

DARTMOOR TRACKS.

LECTURE BY MR. R. HANSFORD WORTH, M.INST.C.E., F.G.S.

(Given December 13th, 1934.)

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THE simplest, and probably the only useful, classification of tracks on an open moorland is into the discontinuous and the continuous.

It will be found that on Dartmoor the discontinuous tracks serve always to avoid or circumvent some natural obstacle, a mire, a tract of "vaen", a clitter of rocks or the passage of a stream. With slight exception, wherever such obstacles exist, those who are moor-wise will have no difficulty in finding the safe and convenient way readily defined to their use.

Some few of these passes are the work of man, especially at fording places, but the great majority have been formed by successive generations of grazing animals. The cattle, sheep and ponies range widely; even sheep which have adopted a lair are constantly on the move within their accepted limits. In passing from place to place the animals meet the patches of unfavourable ground and seek the nearest safe going; thus their traffic marks out tracks, and as such tracks become marked they are consistently followed. Even in the bracken, which can be a sufficient obstacle, once the ponies have forced their way through they tend to follow the same course again and again; labour saving is not a merely human habit.

Once past the obstacle such tracks may quickly be lost, but from favourite pasture to favourite pasture they may be defined over considerable distances, and on steep hillsides there are also continuous tracks; sidelong ground is yet another form of obstacle. The hillside tracks are usually multiple, one above the other on the slope, in approximately parallel lines.

The feature of all these cattle tracks, except river crossings, is that they contour the ground, it is extremely rare to find a track which breasts a hill.

Of continuous tracks there are two classes, those which starting from the margin of the moor reach a defined point within its area, and there cease ; and those which traverse the moor from enclosed land to enclosed land.

The first class may have one of three intents, access to turbaries for fuel, with which may be joined access to the banks of streams for the purpose of gathering rushes ; access to mining works, quarries or clay pits ; and roads for the driving of cattle to the pastures.

There are two ways known as "Blacklane" and one as "Blackwood Path", all of which, whatever their other uses, appear to have been for the conveyance of turf or peat. The Blacklane which has given its name to Blacklane Brook which joins the Erme near the head of that river is also used for cattle driving, but, indeed, there are none of these ways but are used for all purposes to which they may be convenient.

A well marked track passes over the western flank of Piles Hill and Three Barrows in the Erme valley, and at Three Barrows it has been described as being paved. It leads to turf ties near the Redlake, and there is no evidence of purposeful paving. The ground at Three Barrows is a mass of loose stone, a clitter of very small blocks, with practically no soil. Indeed, stone for the Redlake railway was derived by direct excavation from this area and it was quite unnecessary to screen the material before it was sent to the breaker. In such ground constant traffic beats down the surface to the semblance of a pavement.

The mine tracks are all relatively late in their present form ; there is no evidence of any defined way to the old stream-works. Some of the roads to Eylesboro Mine are probably formed on old tracks, but of this there is no certainty. The roads to Knack Mine on the Taw and to Forest Mine on the West Ockment may also be in part coincident with old tracks.

Dartmoor in the old days had advantages, relative only, as a means of passage between the enclosed lands by which it is surrounded. The open moor, notwithstanding its exposure, and despite its mires and bogs, was more suitable for pack-horse traffic than the deep and miry lanes of the in-country. One could circumvent a Dartmoor bog, but to the unfathomable mud of the Devonshire lane of the day one was confined by the hedges. Even in the days of the waywardens, who had power to enter lands and take stone and sand for the roads, and

who could call upon the parishioners, according to their ability, to provide labour, carts, waines, tumbrells, dung pots or Courts, sleads, carres or drags for transport, there were but six days in each year appointed, on which there was a levy of labour and transport throughout each parish, men, horses and oxen, drays, dung pots, etc. Six days of energy, three hundred and fifty nine days neglect, and one can imagine the result. Little wonder that the way from Plymouth to Exeter lay across the open Moor, rather than by the roads of the South Hams. Matters were much as in Hayti, where the Negro Republic formerly held that "the good Lord destroyed the roads by his storms, and in His good time would repair them." In 1411, Bishop Stafford sanctioned the description of a road from Plymouth as "deep and full of mire, exceeding perilous and harmful to travellers and toilers thereby." Risdon bears testimony to the condition of such Devon roads as existed in his time, writing :—"This country, as it is spacious, so it is populous, and very laborious, rough and unpleasant to strangers travelling those ways, which are cumbersome and uneven, amongst stones and rocks, painful for man and horse : as they can bear witness who have made trial thereof. For be they never so well mounted on horses out of other countries, when they have travelled one journey in these parts, they can, in respect of ease of travel, forbear a second." He adds, as a silver lining to the cloud—"and therefore so much the less passable for the enemy with his troops of war." In which respect it has to be remarked that the disability cut both ways, and Raleigh was driven to report that ordnance could not be brought to Plymouth by land, by reason of the badness of the roads.

