

# WILD swimming *Walks*

Dartmoor and South Devon  
28 lake, river and  
beach days out

Sophie Pierce  
Matt Newbury



# WILD swimming *Walks*

Dartmoor and South Devon  
28 lake, river and  
beach days out

## WILD SWIMMING WALKS

Leads you on 28 adventures into the beautiful scenery and wild swimming paradise of Dartmoor and South Devon. Discover wooded river pools and tumbling waterfalls, secret coves and amazing sea caves, safe in the company of Devon's two most intrepid and fun-loving explorers.

All the walking routes include places to swim and ideas for pubs and refreshments along the route.



**WILD  
THINGS**  
PUBLISHING





Sophie Pierce lives on the edge of Dartmoor and started the South Devon Wild Swimming Club after getting caught in a rip-current during a New Year's Day dip. She has worked as a reporter for the BBC for 20 years.



Matt Newbury is a writer and marketing specialist born and raised in Devon. He has completed many swimming challenges including escaping from Alcatraz and swimming to the Isle of Wight.



Sophie and Matt are authors of *Beyond the Beach: the secret wild swims of Torbay*.

If you like *Wild Swimming Walks* you might also like these other titles from **WildThingsPublishing.com**



# WILD SWIMMING SAFETY



**S**plan your walk, taking necessary supplies and protection; don't forget water, a map, compass and waterproofs, especially on the moor.

Remember that cold water can limit your swimming endurance. If it is your first outdoor swim of the season, be careful to enter the water slowly and acclimatise. Stay close to the shore until you are comfortable. Wear a wetsuit for added warmth and buoyancy. Do not overestimate your ability. Remember that the cold water quickly creates hypothermia – shivering is the first stage.

Don't enter water without first establishing an exit point, especially in fast-flowing water. Never jump or dive into water without first checking the depth and whether there are any obstructions. Even if you have jumped/dived there before, always check every time. Large obstructions like tree branches and rocks move about underwater and an area that was previously clear may well be blocked.

Swim in a group wherever possible or, if swimming alone, let people know your movements and take extra special care.

Take extra care following heavy rainfall, when rivers might be in spate and flowing much faster than normal.

