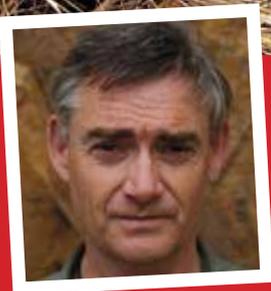


TED HUGHES OM

1930 - 1998

# SQUELCHY BOGS AND STANZAS

PHOTOGRAPH BY DARTMOORANIMAL



Mark is a globetrotting freelance travel journalist and photographer writing for many national newspapers and magazines. He lives on Dartmoor with his partner and two slightly naughty horses.

High upon Dartmoor's rough bounds lies a simple granite rock which from a distance appears as a natural feature on the landscape. However, closer inspection reveals the stone's secret. Inscribed are the words: Ted Hughes OM....1930-1998.

For the stereotypical dour north countyman who became one of the nation's greatest poets, it was the rolling expanses of Devon in 'the soft south' which became his spiritual home.

You are soaked with the cold rain -  
Like a pelt in tanning liquor.  
The moor's swollen waterbelly  
Swags and quivers,  
ready to burst at a step.  
(Ted Hughes, *Snipe*)

The recent and overdue induction of former poet laureate, Ted Hughes', into Westminster Abbey's Poet's Corner, was my inspiration for a classic walk into northern Dartmoor's brooding centre.

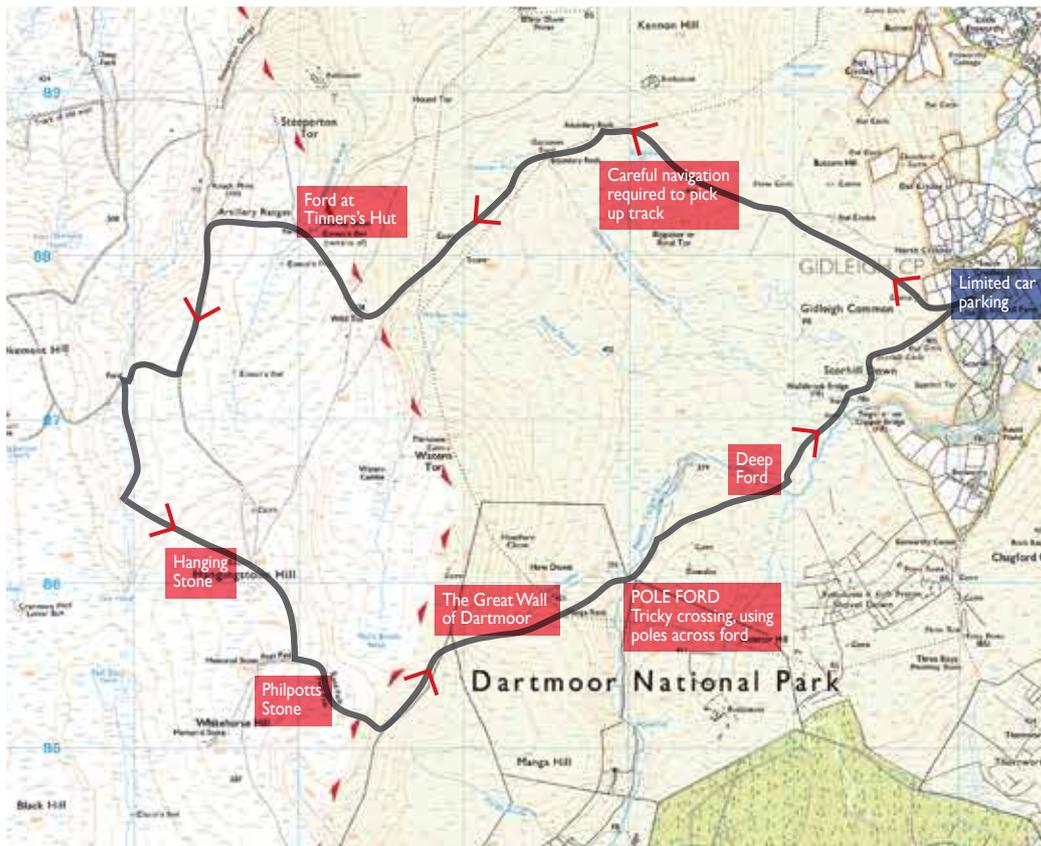
After the Yorkshire-born Hughes had attained critical success in 1957 with *The Hawk in the Rain* collection, the poet moved to North Tawton, just outside the National Park, in 1961. Throughout a turbulent personal and productive literary career he remained in Devon for the rest of his life. His poetry was strongly influenced by a love of nature and the countryside, and so upon his death in 1998 his ashes were spread near a favoured spot at Taw Head on

Dartmoor. A memorial stone later followed at this remote location.