There is no room for wonder that, even as late as 1699-1700, the Corporation of Plymouth paid two pounds "towards defraying the charges of "putting vpp Moorestones on Dartmoor in the way leading from Plymouth towards Exon for guidance of Travellers passing that way."

Donn's Map of Devon, published in 1765, shows such stones along the track from Peak Hill to Two Bridges, along a track from Merrivale Bridge to Hexworthy, and along the track to Tavistock from Moreton, at the Moreton end ; thirteen stones are still to be seen between the stone rows above Merrivale and a point east of Foggintor Quarry, two others remain at Hexworthy. These Merrivale-Hexworthy stones are inscribed

T on the one side and A on the other.¹ Their average distance apart was 200 yards.

Writing in 1800, Martin Dunsford of Tiverton said² :—
 “The tracks over the Moor before the new roads were made, were marked by high stones, placed about a mile asunder, but just discernible in good weather from one another.” The present existing stones and the evidence of the map lead one to believe that he greatly overestimated the distance. He added—
 “Tho’ a company of five or six of us, at mid-day, in the midst of summer, we missed at one time, the next stone mark, and wandered an hour in different parties, in search of the road, making signals to each other ; and we should perhaps have wandered ’till night, if a cutter of turf we met, had not led us to the right path.” One is not so impressed with the difficulties the party encountered after reading, a few pages later, that one of his party, on mounting his horse found himself with his head toward the tail of the steed, and that several successive essays produced a similar effect.

The train-bands on their way from Exeter to Plymouth passed through Ashburton and Buckfastleigh, by Yalland Farm to Shipley, crossed the Avon, and proceeded by way of Diamond Lane, across the moor by Ball Gate to the ford at Glasscombe Corner, thence by Spurrells Cross to Harford Moor Gate where they returned to the enclosed lands.

Such late uses of moorland tracks, and the undoubted needs of far earlier years, make it unnecessary to invoke the priors or the monks as the great track-makers. It is more probable that, long before the monasteries existed the principal tracks were already well defined. The hands of the monks may well be traceable in the more numerous crosses which mark the southern tracks of Dartmoor. Wayside crosses are not unknown elsewhere, but are much more closely set in the south. None the less, it would be of interest to know when the “traditional” “Abbot’s Way” first received that name ; and why its alleged course from Buckfast to Nuns Cross is unmarked by crosses, if we except Huntingdon Cross, by Wallabrook foot. It is not the best route from Buckfast to Nuns Cross, involving as it does the crossing of the Avon, at times a very inconvenient river. If the Abbot of Buckfast did sponsor a way, it was by Holne across Holne Ridge to Horns Cross, thence over Horse

¹ Tavistock and Ashburton respectively.

² M. Dunsford, *Miscellaneous Observations in the course of five Tours*, Tiverton, 1800.

Ford on the O Brook to the two crosses on Down Ridge, and so to the cross on Ter Hill, continuing by way of Mount Misery where there is still one cross, and formerly there were two; passing on to Childs Tomb, also formerly marked by a cross, then to a cross set on a boulder to the west of Fox Tor Mire, and so to Nuns or Siwards Cross.

From this last point the only course effectively marked by crosses runs westward. There is the socket of a cross in a boulder near the foot-bridge over the Devonport Leat about five hundred yards from Nuns Cross; there are then two more crosses, the western of which is very near Classenwell Pool. The track appears to have passed down Raddick Lane to a bridge or ford at Leather Tor Bridge, thence along the course of the present road to Cross Gate, where there is another cross. Until recent years a cross base was to be found set on the north side of the road opposite Lower Lowery; this has now been broken up and removed by quarrymen. Near Dousland, at the entrance to Burham, is a cross base, which has very probably been removed from near Yennadon Cross roads; and, following the narrow lane from Yennadon Cross to Walkhampton Church, another cross base will be found close to the church house. Hence there is a track past Dittisham to Huckworthy Bridge; a cross above Huckworthy Bridge, and two on Whitechurch Down complete the route to Tavistock. There is also a cross at Moorshop, but that lies off the route, still, and since it was functioning as the threshold of a pigstye, it may have been brought some little distance from its proper site.

But after all, it is not certain that the monks erected or procured to be erected these crosses. Siwards, or Nuns, Cross was in existence before Amicia, Countess of Devon, granted to Buckland Abbey the lands of Walkhampton, 1280, and at the same date another wayside cross, known as Smalacumba, now Marchants, was also in being. Since these were named as boundary marks it may be argued that such was their sole intent, but there was also a "Yanedonecrosse" which must have stood very near the point now known by the same name in respect of cross roads. It remains that Sywards Cross now stands by an ancient track, as also does Smalacumba Cross, and that Yanedonecrosse, now possibly represented by the base near Dousland, stood also where there is now a road.