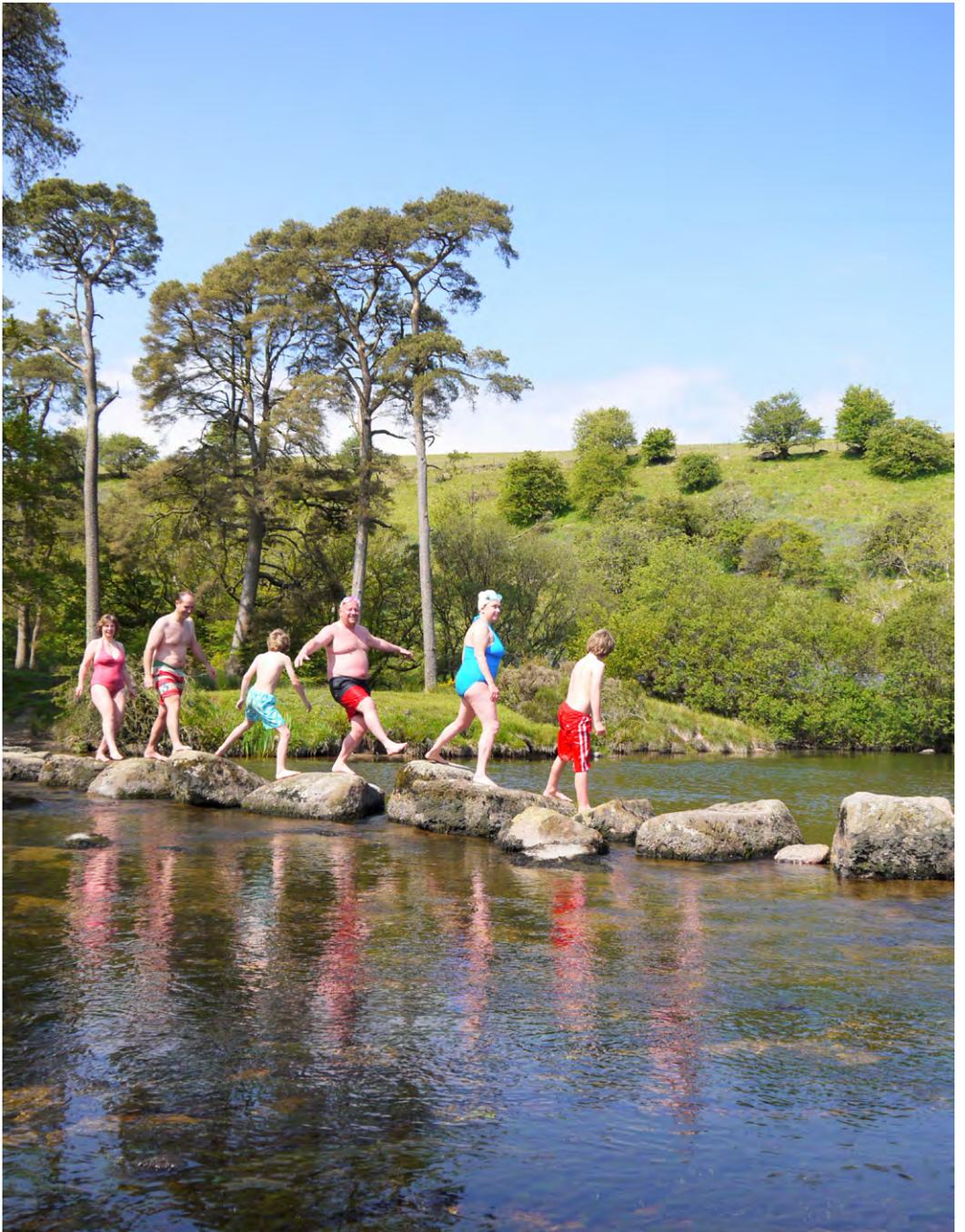
Watch out in high surf - rip-currents can form which take you out to sea, to behind the breaking waves. Swim perpendicularly from them to escape, then body-surf back in.

Beware of tidal currents, especially near estuary mouths and around headlands, especially at mid-tide, and on fortnightly spring tides, when flows are strongest.

If you are concerned about water quality, cover cuts and open wounds with plasters and do not swim front crawl.

## TIDES AND WEATHER CONDITIONS FOR SOUTH DEVON

When planning a swim on the South Devon coast, it's very useful to look at the wind forecast as well as the tides. If you want calm water, you need to know which way the wind is coming from. The prevailing winds in Devon are south westerly, and if this is the case, then choose a swim spot that faces east. Conversely, if the winds are easterly, then it's a good idea to pick a west or south west facing beach. The principle here is that you don't want the wind blowing from the sea onto the land, as the sea is more likely to be rough. Tides are of course very important. Before you go, find out what the tide is doing; it is important to know whether it's going out or coming in. The interesting thing to note about tides in South Devon is that on spring tides (the biggest tides, occurring at the time of the full and new moons), high water will always be at about 6pm, while low water will always be at about noon.



## Walk 9

# THE STEPPING STONES WALK: SHERBERTON, THE WEST DART, THE EAST DART AND HEXWORTHY BRIDGE

This route includes standing stones, mines, open moor and woods, combining peaceful and more popular spots on the West and East Dart Rivers.

**A**s you set off down the lane, enjoying the vistas over open moor out towards Princetown, there is an interesting little detour into Dartmoor's mining history. After 100 metres there is a track leading off to the left, and 50 metres up the track on the right are some well-preserved remains of the 19th century Gobbett tin mine. These include round stones with holes for grinding ore in a crazing mill, and a stone with an indentation, which was a mortar for crushing tin ore.

Back on the main route, you pass Wydemeet on the right, an elegant house which was built in 1914 as a fishing lodge. It later became an adventure centre, and then the home of the famous Polar explorer Pen Hadow. More recently it has been a bed and breakfast, but at the time of writing was up for sale.

