

## **THE MENDIP RING. Leg 1a**

### **Ashcott Corner to Walton Hill. 7 Miles.**

#### **Start from the car park at Ashcott Corner Grid Ref. ST449397**

- 1** From the car park cross the road, you can either walk along the cycleway on the right or the footpath on the left of the rhyne, you will have to cross a bridge onto the cycleway halfway along if you use the footpath. Follow this to Sharpham Crossing, turn right into Sharpham Drove passing the Tearooms on your right, after you pass Durston's Works and the junction on your right, look for and cross a stile on your left into the R.S.P.B.reserve, follow this path which turns right. At the next right turn go over the stile on your left then over the one on your right, now follow the rhyne on your right down to the bridge, cross the bridge over the rhyne into the field and head straight across to the gate on the far side, through this over the bridge, turn left follow the path down the hedge on your right to a gate at the bottom, turn right through the gate and aim for the buildings straight ahead to regain Sharpham Drove, turn left to reach the entrance to Abbots Sharpham.
- 2** At the entrance to Abbots Sharpham turn right over the bridge then left through the gate, follow the path for approx 400m then turn right at a footpath, follow this path up the hill to reach the gravel drive into Sharpham Park, turn left and follow the drive out to the road. Turn left, just before Park End Farm take the path on your left, go over the bridge follow the hedge on your left then over a stile down the side of a fence on your right to reach a field, continue down the field with the hedge on your left. You will cross four fields in total before you lose the hedge in the fifth field, aim for the houses ahead going over three stiles, then aim for the gas pumping station next to which you will find a stile, cross this onto the road, turn left up the hill to reach the A39.
- 3** Turn right pass the Pike & Musket pub then cross the road to turn left into Ivythorn Lane, after a few metres turn left into the enclosed path just before the first cottage, follow this path through the fields to reach a housing estate, on reaching the road turn right and take the path through metal barriers by the side of a garage out to another lane, cross this entering the enclosed path opposite, follow the hedge on your left and as it turns left and right ignore the first stile you come to, continue up the field crossing three stiles to eventually reach the road. Take care here as the road is a very busy one. Cross the road to a small signpost where you will find a stile on your left, cross this and walk up the hill passing the old windmill to reach the car park on top of Walton Hill. Finishing Grid Ref.ST466350

## Points of Historical Interest

‘Never underestimate the importance of a good visual landmark to the medieval traveller’. Professor Mick Aston, University of Bristol, in a lecture on Glastonbury, 1995.

### Leg 1a – Ashcott Corner to Walton Hill Car Park ST 449 397

#### 1. Introduction

No description of Mendip, starting as this does on the flat lands of the Moors, could ignore the visual impact of Glastonbury Tor rising above the landscape to the east. So it must have been to the traveller from the beginning of time.

This is a brief summary of the unique importance of Glastonbury and the Tor in the history of Mendip.

This was one of the earliest Christian settlements in Britain. In 658AD the Saxons recorded an already well-established religious house. The Abbey prospered as Christianity spread, but a chequered history was to follow. Ravaged by the Danes, the Abbey was brilliantly restored by St Dunstan in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century. Then in 1184 a disastrous fire brought it nearly to ruins again and destroyed much of the library. At about this time stories started to circulate that Joseph of Arimathea, the uncle of Jesus, had visited Glastonbury and even that his nephew had been with him. It was also reported that the tomb of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere had been discovered and later rumours arose that the Holy Grail was hidden somewhere in the precincts.

It has been said that the monks needed to keep the pilgrims and their money coming to their ruined Abbey and were not above a little spin, but who knows?

More than 600 years later William Blake was inspired by this story to write The Glastonbury Hymn, which was set to music by C.E.Parry and became known as ‘Jerusalem’.

During the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries the Abbey became increasingly rich and influential, owning and receiving income from an eighth of all the land in the County. At the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539 it was sacked and its lands and property redistributed by the Crown.

The chapel of St Michael on the summit of the Tor was built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Only the tower remains. It was here that Abbot Whiting and two of his monks were executed after refusing to accept the King, Henry VIII, as the Head of a Reformed Church in England.

