

Paddlesteamers, Postcards and Holidays Past

SITE VISIT – THE DOONE VALLEY

Oare and Malmsmead have been popular places for tourists to visit ever since Richard Doddridge Blackmore used them as the setting for his novel, “Lorna Doone”. Published in 1869, the romantic storyline of the novel captured the public imagination, and the scenic beauty of the area made it irresistible to readers who visited Doone Valley to see where the action took place.

It has been suggested that the novel was based on real-life events, and some of the characters and places are known to have existed. Nonetheless, Blackmore himself said that “the author neither dares, nor desires, to claim for it the dignity or cumber it with the difficulty of an historical novel.”

- Before you visit Doone Valley, look at the Lorna Doone postcards in the online resources, and write a short story based on them. As you walk through the valley, gather as much information and detail as you can about the scenery to incorporate it into your story back at the classroom. Make notes and sketches, especially in those places where the scenery changes, and the atmosphere does too.

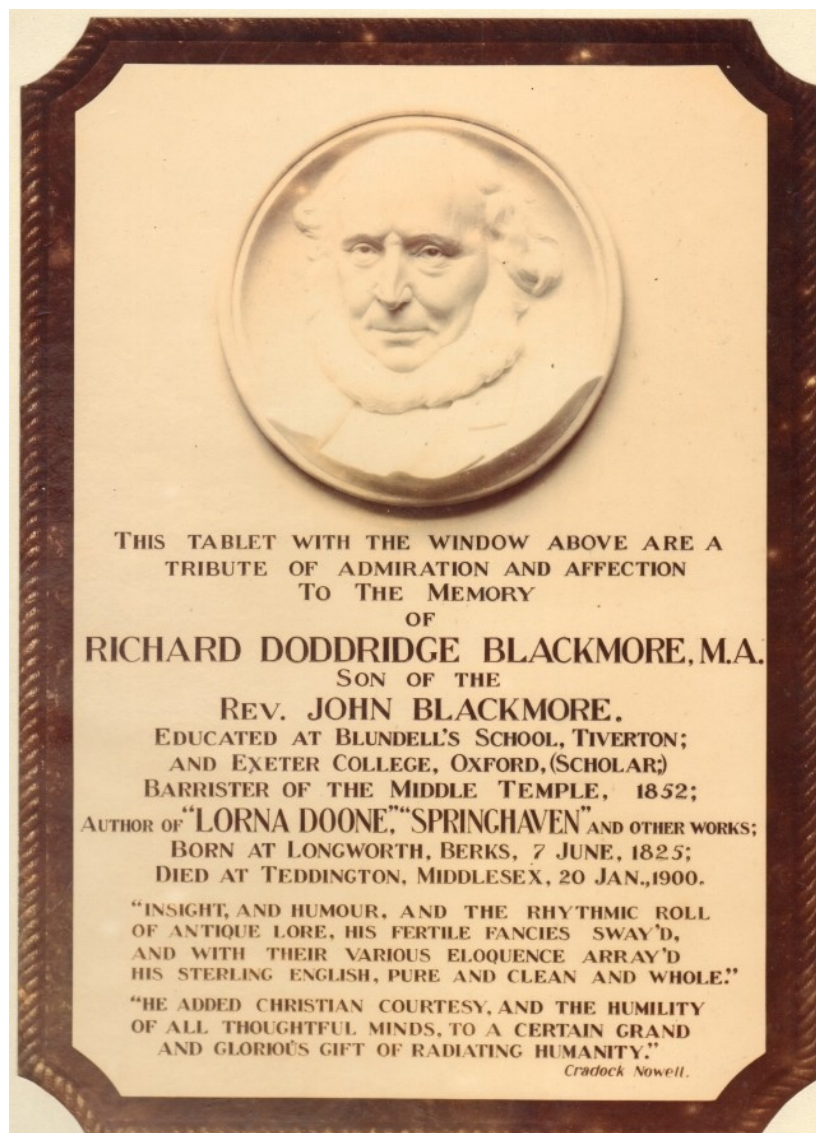


Lorna Doone Farm and the Lorna Doone Inn were named after the heroine of Blackmore's novel. They provided accommodation for the tourists, which provided an income for the area. After farm machinery put labourers out of work and the herring fishing stopped, the local people were very poor, and they were very glad to have money coming in from outside the area.

