

Devon Great Consols

A fascinating exploration of Blanchdown Wood, on the east side of the Tamar Valley, and the extensive remains of Devon Great Consols, via pleasant paths and tracks.



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Elevation Profile



Devon Great Consols

Start/finish	Tamar Trails Centre car park, Bedford Sawmills SX 438728, PL19 8JE	Public Transport	None available
Distance	Short walk: 2½ miles (4km); long walk: 5¼ miles (8.4km)	Dogs	Under control at all times
Time	Short walk: 1½ hours; long walk: 2½ hours	Map	OS Explorer 108 Lower Tamar Valley & Plymouth; OS Landranger 201 Plymouth & Launceston
Terrain	Easy tracks and paths; steady climb towards end of long walk	Note	This trail takes you through areas of historic mining remains and has a number of associated hazards. Please take care not to place yourself and others at risk. Many of the paths are shared with cyclists and horse riders.
Toilets	Tamar Trails Centre (when open)		
Difficulty Rating	Short walk: easy; long walk: moderate		
Parking	Tamar Trails Centre car park (pay & display)		

This circular walk explores the mines of Devon Great Consols, at one time the largest copper supplier in Europe. Following the discovery of a 3-mile (4.8km) long copper lode – the largest in the southwest – in 1844, these steep slopes upriver from Gunnislake were the site of intensive mining activity, eventually stretching over 140 acres. When copper prices fell, the mine switched to producing vast quantities of arsenic; it was said that enough arsenic was stored at Morwellham Quay 'to poison the entire world'. The mine went bankrupt in 1901, with arsenic production seeing a brief revival from 1915 into the 1920s. The area is now home to a complex network of signed multi-use trails and unsigned paths.

The Route

1 SX 438728 At the far end of the car park follow a broad path into the wood, ignoring an early footpath (right). Beneath the trees look out for the remains of shallow mine workings.

At the next path junction turn right on a narrow path, then right again, ascending gently past tree-covered spoil heaps, to reach a crossing track.

2 SX 439730 Turn left and walk along an old mineral railway trackbed, constructed in 1858 to carry copper ore from Devon Great Consols (DGC) to Morwellham Quay on the River Tamar, 4½ miles (7.2km) away. The views open up across the valley towards Hingston Down and Kit Hill and, nearer to hand, the extensive red-brown spoil heaps of DGC.

3 SX 437724 Reach a fork, with a gate ahead (a siding leading to the Wheal Emma incline – the easternmost mine of DGC, which opened in 1848). Take the left (lower) path – the main trackbed – soon bearing sharp left (the vegetation-covered bridge ahead once spanned the line) and then right.

The path re-joins the trackbed and curves left across the wooded Rubbytowntown Valley, where J.M.W. Turner made his preliminary

sketches for his celebrated painting *Crossing the Brook* when he visited the Tamar in 1813 (the view of the river is now obscured by trees). Pass through a wide clearing to re-enter the trees and meet a path fork.

4 SX 434735 Keep right, ignoring a narrow path forking right a few paces later. Head on through the trees – the ground drops away very steeply on the left – passing mounds of waste rock on the right.

As the trees thin out Wheal Josiah railway bridge appears ahead. In the 1860s copper mining increased dramatically; the bridge was built over the railway so that the additional spoil could be tipped down the hillside. The path skirts the huge spoil heap, then re-joins the route of the original railway. Continue ahead, soon emerging into a vast swathe of orange-brown rock and sand, the legacy of decades of arsenic production, now dotted with birch, Scots pines and heather, to reach a path T-junction by the remains of Wheal Anna Maria arsenic works.

5 SX 426733 Turn right (the interpretation point is located in the remains of a small building – an office dating from the 1860s – on the right). Continue up the track to find a gate on the left into the Wheal Anna Maria calciner complex.

