GUNNISLAKE CIRCULAR via RIVER TAMAR

Soon after leaving the car park, our group of 15 walkers found ourselves heading up the grassy slope beside the Tamar Valley Centre. At the top we emerged into the lane near Delaware School and when the lane reached the main road, everyone carefully crossed into Delaware Road.

At Delaware Farm we followed a footpath down to Higher Dimson; the path was located between farmland and had a narrow leat running down its left hand side. Half way along there was one stile to cross and further down an old concrete kissing gate just behind these three men (Roger, Jeff and Ray) who accompanied me on the day we recce’d this walk three months earlier. Those two walls in the picture are the remains of an old railway bridge when the line once continued as far as Callington and steam trains would have crossed overhead.

At the end of this footpath we arrived at a road junction at Higher Dimson and proceeded down a quiet lane. Down and down we walked through Middle Dimson and Lower Dimson. These medieval hamlets were here long before tin and copper were discovered in the Tamar Valley and long before the town of Gunnislake was ever built a mile to the south.

A footpath followed which was once an old pack-horse route but the locals have their own name for it, ‘Dog S**t Alley’! Some of the path was rough underfoot with loose stones and pebbles; we slowly tiptoed our way along taking great care because we were still going downhill. When we did take our eyes off the ground we were rewarded by tantalising glimpses of the river through the trees as we neared the end of the path. A flight of steps brought us on to the Discovery Trail where we had a short break. This path was much wider and easier to walk along and a little further downhill on our right was a repair garage which stands on the site of the Caledonia, a five storey miner’s hostel which features in JMW Turner’s painting entitled ‘Crossing the Brook’ and in the old postcard below. Now we had arrived at New Bridge which was built in 1520 by the abbots of Tavistock. It stands at 23 feet above the River Tamar at Gunnislake and is 182 feet long. The bridge is constructed of granite, with seven arches and it remained the lowest downstream road bridge until the opening of the Tamar Suspension Bridge in 1961.

Although the bridge is now part of the A 390 carrying the road between Liskeard and Tavistock, it was only ever meant for crossing on horseback or with horse and cart. The medieval roads and even the 16th and 17th century roads leading over the bridge from Devon went up through Lower, Middle and Higher Dimson as the road up Newbridge Hill didn’t exist then.
Today we didn’t cross the bridge into Devon, but instead carried on along the Discovery Trail on the Cornwall side of the river with the riverbank on our left for over a mile. Along the way there were dis-used lime kilns and ruined buildings hidden amongst the undergrowth on one side of the path, whilst a part of a wall could be seen on the other. There were once wharves all along here.

The river could be seen between the lush vegetation as we walked along and soon we spotted the rocky outcrops of Chimney Rock and Pleasure Rock on the opposite bank. Long before we could see it, we heard the rushing water as it flowed over Gunnislake Weir, it must have been deafening closer up. This is where the tidal stretch of the River Tamar ends with fresh water flowing along from now on. That plant in the foreground is Pendulous Sedge which always reminds me of fishing rods dangling in the water; it grows in abundance along here.

In 1808 a stretch of canal was constructed to the south of Gunnislake to by-pass the weir. It contained one lock and cost £11,000 to build. Nothing more was ever added to this short stretch, though the Tamar Manure Navigation Canal as it was known outlasted every other canal in the West Country and lasted for nearly 120 years. The canal was used principally to transport manure, building sand, bricks, lime and granite for the mines and the market gardens. Copper was exported from here to be smelted at Swansea in South Wales. The barges were said to have been hauled along by teams of men pulling ropes attached to the masts of vessels; I couldn’t help wondering why horses were not used to pull them.

Between the river and the canal is an island and this is where the lock keeper’s cottage (below right) was located. The cottage is still inhabited today but in the year 2000, the floodwaters took over the ground floor of the building, and the owner had to be rescued by helicopter. Soon we reached an area called Netstakes; it is thought that this name refers to the nets for salmon fishing at a time when salmon was plentiful on the Tamar. A salmon ladder was seen to the right of the weir earlier.

Here at the marker we left the Discovery Trail and first walked uphill then back along Calstock Road to Gunnislake village. Some of us then walked up Sand Hill to Gunnislake station which is quite steep and carries a steady flow of traffic, but there was the option of returning up the hill by bus from the village and half of the walkers did just that; we all arrived at the car park together.