



Viewpoint

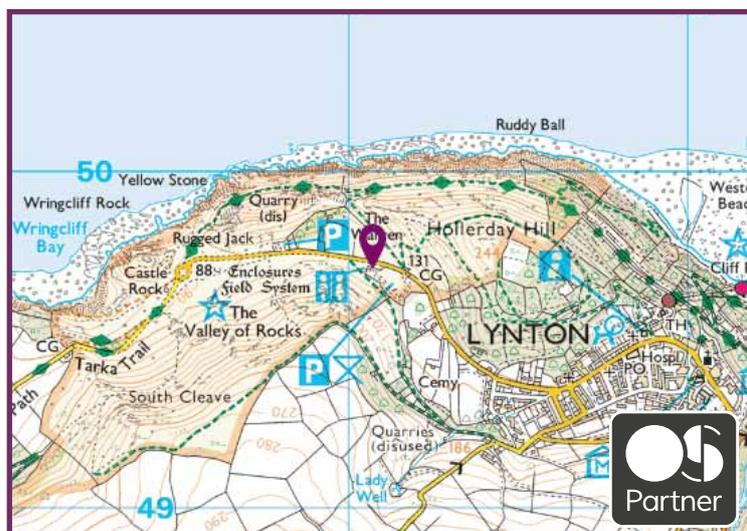
High and dry



Time: 15 mins

Region: South West England

Landscape: coastal



Location:

Valley of Rocks, Hollerday Hill, Lynton, Exmoor, Devon, EX35 6JH

Grid reference: SS 71072 49712

Directions:

From the cricket pitch/car park at the base of the Valley of Rocks take the obvious zig-zag path up Hollerday Hill. Stop just below the summit and look west down the valley towards Lee Bay

The Valley of Rocks lies on the northern edge of Exmoor, where a craggy, boulder-strewn hillside tumbles into the depths of the Bristol Channel. From this vantage point it spreads out below us, running parallel to the sea towards Lee Bay.

The deep valley, edged by strange-shaped rocky towers, was cut by the flow of the East Lyn River over thousands of years. But today the river meets the sea further east at Lynmouth and the valley is completely dry.

What made the river change its course, leaving the Valley of Rocks high and dry?



The South West Coast Path winds its way at half-height along the Valley of Rocks, carving an airy and exposed line beneath towering stacks that seem to rise straight into the sky. Stripped bare by the unrelenting sea, these stacked, fossil-strewn blocks are the exposed skeletons of what once was rolling moor, with the most prominent – Castle Rock – resembling a high fortress; a lookout across the waves.

The windswept, treeless uplands of this part of Exmoor are scored by steep, densely-wooded river valleys. The Valley of Rocks is one of these: steep sided, with rocky outcrops and a wide base that tilts gently towards the sea. But the great river that must have swept through this valley, carving its distinctive shape through the rocks, is no longer here.

Two main theories aim to explain why.

The first theory suggests that the lower reaches of the East Lyn River originally flowed westward here, parallel to the sea, before joining it nearer Lee Bay. The river carved out a channel that we now know as the Valley of Rocks.

At this time the coastal cliff line would have extended further north, but over the years erosion by wind and waves would have caused the cliffs to retreat inland. As the cliffs retreated the ridge of land between the river and the sea became narrower.

Eventually it became easier for the river to simply flow over the cliff face down to the sea at Lynmouth rather than continuing to flow westwards down the Valley of the Rocks. The Valley of Rocks is therefore the dry relic of what was once a busy river channel.

The second theory relates to the valley's position at the southern edge of a vast ice sheet in the penultimate cold period (glacial) of the Ice Age between 120,000 and 200,000 years ago.

Originally the East and West Lyn may have flowed along similar routes to those we see today. But once the ice arrived it blocked the mouth of the valley through which the river flowed and created a lake behind it.

This lake overflowed and the waters carved a new channel: the Valley of Rocks. Once the ice retreated the river could return to its original course and the Valley of Rocks drained and was left dry.

Both theories seem to explain the valley as it appears today – it may be that we'll never discover the definitive answer. Perhaps the mystery only adds to the allure of this dramatic location.

Viewpoint researched and written by writer and adventurer **Jem Benson**.