- The farm's gift shop is an example of how the novel “Lorna Doone” still helps towards bringing money into Exmoor today. As you walk through Doone Valley you will see other ways that local businesses are making money from the popularity of both the book and the landscape. Why are these important for the area?

The bridge in front of the farm is a “packhorse bridge”, and it dates from medieval times, possibly as early as the fifteenth century. Packhorses were the main way of transporting goods across Exmoor until the middle of the nineteenth century, and there are several of these cobbled bridges on the moor, enabling travellers on the ancient pathways to cross the rivers. Most of them have just one or two arches, with low walls so that the bags or baskets on the horse's back did not knock against them and spill their load.

The road crossing the packhorse bridge, heading eastwards, leads to Oare. Blackmore's uncle was Rector of Oare Church, where today there is a memorial tablet to the novelist.



- Use the information on the tablet to write a brief biography of Blackmore.

A mile or two further on in the same direction, the road crosses Oare Water at a place known as “Robber's Bridge”. You are about to find out why!

Take the footpath (near the packhorse bridge) along the drive to Cloud Farm. When you reach the farm, turn right in front of it to take a small footbridge across the stream (Badgworthy Water). Here you join the bridleway that was once one of the main packhorse routes into the area.

The Dounes



It is said that there really was a band of robbers here, who ambushed travellers making their way across the moor along this route. The Doune brothers arrived as outcasts from Scotland after a family quarrel.

Sir James Stuart of Doune Castle, near Stirling, had a twin brother, Ensor Stuart. Ensor believed that he should have inherited half the estate when their father died, since they were twins. When Sir James was murdered by the Earl of Huntley, (one of Ensor's friends), it was assumed that Ensor had paid Huntley to assassinate his twin. This meant that he was not eligible to inherit, and the whole estate passed to his brother's son, who became the second Earl of Moray.

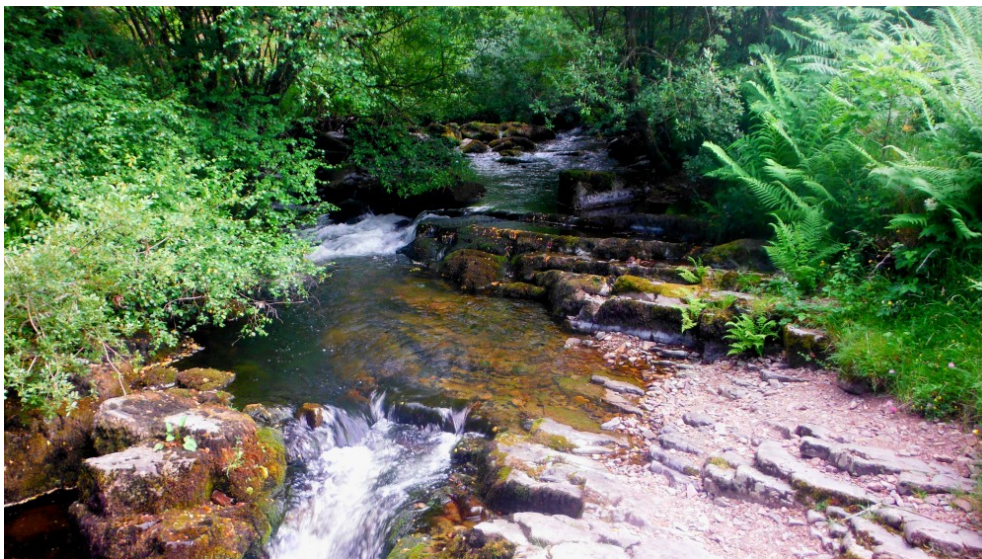
In 1618, Ensor renamed himself Ensor Doune and tried to claim the castle as his own. In fury, the rightful Earl of Moray and an army of 16 men attacked Ensor's house and gave him and his wife the choice of either being imprisoned in Doune Castle or leaving the district. Ensor's wife persuaded him that they should leave, and with a single servant they made their way to London, hoping that the King would intervene on their behalf.

When this failed, they walked to Exmoor, which took them 13 days. Here (allegedly) they took over and renovated a semi-derelict farmhouse “near Oareford” Embittered at the way they had been treated, the Dounes raised their four sons to be the same. Caring nothing for anybody, they were notorious for their robberies and raids, terrorising the local people. When the family finally returned to Scotland, in 1699, a great bonfire was lit on Dunkery Beacon to celebrate their leaving.

