

About the farm

Welcome

To

Dart Raffe Farm



Farm information

Contact details

Dart Raffe Farm
Witheridge
Tiverton
Devon EX16 8PX

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Booking a visit

In the first instance, please telephone the farm. Visits are normally free of charge for school visits or for educational groups of six or more.

Cancellation arrangements

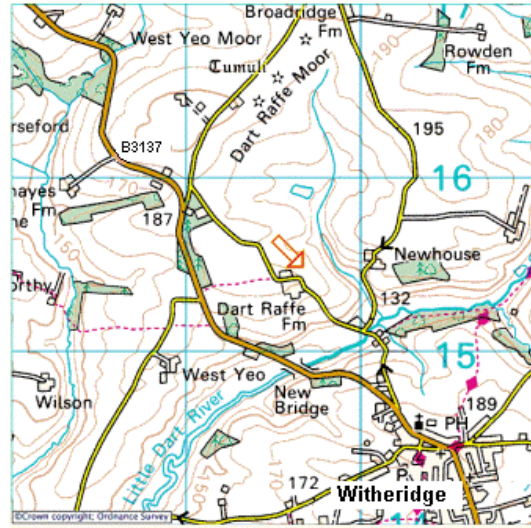
If you are unable to carry out your visit, please let us know as soon as possible so that we can make alternative arrangements.

How to get here

The farm is ½ mile from the village of Witheridge. From Witheridge, turn off the B3137 taking the next lane to the right after the church. At the bottom of the hill, cross the bridge over the

stream and take the left turn up the hill, signposted Dart Raffe.

From South Molton, take the B3137 and turn sharp left a mile before Witheridge, signposted Rose Ash. Then take the next right, signposted Dart Raffe.



On arrival

Cars and minibuses can be parked in the car park next to the lake, at the start of the nature trail. There is parking for horse boxes at the start of the bridleway – please ask for details.

On wet days, the Old Barn adjacent to the farmhouse can be used as a schoolroom, and cars and minibuses parked in the farmyard. If you are coming by coach, let us know in advance and we will make special arrangements for parking.

Facilities

Undercover teaching area

The Old Barn adjacent to the farmhouse can be used as a teaching area, for packed lunches or for wet weather activities.

Picnics/Lunch

There is a picnic site by the lake, or the Old Barn can be used for lunch.

Toilets

There is a toilet near to the lake and nature trail with cold water hand washing facilities, or if the barn is used, a toilet in the farmhouse can be used by arrangement.

Emergencies

Place to go to if there is an emergency: we have a first aid box in the farmhouse and in the old barn. The nearest hospital is at Tiverton, where there is a minor injuries unit.

Introduction

The farm is located in peacefully rolling countryside, with the farmhouse and some historic farm buildings located on a site that records show to have been farmed since the time of the Domesday Book.

The farm is managed as a mixed arable and livestock unit, with crop production and sheep.

Of particular interest is the move over the last 12 years away from intensive farming to the introduction of a range of Countryside Stewardship Schemes based on public access, and protection and enhancement of wildlife.

What you can see and do on the farm

A typical visit might include a walk along our **nature trail**, which takes about 1½-2 hours, including discussion en route. Gerald, who has lived and farmed at Dart Raffe since he was a child, is happy to act as guide if required. A map and details of the nature trail are on the following pages.

Alternatively a themed walk can be arranged – this can vary according to group interests. There is a 4km bridleway for horse riders. Areas available for themed walks or for your own fieldwork are described on pages 8/9.

