

Making your mark on the moor: Dartmoor letterboxes

Level

B2

Intermediate

Britain's red letterboxes are famous, and there are plenty of places to mail your postcards from Dartmoor National Park. But Dartmoor also has a second type of letterbox, for which you need a different type of stamp.

Hidden under rocks and boulders, in cracks and crevices, you can find plastic boxes containing a rubber stamp and visitors' book. These are 'Dartmoor letterboxes' and there are thousands hidden all over the moor.

Why are they called 'letterboxes' if you can't send your mail from them? To answer that question we have to go back to 1854, when a local tour guide called James Perrot decided to install a

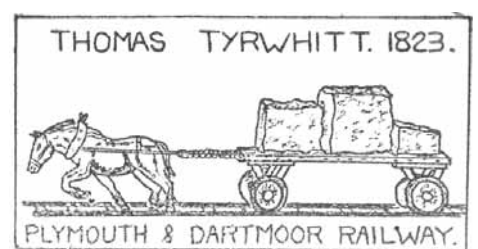
bottle at a remote beauty spot called Cranmere Pool, and encouraged walkers who managed to reach the pool to leave their visiting cards - small cards with their name and title - in the bottle to record the fact that they had visited. This proved remarkably popular, and a second box was set up at Taw marsh in 1894.

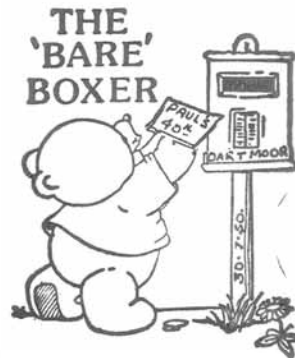
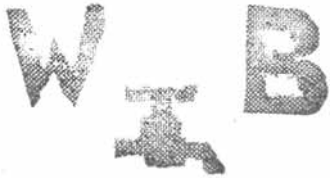
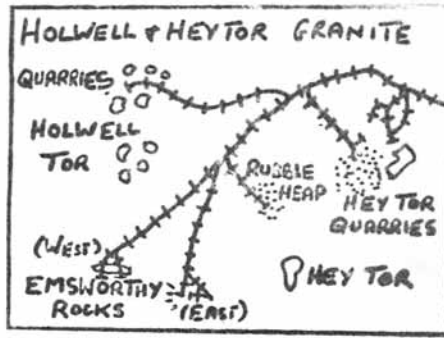
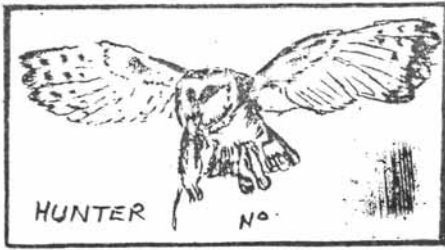
By the early 1900s the Cranmere Pool bottle had been replaced by a tin box containing a visitors' book, so anyone could sign their name to record their visit. People started to leave stamped postcards with their own address in the box, so that the next person who found it could take the card home and post it back - hopefully from

some exotic location. This led to the nickname of the 'letterbox'.

In 1933 the Cranmere Pool box was made permanent in a concrete pillar, and a second permanent box was established in 1938 at Ducks Pool.

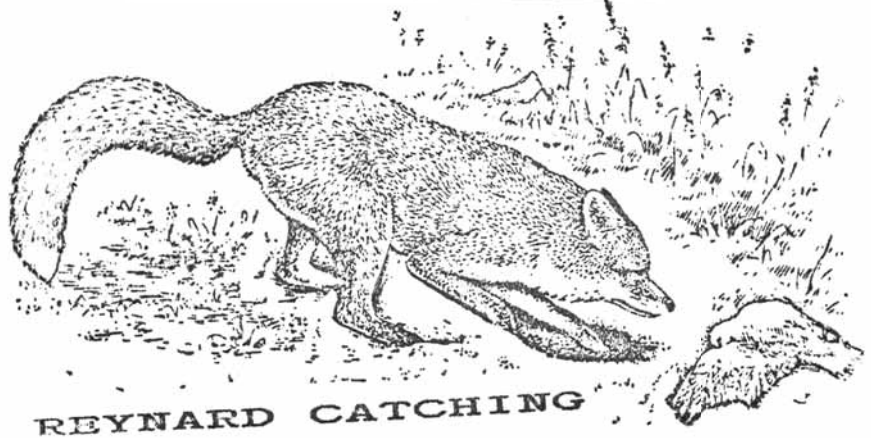
Slowly - very slowly! - letterboxes began to spread across Dartmoor. An official box was set up at Crow Tor in 1962, but by the 1970s there were still





