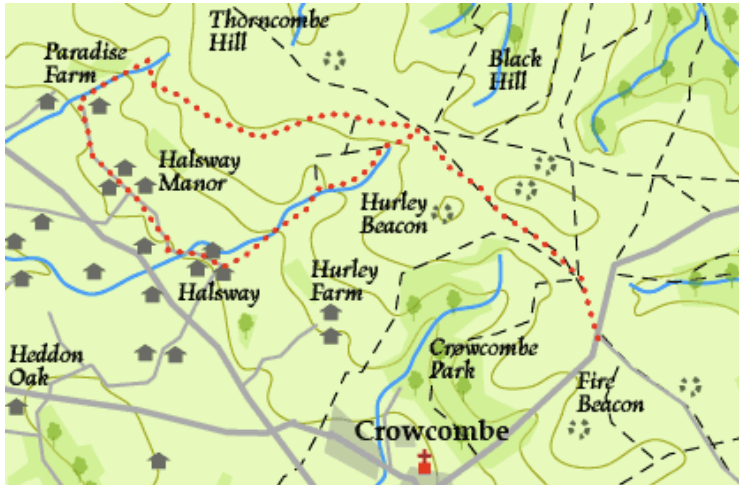




Quantocks

Halsway



Basic hike: A circular route around central Quantock's western flanks - from Crowcombe Park Gate down to hamlet of Halsway via Paradise, and back up Halsway Combe.

Recommended Map: Ordnance Survey Explorer 140 - Quantock Hills.

Distance and going: Four and a half miles - steep in two places.

Food and drink: Carew Arms at Crowcombe, or Bicknoller Inn at Bicknoller.

This walk should help elevate anyone's mood should they feel down in the dumps. It is one of those high, airy affairs capable of invigorating the most slothful and sluggardly soul. The views stretch for miles and a fresh Atlantic breeze forever seems to dance across what I believe to be Britain's most beautiful single ridge of hills.

The dear old Quantocks – you can return to them again and again because they offer some of the best walking territory anywhere. This is partly due to the fact that the single ridge affords great panoramas in every direction. Added to this, Britain's first ever designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is pitted with deep, interesting coombes that add an immediate and stunning intimacy to the landscape.

On this walk you can take a look at glorious Halsway Manor even though it's not officially opened to the public: "I'm afraid we don't have any coffee-shop or anything like that - we've hidden our light under a bushel for far too long," I was told by the centre's manager, Gerald Foster Clark. "But of course your readers are welcome to pop in - they can pick up a leaflet that'll explain what goes on here and perhaps take a peek inside."

So, whether you are into clog-dancing, hornpipes, reels, jigs or flings - or whatever it is they do at Halsway - I promise you that just seeing the house is ample reward for loping around

the Quantocks' steep western flanks. The old pile is as elegant an abode as any in the region.

To find the start of this walk you must drive to the very top of the Quantock ridge. Few roads cross the hills, but there's one particularly picturesque lane that climbs out of pretty Crowcombe to the moors at Crowcombe Park Gate.

A few hundred yards beyond the cattle-grid there's a car-park tucked under Black Hill. You'll see a track that climbs to the trig-point and from the summit you can observe half the Westcountry - from the new Severn Bridge near Bristol right around past the Mendips to Glastonbury and onwards south to the Blackdown Hills, and beyond again to the lowlands of Devon and the eventual eminence of Dartmoor. The Brendon Hills and Exmoor complete the view to the west, while to the north the Bristol Channel and distant Wales add a chill to the wintry vista.

We turn down the track that leads more-or-less due west to Halsway Post. I don't know what these posts were - there are several along the Quantock ridge and they usually advertise the fact that a village lies at the foot of a nearby coombe. There is a post here - albeit a weather-beaten piece of wood with not a single marking to state why anyone would have erected it in the first place.

Our path continues directly across the main ridge track to follow ever-descending contours around the flank of the hill. High above Halsway Combe these contours veer north to join an ancient hedge of beech trees, and this we follow until the bank terminates above Paradise Combe. I love these high Quantock beech hedges. They mark the frontier between the endeavours of man and the elevated wilderness. The wild wind never ceases to make its haunting music among the bent and silver limbs and animals often shelter among the gnarled roots. When we were there a lone hind sat by the bank and eyed us with suspicion.

Where the trees end we go down towards Paradise - which is a nice thing to write and an even nicer thing to do. But before we reach Paradise Farm we turn left along a path that takes us south. It eventually joins the path that comes directly down from the beech hedge, and here I must admit I only extended the walk because I wanted to go to Paradise. You needn't, but an old sinner like me needs all the Paradise he can get.

The path now grows up into a track, which takes us down to the hamlet of Halsway (pronounced Hallsey) where we find ourselves on a paved lane beside the handsome Mecca of the folk-dancers. We can walk along under its ornate garden wall and take a stroll up the drive to pick up a leaflet or two which will tell us all about the folk-dancing events that occur at the house. Many of these are open to the public.

In her sublime book *Quantock Country*, Berta Lawrence writes that the house: "Breathes the serenity that is characteristic of a beautiful old age. Its grey Tudor face looks unmarred by the passage of time, yet this house has suffered constant change and rebuilding."

Local legend has it the place once belonged to Cardinal Beaufort, but Ms Lawrence asks: "Did the haughty and princely Cardinal really own a house here, and sally forth with his gorgeous entourage to hunt the deer in Quantock forests? The tradition is strong, definite evidence very scanty."

On the day we were there the nearest thing to a gorgeous entourage was a group called the Stogumber Hand Bell Ringers who chimed away with great aplomb. We left them to it and returned to the hills in order to retrieve the car.

To do this we turned left out of the manor and followed the tiny lane down to Lower Halsway. Here, at a sharp corner, we turned left again, up a track that took me into the depths of Halsway Combe where we climbed past the two small disused quarries and on up to Halsway Soggs. Strange word that - and we can find no reference as to what a Sogg is, or was. But at the Soggs it was simply a matter of taking the ridge track back over Hurley Beacon to Crowcombe Park Gate.

Not the greatest route march in the world, but a fabulous four or five mile slog nevertheless - one that introduces you to a million views.