This walk, therefore, seeks out his memorial stone, and in the process explores a realm few people ever experience where the embryonic rivers of the Taw, Dart and Teign, rise. It's not for the faint-hearted or inexperienced walker however. On a sunny day the golden grassland and blooming heather etch indelible memories of benevolent beauty into the mind. But more often during fearsomely blustery days of cascading rain the journey to Taw Head can seem desolate, crossing mires, as Hughes so eloquently wrote, that 'Swags and quivers, ready to burst at a step'. ➔



The flame-red moon, the harvest moon,  
Rolls along the hills, gently bouncing,  
A vast balloon,  
Till it takes off, and sinks upward  
To lie on the bottom of the sky,  
like a gold doubloon.  
(Ted Hughes, *Harvest Moon*)



Ordnance Survey mapping © Crown Copyright: AM49/12

This circular walk from Scorhill is by no means the most direct or definitive route to Hughes' Memorial Stone. But besides avoiding some of the moor's boggy patches, I believe it embodies the archetypal Dartmoor yomp.

We'll lace up our boots at Scorhill Car Park: located at the abrupt terminus of a narrowing lane running via Murchington from Chagford. A short hike upslope, passing through a gate, delivers us onto Gidleigh Common's open moorland. What a view greets us. A granite-studded necklace of tors crowns the horizon, including my own favourite, Watern Tor, whose form reminds me of an ocean wave.

First up, Scorhill stone circle (SX655874) lays a short detour to your left – most likely Bronze Age with some thirty fallen and standing stones. Otherwise our path veers right venturing northwestwards on a distinctly worn track with Rippator (Rival Tor) initially ahead.

After several kilometres our track passes north around Rippator, eventually drifting southwestwards to the first of several ford crossings, at Gartaven. Thereafter along the same track, we climb towards the striking Wild Tor (SX623876), seen at its best in late summertime when ablaze with purple heather as the sun warms its elephantine-like hide. Ascending its tufted calluna

slopes we enter the military-used Okehampton Range: a live firing zone not to be entered if the range posts are flying red flags.

Crossing Wild Tor into the central moor is like stepping over a threshold into a forbidden, uninhabited world of chaotic mires, bubbling streams and mine workings. Ted Hughes' memorial stone is just two-kilometres away but takes some finding. It requires some prudent navigation using available landscape features to handrail progress to it. First departing Wild Tor on a compass setting around 330°, the narrow track initially squeezes between two small boulders downhill affording views ahead, if swirling mists abate, of the slightly

conical Steeperton Tor (with its noticeable military hut). We then ford Steeperton Brook (SX621881) near the crumbling foundations of an old tinner's hut.

Our immediate goal, after a short ascent, is to intercept a rocky track used for military manoeuvres westwards. This convenient track guides us south towards a clear right-hand junction that leads to another ford on the fledgling River Taw (SX609872). It takes a leap of imagination to believe this babbling brook eventually discharges as a mature river into the Bristol Channel some 72km north. It was a favourite river of Hughes, who loved angling, a subject he waxed lyrically about:

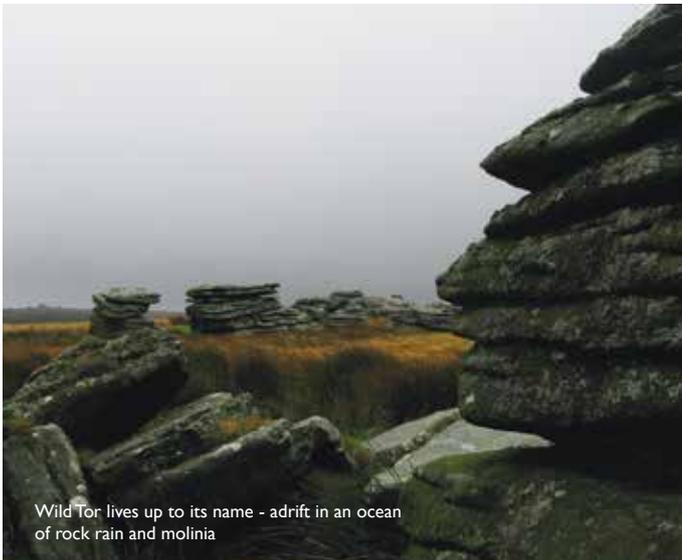
*Pike, three inches long, perfect  
Pike in all parts, green tigering  
the gold,  
Killers from the egg: the  
malevolent aged grin.*

*They dance on the surface  
among the flies.*

(Ted Hughes, *Pike*)

Nearly there and time for some squelching! Don't cross the Taw's ford, instead keep the river to your right taking great care when tracing it over 600m of soggy footsteps. It's then, a mound becomes apparent set in a basin valley ... a prehistoric barrow perhaps? Actually most likely heaped tin workings upon which sits Hughes' small granite commemorative stone (SX609865) like an almond flake on a fairy cake. The Inscription may be simple: "Ted Hughes OM 1930-1998." Yet Taw Head possesses a palpable energy that ensures you'll return on a high.