As you walk along near Wydemeet you may notice huge tree trunks lying by the road. They're from a sawmill set up by Anton Coaker of Sherberton Farm, which is just nearby. He's a bit of a local celebrity, who has a weekly column in the *Western Morning News*. He's the fifth generation of his family to farm there, and as well as producing sheep and cattle, he's diversified by starting the sawmill and a granite supply operation.

Sherberton Farm is interesting because it's one of the so-called 'ancient tenements' of Dartmoor. These are among the earliest surviving farms on the Moor, established in the 14th century, when certain farmers were allowed to settle and enclose areas of the Forest of Dartmoor. There were seven of these tenements around

### INFORMATION

**DISTANCE:** 7 miles

**TIME:** 4-5 hours

**MAP:** OS Explorer Dartmoor OL28

**START POINT:** Car park ( SX650 727, L20 6SD); it's quite remote.

From Venford Reservoir, drive north west for about two miles and take the first turning left signposted Sherberton. There is a car parking area shortly along on the right just before the cattle grid.

**END POINT:** Car park

**PUBLIC TRANSPORT:** None

**SWIMMING:** Swincombe Meet (SX 647 737), East Dart (SX 671 742), Hexworthy Bridge (SX 658 729)

**PLACES OF INTEREST:**

Dunnabridge Pound, Laughter Man Standing Stone, Dartmeet, St Raphael's Church

**REFRESHMENTS:** Badger's Holt, Dartmeet, a former fishing lodge with tables outside along the river bank, specialising in cream teas (01364 631213, PL20 6SG). Brimpts Farm, Dartmeet has a tearoom, bunkhouse and camping (0845 0345968, PL20 6SG)

*Wellies or good waterproof boots are advisable for this walk. The route includes three sets of stepping stones which may be covered after heavy rain, and some boggy areas of moor alongside the Swincombe.*

the West Dart, including Sherberton. In return for their right to enclose and graze their animals, the farmers had various duties including rounding up stray cattle and ponies (the ‘drifts’) and impounding them at Dunnabridge Pound, which we will see later on the walk. If you want to look at the farm you can do a short detour up the road just by the first set of stepping stones.

This first set of stones – across the River Swincombe ② - is a bit of a warm-up to the next set, which is a lot bigger. Stepping stones tend to be referred to simply as ‘steps’ on Dartmoor. They’re great fun, but can be tricky to cross, especially if they’re wet and you don’t have a great sense of balance. So take care and if in doubt, wade! You don’t want a broken ankle at this stage of the game.

Thread your way through a boggy area, following the river downstream, and after 10 minutes you will reach a sedate bend in the West Dart where the Swincombe joins it. This is known as Swincombe Meet ③. Framed by pine trees this is a beautiful place for a picnic and, of course, a swim. We call it the ‘Winnie the Pooh place’ on account of the pine trees. It’s easiest to cross the stepping stones and swim from the other side where there is a ‘beach’. In the spring the hillsides around are carpeted with bluebells and it could not be more idyllic. It’s fun to snorkel too and spot numerous trout, and if you’ve got small children they can have fun fishing for minnows in the shallows.

The walk continues with the West Dart on your left, before you reach the main road where you will see the magnificent Dunnabridge Pound ④, which is thought to date back to the Bronze Age. In medieval times it was used to impound animals, which were rounded up during the drifts. The most noteworthy and intriguing thing about it is a granite ‘seat’ that looks as though it was made from some

of the smaller bits of Stonehenge. It’s known as the Judge’s Chair, and old Dartmoor legend has it that it came from the Stannary Parliament at Crockern Tor, over to the west. This idea seems to have been largely discredited but it does seem likely that, as William Crossing suggests in his *Guide to Dartmoor*, some enterprising farmer in the past used ancient dolmens found on the moor to construct a shelter for those who were looking after the animals in the pound. Further on in the walk we will see a standing stone and a stone row, so it seems eminently possible that these could have been used. You can just imagine the farmers of the past sheltering in the chair from the unforgiving Dartmoor weather.

