future

### South Western Approaches Audio Trail – Geoff Sumner

Welcome to a 10 mile walk in a quieter part of the National Park across moorland, valley and forest with beautiful panoramic views across the Cheshire plain and the Welsh hills.

With luck and depending on the time of the year you are doing the walk you may get chance to see or hear a wide range of moorland flora and fauna. In spring and summer the sight and sound of curlew, and golden plover over many of the moors you will be crossing is not uncommon. Lapwings may also be seen though not quite as common on this route. Buzzards are possible but quite rare in the area and you will undoubtedly see a number of kestrel. The forest has many different birds from the siskins singing high up in the conifers to woodpeckers, spotted flycatcher and even crossbill. Herons are also on the menu but more of that later.

On even rarer occasions you may see red deer in the forest but this is unusual during daylight hours.

The walk is in the strenuous category as there are a number of steep climbs although mostly on reasonably good paths.

As you would expect in moorland country there are some places that get quite boggy in wet weather so come prepared for this. Rain, wind and sun can all come in quantities that mean you need good protection with you. Navigation can also get quite tricky so bring a map and compass and make sure you know how to use them. You will also need to take care crossing roads on the walk especially at the start of the walk which is alongside the now infamous A537 Cat and Fiddle road that links Buxton with Macclesfield.

I have chosen a number of points of interest along the route that hopefully will make your day more enjoyable.

#### **1. Cat & Fiddle**

Our starting point is the Cat and Fiddle pub on the busy A537 Buxton to Macclesfield Road. Here there is a small lay-by (note this is not the pub car park opposite) and a bus stop.

At 510m or 1690 feet the Cat & Fiddle is the second highest pub in England – only the Tan Hill Inn is higher on the northern edge of the Yorkshire Dales National Park at 1732 feet.

They are both set in very similar beautiful moorland scenery surrounded by heathers moors and the calls of red grouse. Can you hear any today?

The Cat & Fiddle was built by a Macclesfield banker in 1831 and there has been much argument about how it got its name. Some say a friend of the banker said it was situated high enough for the nursery rhyme cow to jump

over the moon; some that the Duke of Devonshire practiced his fiddle playing there, and others that it was named after an English knight who held Calais and was called Caton Fidele. This last idea also fits a story that it was actually French prisoners who named it whilst they were repairing roads in the area at the time the pub was built. There are a number of other ideas from children's ball games to even links to Tsar Peter the Great's wife Catherine le Fidele and Henry VIII's first wife Cathereine Aragon- Fidelis. – perhaps you've got some of your own too.

## 2.Chest Hollows

Chest Hollows holds a concession path, reached opposite the entrance to the Peak View café, which is not marked on the OS map. It has a name that apparently comes from the meaning 'disputed land in a hollow', and is on a line of ancient holloways which you will follow toward Forest Chapel.

Once you get lower down you will see below you close to the river an old sheep fold. Further on is a new gate linking this path to the moorland opposite which is now in Open Access. Since September 2004 open access land has more than doubled in the Peak District and the area that you are walking through today has been effected as much as any other in the Park. The new OS maps have shaded in the new access areas and signs have been placed to help you know where the boundaries are at key entry points.

Keep your eyes peeled for interesting bird life – this is one of those areas where any of the moorland birds may appear. During 2004, Moors for the Future conducted a moorland breeding bird survey that repeated one undertaken in 1990. The results returned mixed results. The Twite which breed in the uplands and returns to the coast to overwinter has suffered a major reduction in both range and numbers. This mirrors the national picture for this bird and it has been as a result it is categorised as a red data book species, meaning it requires urgent conservation action. However it is not all bad news, both Curlew which has a bubbling call and Lapwing also known as the `peewit` because of its wheezing song are now more prevalent. Another bird of interest here is the Golden Plover where 27 breeding pairs were recorded on the South West moorlands of the Peak Park.

Birds are excellent indicators of positive and negative changes in habitat condition and this will help to identify efficient conservation and recreation management planning for sustainable Moors for the Future.

## 3.Chamber Farm

As you approach the fields above Chambers Farm at Bottom-of-the-Oven you will have seen evidence of the Holloway route as you turned west off the Torgate Farm path. Clearer examples are laid before you as you cross the last ladder stile above the farm and see evidence of two holloways next to each other. In the distance across the valley you can see the link holloway leading up to Forest Chapel. Yes – you are going up there!

Many of these old routes were used by drovers, packhorses or in some cases highwaymen. They are often linked to the salt trade as packhorses were used

to carry the salt from the mines in Northwich across the Pennines to the towns of Sheffield and Chesterfield and beyond. Some of these packhorse trains had as many as 50 horses in them so path erosion is not just a 21<sup>st</sup> century issue.

You may also have noticed that the sheep in these fields look slightly different from the Swaledales higher up on the moors. These are the rare mountain breed Woodland White Face, originally bred in the Hope Valley for their fine fleece which is said to be the finest of all the mountain breeds.

If you are wondering about the name Bottom-of-the-Oven – we're not too sure but the best answer seems to involve an ancient bread oven that served the local community from here. One of the local roads is also called Oven House Lane.