The Tor and the lower slopes now belong to the National Trust.

Glastonbury has a Tourist Information Centre and a Museum.

#### SECTION 1

Ashcott Corner. ST 449 397 The old Ashcott and Meare railway station of the Somerset Central Line is opposite the car park. It is now privately owned. The edge of the brick platform is just visible from the footpath.

In the 1850’s there was a preaching place for the Primitive Methodists at Ashcott Corner.

Peat cutting or Turbary ST 464 395 is first recorded in Ashcott Moor in 1344 when tenants were charged with cutting without licence. From 1808 following draining activities (Leg 9), turbary allotments were bought and sold and by the 1830’s houses were being built on them. Commercial exploitation of peat began in 1851 when three cutters and eight turf merchants are recorded. The turf cutting community was described as uncivilised and their cottages small and overcrowded. *By the 1920’s a peat factory had*

been established near the railway station producing such as fuel, firelighters and bulb fibre. By 1947 there were between 15 and 20 workers and the number increased into the 1970s. Since then, and following environmental concerns, the industry has been in decline.

The Ham Wall National Nature Reserve ST 449 397 includes the Glastonbury Canal to the left of the path. It was opened in 1833 establishing a link to the sea *and for a time revitalising the area*. It closed in 1853 as the Somerset Central Railway Line, now the footpath, opened in 1854. *The Line was crossed by a narrow gauge peat tramway with which there was a serious collision in 1949*. The Line closed in 1966. There are descriptions of the nature reserve, the canal and the railway on the information boards along the track.

At Sharpham Crossing ST 471 392 there is a Railway Keepers cottage, now rather changed in appearance, described as one of the few remaining from the Somerset and Dorset Railway (Leg 3).

Sharpham Drove. ST 469 389 The word 'drove' describes a route for moving beasts. Often ancient and in a straight line, it would usually be enclosed by banks, hedges, or in this area by ditches (Leg 9)

Avalon Farm. ST 469 384 The Day and Masters Map of 1785 shows land in this area marked 'Aveland' which translates to Apple Island, an apple growing area. In Leg 2 there is a short history of cider production.

Before Sharpham Bridge ST 468 380 and on both sides of the drove is an archaeological site called Tinney's Ground. It is a peat field containing multiple Bronze Age timber trackways used as routes between settlements across the bog. There are also two heavy platforms used perhaps for hunting and fowling. The tracks, *which have been monitored by the Somerset Levels project since 1973*, date from approximately 2300BC. Part of the site, to the right of the drove, is now a Scheduled Monument.

Bronze Age dates are generally taken as being roughly between 2400 to 550BC. Scheduling provides legal protection to archaeological sites that are considered to be of national importance

## **SECTION 2 .**

Abbots Sharpham and Sharpham Park. ST 461 375 These were part of the estates of Glastonbury Abbey possibly as early as 1260. The house, described as 'a poor lodge' in about 1420, had become 'a maner place' by the end of the century. Here in September 1539, Henry VIII's Commissioners examined the Abbot of Glastonbury, Richard Whiting, before his trial at Wells and execution on the Tor. With the Dissolution of the monastery Henry VIII gave these lands, with others at Walton and Butleigh later in this walk, to Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, the brother of Queen Jane Seymour. *By 1600 the house was described as a mansion*. Henry Fielding, the author of 'Tom Jones' was born here in 1707. *Said to have been partially demolished before 1799, it was still standing in 1826*. There has been careful rebuilding in the late 20th century, using old materials and illustrations. Shields of arms from the original building are incorporated on the north and south facades. The house is a Grade II\* Listed Building. It is private property.

A Park was an essential part of a large Estate. It was an enclosed area of mixed woodland and grassland for the management of deer herds. Very large Parks could include hunting boxes, rabbit warrens, fishponds and lodges. This latter was not necessarily an important building but a base, often on a hillside, from which the Parker could store winter feed, keep an eye on the animals and watch out for poachers. Sharpham Park was described in an early survey as being two miles in circuit with 160 fallow deer and 80 acres of woodland set with oak, ash and maple for rotational felling.