This return commences by aiming towards Hangingstone Hill (SX617861) with its military hut on a compass reading of 120°. There's something very illusory about Hangingstone's



Wild Tor lives up to its name - adrift in an ocean of rock rain and molinia



A rain soaked lens proves that Manga Rock does exist albeit in wild Teign country

dimensions. It's famous rocking stone, a seesawing slab, looks so much larger from a distance but is actually quite tiny.

From there, we can traverse south to find another memorial, this time to local legend Frank Phillpotts (1837-1909), unofficial patron saint of moorland hikers. A passionate horse-rider and hunter, Phillpotts was responsible for cutting Dartmoor's many 'peat passes': linear channels incised down to granite bedrock, which make for fine navigational aids and drier feet through particularly boggy areas. The peat pass at Whitehorse Hill, which we don't enter, is marked with an engraved stone to Phillpotts (SX617815). Instead, we continue eastwards with Fernworthy Forest and the vaguely volcanic-looking Kes Tor coming into view far away.

After a kilometre a drystone wall of Goldsworthy artistry bisects our decent. We trace it left before entering onto Hew Down through a hunt

gate. Its not easy to find but Manga Rock, an inscribed parish boundary stone, lies ahead as we descend a granite-strewn slope downhill directly to the youthful North Teign River. Our drystone wall reappears again at the slope's base meeting the Teign at SX640860, which we cross by shimmying across the fence railings. We then trace the meandering Teign northwestwards for 1.5km – watching out for kingfishers that Hughes delightfully wrote: 'leave a rainbow splinter sticking in your eye'.

The river's right bank delivers us over two iconic stone clapper bridges at Teign-e-ver (SX654871) and Walla Brook, from where it's a straightforward hike to Scorhill. You may be slightly sodden, assuredly windblown, or glowing from a sunny day, but congratulations, you've made it back from the deepest recesses of Dartmoor's soul. It's little wonder Ted Hughes sought and found poetic inspiration on Dartmoor. ■

## FOOT FILE

LENGTH: 14.5km (9miles)  
 TIME: 5-6 hours  
 START/FINISH: Scorhill Car Park (SX661878)  
 SUITABLE FOR: Fit and Experienced hikers (see 'alternatives')  
 MAP: OS Explorer OL28  
 PUBLIC TRANSPORT: None to Scorhill. The nearest hub accessible by public transport is Chagford, 4km away, served by the four-times daily 173 service from Exeter (note no Sunday service).  
 LITERATURE: Get in the mood with Hughes' *Moortown Diary* or *The Hawk in the Rain*.

## Military Firing Ranges

As a rule of thumb Okehampton Firing Range is usually open to access at weekends and throughout August. For walks inside the range outside this quota it's vital to check whether live firing or manoeuvres are taking place by finding 'Dartmoor Firing Programme' on [www.dartmoor-ranges.co.uk](http://www.dartmoor-ranges.co.uk)"



Walking up from Knack Mine to Taw Ford

## AN EASIER ALTERNATIVE

For those a little less confident navigationally, an alternative easier passage to Hughes' memorial stone exists departing from Belstone, just south of the A30, near Okehampton. The route is relatively flat and faithfully follows the River Taw for a 13km return hike. However, its less challenging navigation shouldn't preclude the need for a map, compass, waterproofs, and mobile phone in case of difficulties.

### Essential directions include:

Exit Belstone Village to the south following a rough track just above the right bank of the River Taw.

Follow this meandering track for 4km passing below Oke Tor (SX612901).

Continuing south, the route squeezes through a narrow gorge commencing to the right of Steeperton Tor and entering Okehampton Range.

Close to Knack Mine's disused workings (SX614884) a ford crosses the Taw to join the well-defined Military Access track.

Follow this for 1.5km to meet a right-hand junction down to Taw ford at SX609872.

Don't cross the ford but stay on left-hand bank for the 600m squelch to Hughes' memorial.

For variety on the return, instead of tracing the Taw back to Belstone, veer off onto parallel higher ground for a higher-altitude traverse via Oke Tor and Belstone Common's multiple tors.

## AN EVEN EASIER ALTERNATIVE

For those preferring a higher ratio of stanzas to kilometres, head to Stover Country Park just outside the National Park on the A328 between Bovey Tracey and Newton Abbot. In 2006 they initiated the two-miles long Ted Hughes Poetry Trail. Circumnavigating Stover's lake, this gentle, largely forested walk is with 16 wooden posts bearing some of Hughes' most famous nature-themed poems, including *The Kingfisher* and *The Thought-fox*.