#### **4.Forest Chapel**

This attractively located church is definitely worth the pull up the hill from Bottom-of-the-Oven. Follow the old trackway that leads off to the right on the newly appointed 'quiet lane' opposite Chambers Farm.

St Stephens Church is famous for its annual rush bearing ceremony carried out in the middle of August each year. It is said that this date was chosen to coincide with the start of the shooting season and the availability of the local landowner, the Earl of Derby, to attend the event.

The ceremony is said to predate the Great Plague of 1660 but was abandoned after the Black Death for fear of spreading disease.

It is based on the old custom of covering church floors with rushes which needed periodic removal and replacing.

The church itself was first built in 1673 and then rebuilt in 1834. Only the louvres in the tower remain from the original church. It is built of a pink crystalline stone, Chatsworth Grit, that was quarried locally at Teggs Nose and Rainow.

As you leave the hamlet, heading along the lane towards the forest, look back to the barn on the left hand side of the road and you will see an unusual shaped nest box on the side of the barn. It has been used by kestrels that are often seen in the adjacent fields.

#### **5.Macclesfield Forest and Trentabank Reservoir**

Take the footpath at the edge of the forest, on the left of the lane, leading sharply downhill. Now aim for our next destination the layby by Trentabank Reservoir opposite the remarkable heronry.

Today Macclesfield Forest is owned by United Utilities as it is a catchment area for the four reservoirs lower down the valley. Its 1000 acres are planted mainly with sitka spruce but there are also many larch trees, Norway spruce, lodgepole pine, Scot's Pine and Corsican pine.

More space is now being devoted to broadleaf trees in a 60 year management plan that aims for 25% of the forest to be deciduous by 2050.

The current forest was only planted after the reservoirs were built. Before then it was a typical open moorland farming scene with over a dozen farms surviving off the land. However, the area has been linked to forests since Norman times. At the time of the Norman Conquest it was in the hands of the Earl of Chester who developed it in the 11<sup>th</sup> century as a hunting ground for Norman knights..

It went back to the Crown in the 13<sup>th</sup> century as a Royal Forest but by the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century much of the land had become enclosed for agriculture especially sheep farming.

Turning our attention to the reservoir - Trentabank was the last of the four reservoirs to be built being completed in 1929. Ridgegate reservoir was built in 1850 along with Bottoms reservoir , whilst Teggs Nose reservoir came along in 1870. The two main reservoirs (Ridgegate and Trentabank) were built to meet the growing water demand from the rapidly industrialising Macclesfield but the other two were compensations reservoirs for the River Bollin.

This area is like many on the edge of the Peak District which have led to over 55 reservoirs of 2 hectares or more providing essential water supplies for many of the cities and towns around the Peak.

Trentabank reservoir was actually named after the farm that now lies under its northern bank. In the 1830s the farm was recorded as Tenter Bank - a name which has some interesting history attached to it as tenter was a wooden frame for stretching cloth by hooks and bent nails from which the term 'on tenterhooks' is derived indicating someone left in suspense. It comes from the latin term 'tendre' to stretch.

The whole forest water catchment provides nearly 2 million gallons of water per day. Trentabank itself holds 134million gallons and covers around 23 acres.

Looking across the water from the lay-by towards the larch trees opposite you may well spot herons in the trees especially if you are visiting between January and April. It is surprising to see such large birds nesting high up in what looks like a precarious position. But each year around 20 pairs nest there which makes it the biggest heronry in the Peak District.

## **6.Shutlingsloe**

Time to move on. Looking behind you, across the road you will see the footpath sign to Shutlingsloe. Be prepared for a steep climb through the forest and then out onto open moorland for the final ascent to the trig point.

At 506m, 1659 feet, Shutlingsloe is a definite objective and one of the few peaks in the Peak District. It is thought to be named after a pre-Roman tribe of Britons called the Scythingas and was once called Scyttels Hill – possibly after one of its leaders.

It's main feature, apart from being called Cheshire's Matterhorn by the locals because of its shape, is undoubtedly its breathtaking views. They make the fairly steep climb out from the forest worth all the effort.

Did you see any grouse or lapwing in the fields on the approach to the summit? There is often something to see over the moor. This moor was used to raise some black grouse quite recently but you are unlikely to see any of them now.

Once you are at the trig point on the summit you have one of the best views before you in the whole of the Peak District. Out to the west you have great views across the Cheshire plain to the Clwydian Hills and the Snowdon range – assuming of course you have been lucky with the weather!

Winter Hill with its tall aerial mast can be seen to the north west of Manchester whilst Fiddlers Ferry power station points the way towards Liverpool on the far horizon over 40 miles away. On a good day with binoculars you can make out both cathedrals in Liverpool – just to the left of the power station.

The saucer shaped dish of Jodrell Bank, the astronomical telescope, is unmistakable in the middle distance, almost due west. Beyond this the Peckforton Range reach out to cut across the Cheshire Plain and end in the unique outcrop that hosts Beeston Castle.