6 SX 426733 Turn left to find the viewing platform overlooking the 1920s arsenic complex (the 1868 works were demolished in 1903). Here the arsenic ore was crushed, washed and roasted; the hot gases were drawn up flues to a labyrinth of condensing chambers, where they cooled and deposited crude arsenic powder. This deadly poison was scraped off by men and boys – with cotton wool in their ears and nostrils, and handkerchiefs across their mouths – and refined into a fine white flour, 99 percent pure arsenic. Following a slump in the price of arsenic – which was mainly used as insecticide – the mine finally closed in 1925.

SHORT WALK Retrace your steps to Point 5, then follow the long walk description (midway through Point 9) below.



For more walks like this, visit www.tamarvalley.org.uk/walking

If you find any problems with this walk please contact us at e: tamarvalleynationallandscape@cornwall.gov.uk

<https://explore.osmaps.com/route/17574440/> Tel: 01822 835030 Route description and photos by Sue Viccars.

Scan for an interactive map and directions



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LONG WALK Head on from the viewing platform and through a gate onto a broad track; turn left towards Blanchdown Wood (look out for mountain bikes for the next ¼ mile) to reach a track crossroads.

7 SX 423725 Keep straight on, downhill, passing Wheal Fremontor's large fenced 'gunnis', where tin and tungsten were mined. The path descends steeply. Out of sight down the valley side here is the 14¾ft- (4.5m-) wide Great Leat, which carried water from the Tamar to feed giant waterwheels near Point 10.

This lovely path heads upstream, high above the river. Some of the trees have been cleared to create suitable habitat for the rare heath fritillary butterfly; across the river (hidden by the trees) is Gunnislake Clitters Mine. After a long, steady ascent the track starts to descend and eventually curves right, away from the river, and continues downhill. The western end of the copper lode is in this part of the site.

8 SX 419736 Reach a junction and turn right, ascending past the pools at Wheal Fanny. Work started here in 1845: the copper lode was struck just 18ft (5.5m) below the surface. Beyond the pools are the remains of cobbled dressing floors, where women and children would break the ore with long spalling hammers.

Reach a fork and keep right – ahead are former miners' cottages and captains' houses – up a zigzag path which levels then passes under soaring beech trees to reach a track T-junction. Turn left. The track ends at a gate with a tall arsenic chimney stack, dating from 1922, ahead.

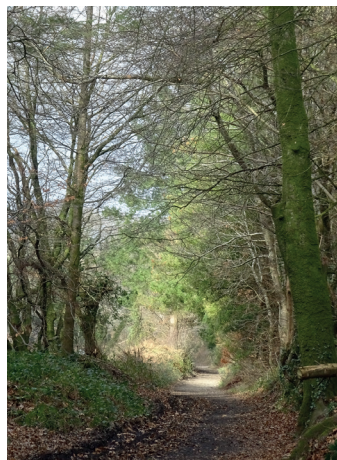
9 SX 423735 Turn right to round a big gate, back into the redlands of Wheal Anna Maria; where a track heads off right keep straight on around another big gate. Descend past the calciners and interpretation point to reach Point 5.

Keep straight on (joining the short walk), following signs to the Sawmill car park, past the red sands of the mine's arsenic tailings. The track descends gently to reach a junction.

10 SX 433731 Turn left, soon crossing the ochre-coloured outflow of a mine drainage adit, contaminated with copper sulphate and iron oxide. Dams and settling ponds originally reduced the amount of sediment entering the Tamar, and from the 1860s up until the 1960s the stream was channelled into wooden troughs packed with scrap iron, onto which the valuable copper was deposited. Round a gate; a few steps later, at a path junction bear left, steeply uphill. Ignore paths to right and left and follow signs to Sawmill car park. Near the top of the valley side bear right at a fork to re-join the outward route and return to the car park.



The woodland floor is peppered with trenches and workings



The trackbed of an old mineral railway line is followed towards the mining complex



View towards Kit Hill, Hingston Down Quarries, Blanchdown Wood and the vast spoil heaps of DGC



The extensive ruins of Wheal Anna Maria arsenic works

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