Turning south past Park End Farm, ST 453 373 the tiled perpendicular spire of Walton church, a style described as peculiar to Somerset, is a landmark on the skyline.

Below Small Moor Rhyne, ST 455 368 the field down to the junction with Whitley Road is an archaeological site. Now visible only as a promontory with a flat top, it is a Prehistoric settlement. Seasonal crop marks show up the defensive banks and ditches.

The description 'prehistoric', if not more specific, could mean any time before 2000BC.

### SECTION 3

The Pike and Musket ST 456 363 is on the junction with the main road. In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *this building was primarily a farmhouse with a smallholding of 18 acres*. The pub, then called The Globe, was a well known cider house. The name was changed in 1973. .

The road, now the A39, was turnpiked in 1753 by the Wells Turnpike Trust. The advent of these Trusts was a major turning point in the economy of the country. The Trustees took responsibility for the state of roads that had previously been little more than unfenced trackways. The cost of road maintenance was covered by charges at tollgates and toll bars. This road is on an old track, in an almost straight line from the Parrett Estuary through Walton to a major crossroads at Christian's Cross above Kingweston.

Walton ST 461 363 is said to be the geographical centre of Somerset. It is a long village where, typically, the farmhouses fronted the roadway and the lands were in the marshland. There has been a church recorded here since 1168. The Old Parsonage, now privately owned, is a late medieval building. Medieval dates can be taken as the period approximately between 900 and 1500.

Following the Dissolution in 1539 the name of Sir John Thynne of Longleat (Leg 4) appears here at Walton, as a lessee of Edward Seymour. *In 1867 the parish was described as poor, cottages defective, rents increasing and wages low. The population in 1901 was 411.* The Longleat Estate sold large parts of the village in 1939. There is a booklet on the church for sale in the church.

Walton Windmill. ST 462 352 This landmark, which is private property, was built in 1342 at a cost of over £11.12 shillings, including millstones brought from Bridgewater. It was worked as a mill from January 1343 for the manors of Street and Walton. After the Dissolution it was let and later sold. Still working in 1622, it was repaired and rebuilt several times and eventually passed into the hands of the Viscount Weymouth (Thynne) of Longleat in 1739. It went out of use in 1906 and in 1926 was bought by the Rev. Evans of Westonzoyland and converted into a house.

The importance of a mill in a local economy, whether windmill or watermill, cannot be overestimated. Neither can the power of the Miller.

At the windmill and looking north, the cathedral towers of the City of Wells are just visible beyond Glastonbury Tor. Wells was established as a separate Bishopric in 909 causing all sorts of arguments, mostly over money of course. After the abortive rebellion in favour of the Duke of Monmouth in 1685, the Assize at Wells was the last to be held by the infamous 'hanging' Judge Jeffries. 500 prisoners were brought for trial of whom 400 were transported and 97 hanged. Wells is the smallest City in England and the only City in Somerset.

Wells has a Tourist Information Office and a Museum.

The red brick chimney, in the foreground to the north, is the site of Clark's Village at Street. The Clark's shoe making empire started with two brothers in 1825, initially working with sheepskin. *By 1841 they had 29 shoemakers, mostly outworkers.* By 1859 there were a 1000, including 150 in the factory, where innovative cutting and sewing machines were installed. Devout Quakers, the Clark family concerned themselves with the housing, education, and welfare of their workers. Until very recently Street was a teetotal village, the only hotel being unlicensed. By 1985 there were 23,000 workers worldwide and an output of 40 million pairs of shoes a year. Clarks Village, with its myriad of retail outlets, was built over a large part of the old factory site in 1993. It is open every day. Clarks were, and remain, major employers in the area.

The other serious economic presence in Street is Millfield School. Established in 1935, Millfield is one of the largest independent schools in the country.

Street has a Shoe Museum and a Tourist Information Office.

Walton Hill. There are information boards at the National Trust viewing point. *On the far edge of the flatlands* to the southwest is Sedgemoor, near Western Zoyland, the site of the last battle fought on English soil in 1685, when the uprising against King James II in favour of the protestant Duke of Monmouth, was finally ended.