Dart Raffe Farm Nature Trail

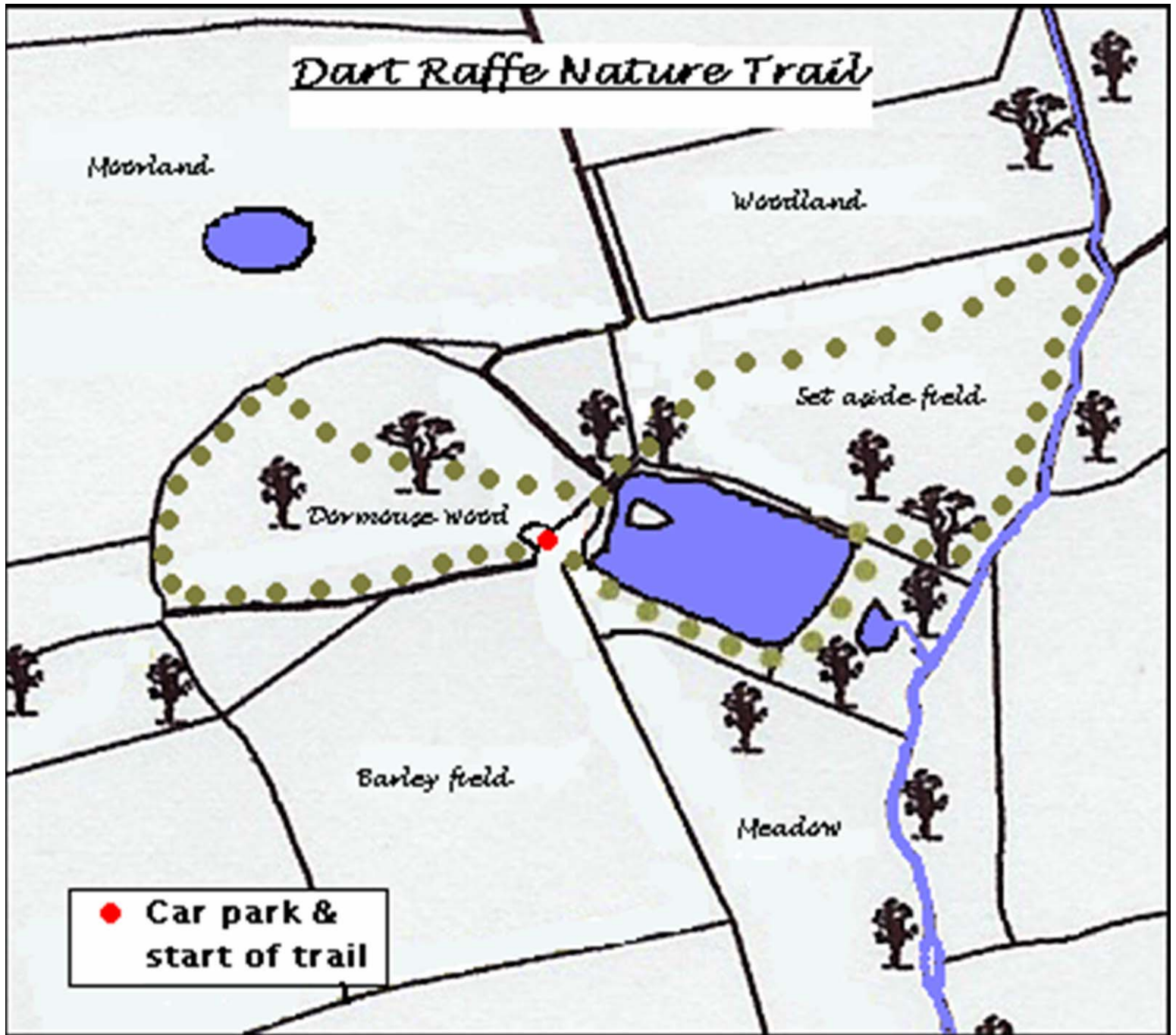
The trail is marked on the map with a green dotted line. Where items are marked in bold below, it is because Gerald has a particular story to tell or explanation to give.

The trail is 1100 metres in length and is designed to last about 1½ - 2 hours, including commentary. A shortened version can be arranged, for example for younger children. A picnic stop can be made by the lake.