only about a dozen boxes hidden on the moor at inaccessible and challenging locations. In the 1970s, however, things began to change. Boxes began to be sited at other Dartmoor tors (a tor is a rock formation, left over from ancient volcanoes), and in 1976 a map was published showing the location of the 15 known boxes. It sparked a letterboxing frenzy.

People began to put letterboxes all over the moor, and to meet to swap the locations of the boxes. As the number of boxes grew, so did the alarm of the Dartmoor National Park Authority (NPA), the organisation in charge of preserving the moor. They complained about a 'rash of little boxes' littering the moor. Their concerns were not entirely



unfounded: people were beginning to use cement to fix boxes into Dartmoor's rocks, and one

box was helpfully identified with a 'letterbox' label on the rocks: in foot-high red letters, with an equally large arrow. The NPA decided to stamp this out and suggested that all boxes should be removed.

There was, at first, no reply from the people who owned and looked for

letterboxes - who were beginning to call themselves 'letterboxers'. But suddenly the local newspapers were filled with replies from letterboxers who pointed out that most people were responsible about hiding and finding boxes and that the hobby was encouraging people to visit Dartmoor - one of the key ►►



It may just look like a hole under a rock...



... but inside is a 'letterbox' with a visitors' book and rubber stamp.



« objectives of the NPA.

So the letterboxers and the NPA came to an agreement: letterboxes could stay, but only if the letterboxers kept to some simple rules about siting and searching for letterboxes. It was a good compromise, and one which holds to this day.

Now with the blessing of the NPA, guidelines - and greater public awareness thanks to the argument - letterboxing grew and grew. Soon it was possible to find over a hundred boxes, so a '100 Club' was set up for people who had visited 100 to claim a special badge. Soon a '200' badge had to be added, and as letterboxes spread badges were introduced for finding 500, 1000, 2000, 3000, 4000 and 5,000 boxes!

But how do you prove you have visited a letterbox? It's easy: every letterbox has a rubber stamp which has either the name of the box, a picture, or both. When you visit a box you can take an impression of the rubber stamp (the impression is also called a 'stamp') on a piece of paper or in a book. By collecting these stamps, you can show which boxes you have visited. You can also leave your name - or a personal stamp - in the visitors' book in each box.

These rubber stamps vary considerably in their design. At first they were often carved from rubber erasers, but professional stamps soon became common and now the stamps are often bought from shops. The pictures in the boxes may be of the places where the box are hidden, or any other picture. Personal stamps are often caricatures of the owner or comic characters.

There are, at any time, about 3,000 boxes on Dartmoor. Not all are hidden under rocks - try asking ice cream vans, pubs and cafés, or even other walkers, if they have a letterbox. Anyone can hide a letterbox on the moor; LAL has four boxes for students to find. And anyone can look for boxes. All you need is paper, an inkpad and a pen, as well as the sensible shoes and clothing you always need on Dartmoor. So next time you are on Dartmoor with one of our tours, why not have a quick look under the rocks and boulders (don't dig - boxes are never buried!). You never know, it might be your first letterbox of 5,000. 🐝 TG

LAL has four letterboxes on Dartmoor, all in the area of Bonehill Rocks. You can visit Dartmoor on our regular excursions, or visit by bus at weekends - buses are best on Sundays, although services are still limited. See www.transportdirect.info for public transport links.

Letterboxing around the world

Letterboxing is no longer just a Dartmoor affair. You can find letterboxes in other parts of England - the North York Moors and the island of Lundy, for example, as well as in parts of North America.

A more technological version of letterboxing is 'geocaching', which uses precise coordinates to allow seekers to find hidden boxes using satellite positioning devices (GPS). These too have log books, but usually no rubber stamp. Instead people swap items hidden in the boxes.



Personal stamps often mention the place from which the letterboxers have come and include terrible puns on Dartmoor activities, or use comic characters. Other people just sign their names!