From the pound, you head onto the open moor, following the stone track. There are great views; to the west is Crockern Tor, the meeting place of the Stannary Parliament, and the impressive Longaford and High White Tors to the north. Cresting the hill, Bellever Tor also appears. After passing through a second gate, note the impressive standing stone to your left below Laughter Tor. This is known as the Laughter Man, or originally, the Lough Tor Maen. There is also an incomplete stone row of at least five stones, which is very well camouflaged among the gorse and marram grass, but is satisfying to find.

The walk then takes you through coniferous forest, which was planted in the 1920s by the Duchy of Cornwall. Opinions vary as to whether this was a good thing. You wind down through the woods, going past elegant Laughter Hole House, with its beautiful manicured gardens, a contrast to the wilderness that surrounds it. Back in 2003 an estate agent was fined for describing it as a property with a royal connection, claiming it had once been King Edward VIII’s hunting lodge. In fact, it was built in 1912 for Raleigh Phillpotts, who was a distant

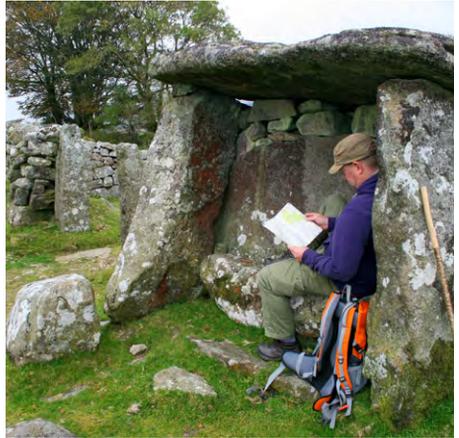
relation of the author Eden Phillpotts, who wrote many novels about Dartmoor.

You then cross the third set of stepping stones ⑥ of the walk, before heading up and through Babeny Farm. This is another of the ancient tenements, like Sherberton at the beginning of the walk, and is currently occupied by the fourth generation of Wilkinsons, who operate it as a successful riding stables.

The walk then takes you down the East Dart to Dartmeet ⑨. There are several swimming spots, but the best can be found where the valley opens out, the river slows and there are large grassy areas ⑧. Nowhere is particularly deep, so it's more fun for plunging and playing, but nevertheless it is an idyllic place to stop. As you near Dartmeet it gets busier, particularly at the weekends and during the holidays. There is an ice cream shop and the Badger's Holt restaurant which serves meals or cream teas in high season. Dartmeet is one of those 'honeypot' spots where the majority of people seem happy to sit by their cars. It also has the remains of a once-spectacular clapper bridge.

Moving on from Dartmeet, you reach the very special St Raphael's Church ⑩, which is usually open. It is particularly beautiful in spring, when it is surrounded by snowdrops. Inside, it is austere but stunning, and, unusually, has a wood burning stove. It was built in 1869 as a mission chapel for those who lived too far away from the main parish church at Lydford. It was designed to be both a place of worship and a school; the wooden desks are still in place today, and used as pews.

Shortly after the church you will come to another swimming spot, at Hexworthy Bridge which was sketched by JMW Turner when he visited Dartmoor. The river bends beautifully here, and



you can have a lovely swim, especially in the deeper part on the outside of the bend. You may well have spectators, as this is another honeypot where people like to park their cars and have a picnic.

After a refreshing dip, it's a short walk back to where you started.

## DIRECTIONS

**1** From the car park, cross the cattle grid and head west down the lane. You reach a bridge over the River Swincombe. Cross it, and turn right onto a public bridleway, and then cross back over the Swincombe via the first set of stepping stones.

**0.6 miles**

**2** Walk with the river on your left, until you reach the second set of stepping stones.

**0.3 miles**

**3** Cross over. This is the first swimming spot, Swincombe Meet. After your swim, walk on with the river on your left, and then bear right, following the path uphill to the road.

