

# From Broomfield to Brendon (and back again): A Journey on Horseback



## **Monday July 21 (midsummer's day).**

I meet my riding companion near the burnt-out Pines Café on the Quantocks at 7.30am, both of us kitted out with saddlebags, drinks, maps and waterproofs. The forecast is variable and we start in light drizzle. I am riding my part-bred Arab horse Shimoni, and my companion is on her Thoroughbred, Tio. Shimoni is an experienced 16-year old endurance horse, with many past glories to his name. Tio is younger and, although fit and ridden regularly, he has not done any previous long-distance rides. The two horses instantly like each other and trot merrily along our first bridleway to Cothelstone carpark, an accessible and rideable route that keeps us off a main road, thanks to the work of the TDBA and the BHS.

From Cothelstone we stay on the high ground of the Quantocks until we drop down into Crowcombe, crossing the A358 near Lawford and then keeping to small minor roads and tracks. We trot under the West Somerset railway line at Stogumber. Shimoni is frightened of all but the smallest and slowest cars but Tio keeps him calm and we make good time, rewarding ourselves and the horses by stopping for breakfast near a grassy verge by a stream. Just outside Stogumber we turn right onto a narrow road with grass and moss growing along the centre (part of the Samaritan's Way) which takes us to Monksilver where we pick up the Coleridge Way.

The Coleridge Way, marked by posts with yellow feathers for walkers and blue feathers for horses (the routes diverge on occasions), takes us all the way to Wheddon Cross. At first, we ascend slowly through ancient woodland, then down through forestry plantations to Treborough where we take our own diversion to avoid too much gain and loss of height. At this point potential disaster strikes as, less than halfway through our journey, Tio loses a shoe! Luckily, my companion has brought a well-fitting emergency boot and we are able to carry on, although we now need to go more slowly on stony or slippery stretches. Our decision to start early is fully justified as we are now travelling mostly at walk or slow trot along the stonier bridleways or slippery downhill sections, and we know we need to get to Exford in plenty of time to stable the horses and find our own accommodation.



Just past Kingsbridge we rejoin the Coleridge Way, and head up onto Lype Common where stony tracks are replaced by open grassy fields that invite a good canter accompanied by many singing skylarks. The high vantage point also provides a good phone signal allowing my companion to contact her farrier. We skirt North of Wheddon Cross and then up towards Dunkery gate – there appears to be no other option to get to Exford unless we go along the main road. After a 9h journey (with many stops to gaze at extraordinary views, eat our snacks, let our horses fill up on grass) the final stony track from Dunkery gate to Exford tests our resolve. It feels endless but at last we drop down into the village and trot along a final quiet road to the stables we have booked for the night. True to his word, the farrier duly turns up and replaces Tio's shoe; we

check in to a very comfortable B&B, and then meet up with two friends to plan the next day's ride to their place near Lynton.

## **Tuesday.**

The day dawns sunny and clear and all 4 of us cross the moor, passing Aldermans Barrow and the ruins of Larkbarrow, stopping for lunch in a deep cleeve by a river where the horses drink and rest. The place is virtually deserted – we see just a couple of walkers and no other riders. We experience great sweeping vistas, with the sea to the north and small herds of ponies grazing amongst the springy heather. A heron flies gracefully along, skimming the river with slow flaps.



After lunch we remount, and ride past the crumbling remains of a medieval village before turning towards Brendon, grateful for the navigation skills of our friends. We are able to stay at our friends' pioneering eco-farm where we hear more about the work of the charity they have established to encourage beneficial interactions between humans and mammals of all kinds, including horses and elephants (the charity is called "We are all Mammals"). After a rest day spent at the farm, we make the return journey to Exford by ourselves, trying hard to remember all the relevant landmarks to ensure we don't get lost.

Because Tio is tired on the final day, I ride back alone from Exford to Broomfield on Friday, feeling more confident about the route although missing Tio's calming presence on the road sections.

I highly recommend this route to TDBA members. It encompasses an extraordinary diversity of terrain, landscape, and biodiversity, not to mention historic tracks, villages and houses passed along the way. The majority of the route is off-road and in places the going is wonderful. However, some of the paths are tricky to find, with signposts that have fallen over or become hidden by vegetation. It would be great if the posts marking the Coleridge Way sections could be renovated soon before they vanish altogether. Gates are passable (with the exception of one wooden gate that had completely broken and had to be stepped over) and people were friendly and mostly delighted to see two touring horses passing along their quiet roads and bridleways. If anyone would like to try a similar ride, I would be more than happy to provide tips on route-finding and logistics (equipment, accommodation) based on our happy experience.

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