- Can you find Oareford on the map? Is it near Doone Valley?
- Can you find anything online about the real Dounes, in Scotland or on Exmoor? How can you validate the “facts” given above?
- The walk from London to Oare allegedly took them 13 days. What route might they have taken, and what speed would they have had to walk? Plan their itinerary for them!

You are going to follow the bridleway alongside Badgworthy Water, heading south for about two miles. Ignore the other paths going off to the left and the right. Stay on the first path to carry on ahead beside the water.

A short distance southwards along the bridleway from Cloud Farm, there is a memorial to RD Blackmore, erected in 1969 by the Lorna Doone Centenary Committee. The inscription reads: “To the memory of Richard Doddridge Blackmore, whose novel Lorna Doone extols to all the world the joys of Exmoor.”



In 2016, the Lynmouth Pavilion Project sent out a pack to local guest houses and B&Bs, asking visitors staying there to describe their memories of past holidays on Exmoor. Many of the respondents said that several generations of their family had spent holidays on the moor, with some family memories spanning most of the twentieth century. Most people's favourite memories featured visits to Exmoor's top scenic spots; and the Doone Valley was high on the list.

- Picnics beside the stream in Doone Valley cropped up in a lot of visitors' stories. The photo above is many people's favourite picnic spot, near the Blackmore monument. Can you find it? Can you list the features that make it seem so special to visitors?

You will notice that the path changes underfoot after a while, and the scenery that it passes through keeps changing, too.

- Describe these changes in your notebook, and draw a quick sketch each time to remind yourself of how the new scenery looks. What causes these changes? What difference does it make to the atmosphere? If you were composing a piece of music about the scenery, how would the music change each time? (Would it get faster or slower, louder or softer? Would it sound more cheerful or more sinister?)



Towards the end of Badgworthy Wood, your path crosses a footbridge, and then you find yourself on open moorland, in a deep valley.

- Count your paces from here, and make a note of how many paces you take before you come to another small valley, dropping down to join yours from the right. As you will see on the map, a small stream runs down this side valley. This water in the stream is the run-off from Badgworthy Lees.
- Count your paces again from here, until the landscape changes again, and your path curves to the right, into another small valley, with a path running downhill to meet yours. **STOP HERE.** There is a waymarker beside this path. What does it say? Write down the number of paces again. What is the total number of paces from the footbridge to here? How far is it on the map?

Now there is sort of triangle of low ground between your path and Badgworthy Water, below the waymarker. In medieval times, a few centuries ago, there was a village here. You will find it marked on the map, located between Badgworthy Lees and Badgworthy Hill, at grid reference SS793444. Can you find any trace of it on the ground? (In summer it is difficult to see where the buildings were, because of the bracken).

- Why do you think the first villagers chose to settle here? What things are always essential for daily living, and what additional matters would medieval villagers have had to consider? What other landscape features would you look for in a place where you are thinking of settling, if you do not have electricity or running water, or a car or a nearby shop?
- Why was this a good place for the real-life Doune brothers to ambush travellers? How many reasons can you find? (Look at the landscape around you, and check out what the map tells you about it).
- What does the map show, dotted around the area, that tells you that there were people here even in prehistoric times?

The bank running through your valley, alongside Badgworthy Water, is the county boundary. You will have seen the Somerset sign at the start of your walk. How is the boundary marked on the map?

You will see that the map calls Badgworthy Lees “Doone Country”.

The medieval village would have been deserted by the time the Doune brothers arrived in the seventeenth century. One of Exmoor's five major deserted settlements, it is thought to have been abandoned by the beginning of the fifteenth century. There are traces of a larger building, however, that may have been in use as a farm to a later date. Could this have been the semi-derelict farmhouse near Oareford that the brothers are said to have renovated?

- After you have explored the site of the medieval village, turn around and walk back to Lorna Doone Farm, following the same route but in reverse. Does the scenery look different from this direction?
- Back at school after the visit, revise your Lorna Doone story to include descriptions of the places where the action happens, using your notes and sketches. Remember that this is fiction: you do not need to include anything about the Doune brothers (but you can if you want to).
- Now read the synopsis of Blackmore's novel in the online resources. Can you see how the person who designed the postcards used different kinds of Exmoor scenery to change the atmosphere each time?