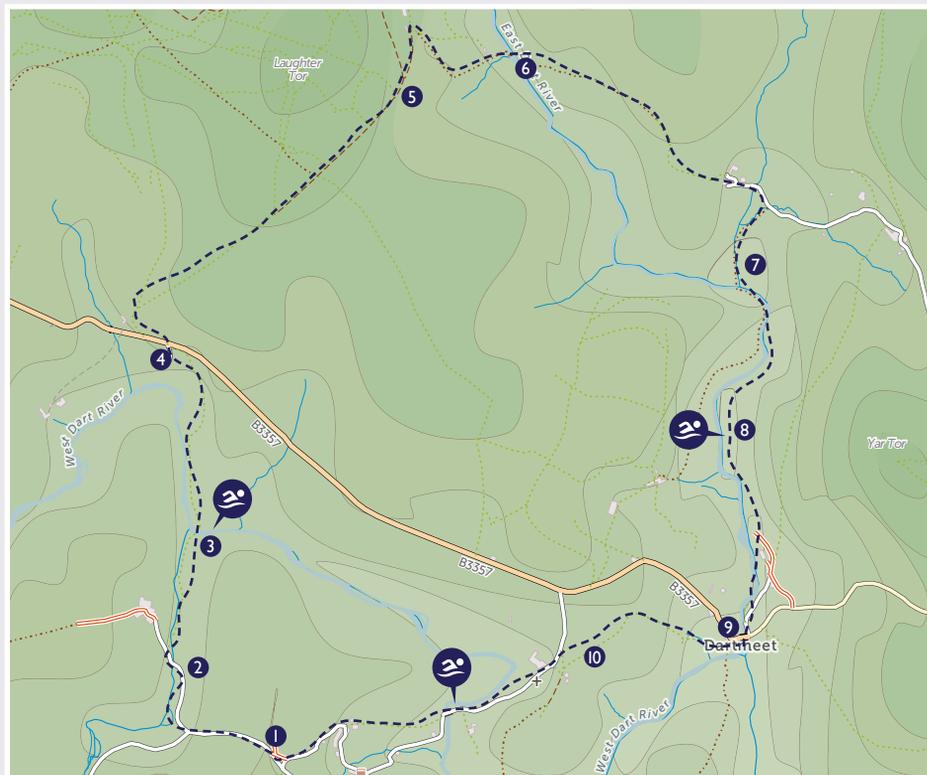
**0.6 miles**

**4** At the road turn left and cross the cattle bridge. Stop to admire Dunnabridge Pound. Follow the outside wall of the pound to the west and pass through a gate onto the open moor. Take the

well-defined stone track ahead of you which bears right gently uphill, signposted Public Bridlepath Laughter Hole Farm. Follow the path all the way to the pine forest.

**0.9 miles**

**5** Go through the gate and take the track which forks to the right downhill. At the bottom of the house on the left, turn right, almost back on yourself, following the sign that says Public Bridlepath



to Sherrill via Babeny. Do not follow the track to the right. Follow the path downhill, through a five-bar gate, and over a footbridge, until you reach a set of stepping stones over the East Dart.

### 0.5 miles

**6** Follow the path up the side of the hill, pass through a gate onto a well signposted bridle path and after 20 minutes you will walk through Babeny Farm.

### 0.7 miles

**7** Pass over a bridge which spans a lovely rocky cascade and after a few minutes, when you reach a car turning space, cross over a small stream and follow it downhill to re-join the East Dart.

### 0.4 miles

**8** Follow the East Dart downstream (with the river on your right) towards Dartmeet. The best swimming spot is where there is a large grass clearing.

### 1 mile

**9** At Dartmeet, cross the bridge to an old garage on the left and follow the Huccaby path between the buildings and through a gate. Then follow the path right uphill until you come to another gate and keep right again, into a rock-walled track. At the top of the hill cross the field to the barns of Huccaby Farm. Keep right on the track and then turn left onto the road. Ahead is the small but perfectly formed church of St Raphael.

### 0.6 miles



**10** Keep on the road and you will shortly arrive at Hexworthy Bridge, another lovely swimming spot. After the bridge, turn right immediately over a stone stile. Head over green fields and stone stiles until you come to the tiny

hamlet of Hexworthy. Take the track to the right, between the thatched cottages, and follow this uphill for 10 minutes. At the top bear right and you will be back at the car park.

### 1 mile