There is but space to write of one other ancient track, and that briefly. The Lichway along which the dead were

borne to the church at Lydford for burial, but which there is no reason to believe was exclusively appropriated to that end. Indeed, although none now traverse the whole length of this track, it is still in use as regards parts of its length for local purposes.

The villis of Babeny and Pizwell and their neighbours, ancient tenements on the eastern extreme of the Forest, lie eleven and a half miles from Lydford Church, in a direct line ; while the Merripits and other ancient tenements by Postbridge are approximately two miles nearer. No direct course is possible, certainly not to bearers of a corpse. The consequent inconvenience for all church purposes was recognised as early as 1260, when Bishop Bronescombe ordered that, as regards " Balbenye " and " Pushyll ", the inhabitants " omnia in vita et morte ecclesiastica percipient sacramenta in ecclesia de Wydecombe."

For purposes of burial, therefore, the eastern end of the track has not been used since the thirteenth century. It was not necessarily abandoned for all purposes, since the dwellers in the eastern quarter would have other need to visit Lydford. But with the vast enclosures made at the beginning of the nineteenth century any track then existing would have been severed. There were certainly alternative routes, the Bishop found that the way to Lydford which had to be taken in bad weather was seven miles longer than that which served when the weather was good. Both the shorter and the longer course may well have been by way of a ford or bridge at Belliver, and thence over Lakehead Hill ; the shorter path continuing to Longaford Tor, in an approximately direct line, thence across the neck between Beardown Tors and Lydford Tor, and so to a ford over the Cowsic under Conies Down Tor. The longer road, to account for its additional length must have kept to the south, crossed the Walkham at Merrivale and approached Lydford through Petertavy ; but all this is speculative.

From the ford over the Cowsic, however, to a ford over the Walkham under Whittaburrow, past the menhir on Launceston Moor, keeping a little north of Whittor, and so down to Brousentor there is still a well defined track, which continues to an old clapper bridge across the Baggator Brook (a bridge which at one time also gave access to Standon, but has now been rendered obsolete by a later structure higher up the stream.) At the clapper bridge two courses were open, either to follow

the brook down to its junction with the Tavy—a little above the junction there is a ford over the Tavy—and from this a track, largely between hedges, to Willsworthy ; or, keeping north, to strike the Tavy at a point five hundred yards higher up that stream, where there is a ford with stepping stones of a very unusual type, the stones being selected for their length, and that length ranging up and down stream, an arrangement said to have been made to enable the bearers to pass with the body between them. This ford again leads to a track to Willsworthy. From Willsworthy the road to the old pound at Willsworthy Bridge was followed, and thence the course of Willsworthy Brook, along Snap Lane, and so by a field-path past Yellowmead Farm, and across Black Down to Beardon Gate.

This western part of the track, from the Cowsic, is still called the Lichway, and when the little clapper bridge in Snap Lane was washed away, a few years since, it was spoken of as the bridge over which the dead had always been carried in former times. The impost of the bridge has not been lost, and the abutments still stand ; it will shortly be restored.

As illustrations of an ancient track the following views have been selected: Plate XXIV, fig. 1, the Lichway by Whittaburrow ; fig. 2, the stepping stones, Willsworthy Ford. Plate XXV, the Clapper over the Baggator Brook, and Plate XXVI, the Clapper in Snap Lane.