Turning our attention south - beyond Tittesworth Reservoir which is to the right of the Roaches escarpment, you can just see the rise of Cannock Chase on the far skyline. Moving along to the right you then find the unmistakable outcrop of the Wrekin at Telford and then the Long Mynd. You can even see Snowdon itself on a clear day nearly 90 miles away.

Closer to us are the telecommunications tower at Croker Hill and the distinctive outlines of Bosley Cloud and Mow Cop.

Looking to the north you find the highest point of Cheshire in the shape of Shining Tor at 559m , 1834 feet, whilst towards the south east you find the highest point of Staffordshire, Oliver Hill at 1684 feet. . Shining Tor is one example where the Moors for the Future Partnership are establishing footpaths to prevent poor drainage and the problems of ever-widening paths that ultimately lead to the erosion of this fragile ecosystem and the disturbance of wildlife.

Use the panorama diagram embedded in the rock just north of the trig point to help you with your identification of the hills.

You might want to follow the trail over the summit to find a sheltered spot for a break – be careful here as the path can be quite tricky especially in wet weather or in icy conditions.

Have you noticed the large country house on the slopes of the valley opposite? This is Crag Hall the country home of the Earl of Derby and the Stanley family whose main residence is at Speke in Liverpool. The valley of Wildboarclough belonged to the Stanley family from the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Henry VI made John Stanley the Steward of the forest. Did you notice the pub called the Stanley Arms close to Bottom-of-the-Oven earlier?

Below the Hall, by the river, it may be surprising to learn that this was a hive of industry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as it was home to three mills that at different points in their lives printed calico cloth from Macclesfield and then carpets. At one stage over 600 people were employed there. It is a remarkable comparison that Wildboarclough, the biggest parish in Cheshire, now has one of the smallest populations at just over 200.

After water power was replaced by steam the village of Wildboarclough became a ghost town and eventually the mills were demolished. One part of the mill complex survived to become the largest sub-post office in the country and is now a private house.

Having caught your breath leave the trig point and head east over the rocky edge – take care especially when it is wet or icy.

### **7.Clough House**

As you join the road by Clough House farm turn left to enter Cumberland Brook via the public car park, thereby avoiding entering the Clough House farmyard. As you cross the stream, Clough Brook, it is hard to imagine that this became a raging torrent in 1989 leading to one death and the terraced cottages in Wildboarclough being besieged by water up to their bedroom windows.

This in fact allows us to deal with the name of Wildboarclough for although it would be nice, as some people think, for it to be the place where the last wildboar was killed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it is much more likely that the name comes from the use of bore as an old English word for hillside or even more likely a wild stream.

Just recently one of the local farmers has begun to farm boar on the lower slopes of Shutlingsloe so perhaps the sight of wildboars in the clough has not gone for ever!

What's that rustling noise behind you?

Moving on quickly you will soon be in the attractive valley of Cumberland Brook which you follow until the right-angled bend where you go left, leaving the track in favour of the inviting footpath.

Your final stop is at the Peak District and Northern Counties Footpaths Preservation Society sign on Danebower where the footpath joins the bridleway.

### **8.Danebower**

As we approach the final leg of our walk we are back on the wild moorland, home from March to August to curlew, plover and snipe as well as the usual red grouse. If during this period you haven't seen any yet it may be worth taking some time to rest and listen. The birds will be busy nesting and taking care of their young so be careful where you walk and keep your dogs under close control.

As the wading birds leave their summer breeding grounds and head back to the coast the moors begin to take on another mantle as they turn bright purple due to the flowering heather and the last of the speckled white display from the cotton grass. There are indeed two species of cottongrass found in the Peak District – the single headed Hares Tail cottongrass and the many headed common cottongrass. What species can you see? Due to the unnaturally acid soil caused by air pollution over the last 300 years, cottongrass has difficulty naturally germinating on the higher moors and as a result Moors for the Future has an ongoing programme with volunteers to grow both species from seed. Once established in green houses around the National Park, they are then planted on the bare areas of peat that have suffered from accidental summer fires.

While many of the moors of the Peak District are shaped by carefully managed winter burning it is summer fires started by carelessly discarded cigarettes and even arson that pose the single biggest threat to this rare, but so accessible habitat. If you do see a fire on the moors please contact the fire service on 999 and if possible contact the nearest dwelling.

These peat bogs are becoming as rare as some of the worlds most prized habitats and yet are so easily accessible.

Where there is peat there is often coal and this area of the Peak District running from the Goyt Valley, along Axe Edge and into Goldsitch Moss is no exception. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century especially a number of small mines were opened up and just below us close to the junction of Cumberland Brook where we turned off the track onto the footpath, there was one such mine.

As we reach the end of the walk and look back over the day we find that even in this wild moorland country people and industry have shaped much of what we see from farms, to reservoirs and from highways to mines. Even the wildlife is a result of mans intervention whether that be from maintaining the heather moors for grouse shooting , providing sheep pasture or managing forests.

I do hope you have enjoyed this walk and that the weather has been kind to you, perhaps you would like to try another listed on the website and find out more about the past, present and future of this special landscape.