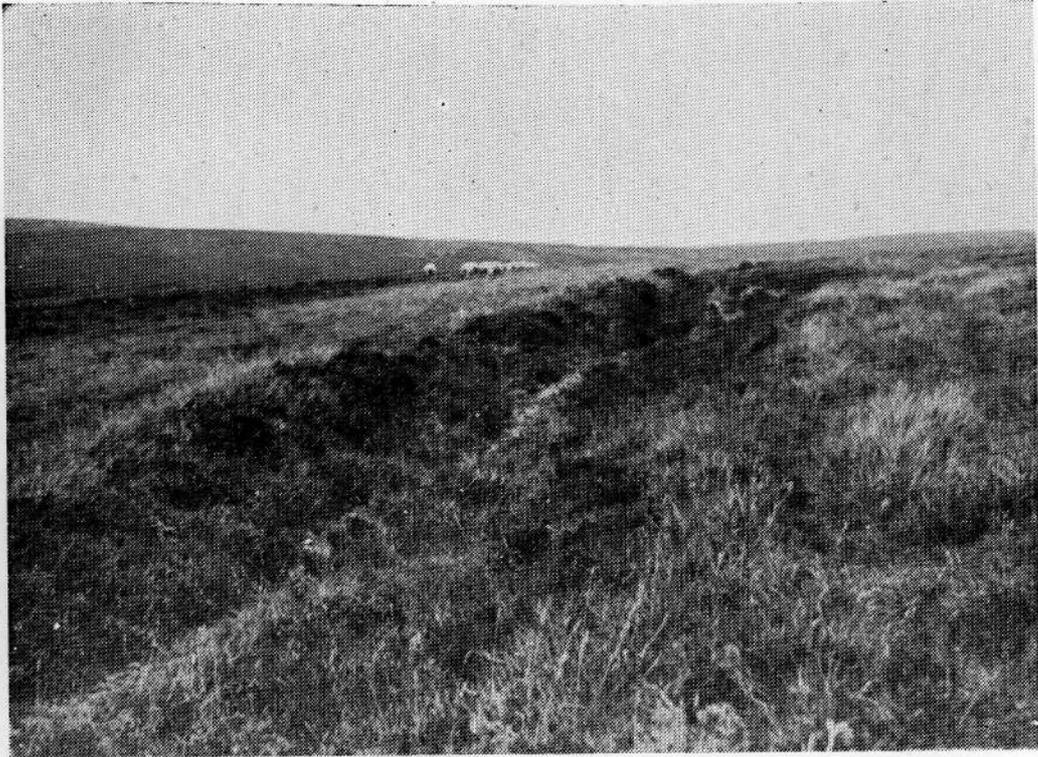


FIG. 1. THE LICHWAY BY WHITTABURROW. *R. H. Worth.*

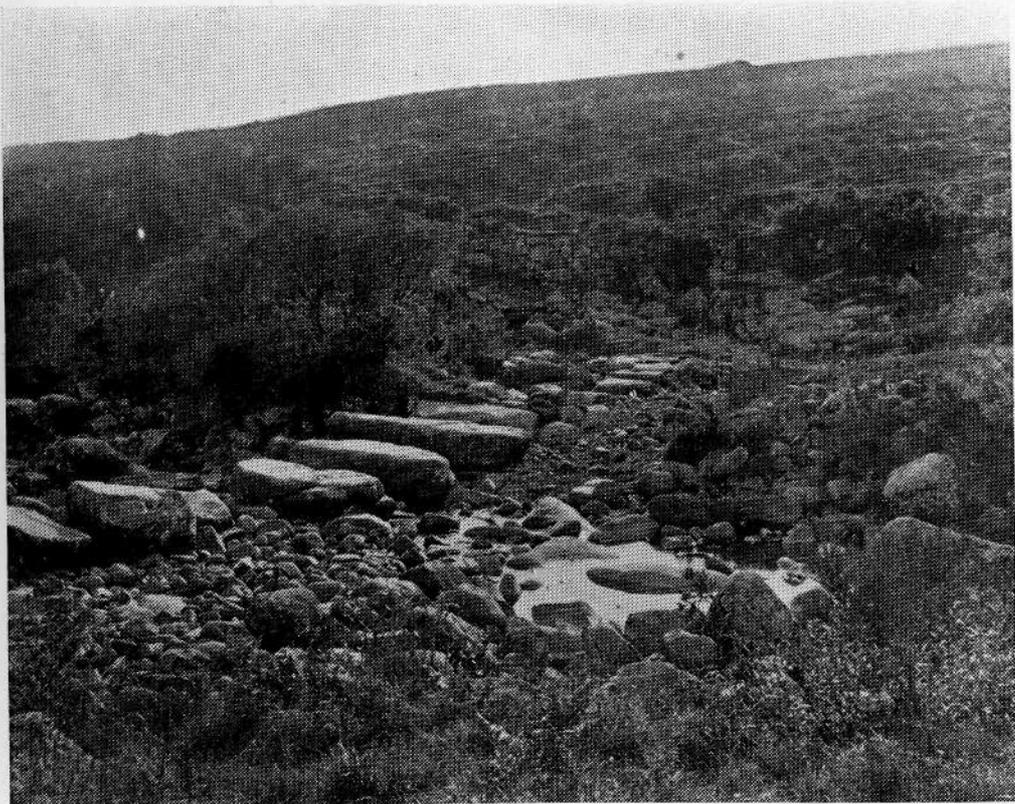


FIG. 2. STEPPING STONES ON LICHWAY, WILLSWORTHY FORD. *R. H. Worth.*
Dartmoor Tracks, to face page 356.



R. H. Worth.

THE CLAPPER ON LICHWAY, OVER BAGGATOR BROOK.

Dartmoor Tracks, to follow Plate XXIV.



From drawing by R. H. Worth.
THE CLAPPER ON LICHWAY, SNAP LANE.

Dartmoor Tracks, to follow Plate XXV.