- 🌸 Start walk from car park.
- 🌸 Cross wooden bridge and take lakeside path, with wildflower area to left. This is particularly beautiful in June when there is a mass of foxgloves in bloom.
- 🌸 The lake and surrounding area are rich in wildlife. The three small islands are ideal nesting sites for moorhens and mallard, swallows swoop across the water to feed on insects and heron and grebe can sometimes be seen.
- 🌸 There are many dragonflies and iridescent blue damsel flies and the water is thick with tadpoles in the spring. Otters visit the lake from time to time.
- 🌸 The waterside wildflowers include meadowsweet, wild vetches, bulrushes and many others.
- 🌸 The lake is stocked with fish, mainly carp, which can be clearly seen on warm days, when they cruise near the surface. **Eels also inhabit the lake.** Otters have returned to the area and have recently been seen hunting for fish in the lake.
- 🌸 The large fir trees on the lakeside margin are Douglas Fir, which is valued for making pinewood furniture and for building.
- 🌸 The lake is fed by springs and at the end of the lake, water flows out again to the nearby stream, and from there to the Little Dart River on its way to the River Taw and finally into the sea.
- 🌸 At the far end of the lake on the right is "Owl Pellet Wood", a rather dark wood where tawny owls have lived and nested for many years, and can be heard at night (and sometimes during the day).

- ❁ The trail goes through a gate into Woodrick Field, which is in set aside. Part of this field has been sown with 'purple haze' - a special flower mixture rich with pollen and nectar for butterflies and bees - and with another mixture designed to provide seeds for birds to feed in the winter.
- ❁ Buttercups, white and red wild clovers, thistles and dog roses and a host of other wild plants also provide valuable food and cover for birds. We believe we have 9 species of bird on the farm which are on the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) 'red list' of conservation concern. They will be doing a survey of the birds on the farm this Spring.
- ❁ Trees along the margin include witch elm, sycamore and horse chestnut (conker tree).
- ❁ A stream runs alongside the field, which is a **migratory stream for trout, salmon and sea trout**, which spawn in its clear water.
- ❁ The walk continues along the east side of the field, where there is an ancient farm boundary hedge, which is around 900-1000 years old. **Hedgerows can be dated by species counts, which visitors can try out during the walk.**
- ❁ Buzzards can often be seen hunting for prey in the field or circling on the warm air thermals on fine days. Kestrels, sparrow hawk and the occasional hobby are other birds of prey which might be seen here.
- ❁ The aspen trees in the corner of the field are a native British tree notable for their beautiful colours in autumn and because the leaves rustle even on a still day.
- ❁ Roe deer and red deer live in the woodland next to the field and visit the field to graze or lie in the grass - although, like most wild animals, they are shy of human contact.
- ❁ The walk now leads across the field and through a wooden gate into the Dormouse Wood, which has a wide variety of native trees, including hazel and willow, which can be identified as we walk through, and which is another haven for wildlife.

- 🌿 A small quarry can be seen from the path, from which has been dug some of the local red stone for making farm tracks, and which is now the car park for visitors to the lake and nature trail.
- 🌿 The path also passes by an environmentally friendly, waterless, composting toilet built for visitors, which has a lovely smell of the cedar wood from which it is built.
- 🌿 **This wood is home to dormice**, which are an endangered species in Britain. There is evidence of their presence on the woodland floor where they have been nibbling hazel nuts, which are one of their favourite foods. This wood is listed by English Nature on their national inventory of dormouse sites.
- 🌿 There is a good view from the path of Dart Raffe Moor, which is boggy moorland, thick with rushes, grazed by sheep. This type of landscape is known as Culm Measure and is characteristic of the traditional mid Devon landscape. It is important for wetland wildlife. Hares are regularly seen here, and skylarks are often seen and heard singing high above.
- 🌿 The trail returns along the woodland margin to the car park.



Nature Trail Map

Areas available for themed walks or for your own fieldwork:

River and streams: The farm is bounded to the South by the Little Dart River and to the East by a tributary of the Little Dart. The river and stream are used by trout and salmon for migration and spawning, and two otter holts have been built along the stream to encourage visiting otters.

Activities: Searching for and identifying baby fish in the river, picnics by the river.

Woodland & Hedgerows: The farm has 35 acres of woodland, some ancient woodland but mostly created in the last 12 years, with a wide variety of native tree species. The woodland and hedges support many nesting birds, and the glades and hedgerows are rich in flower and plant species, attracting a wide range of insects and butterflies. The traditional Devon hedge banks are in some cases many hundreds of years old.

Tree and bush species include hazel, willow, birch, ash, oak, horse chestnut, sweet chestnut, crab apple, aspen, beech, field maple, Scots pine, rowan, hawthorn, blackthorn, holly, hornbeam.

Birds include tawny owls, little owls, finches, thrushes, dunnock, yellowhammer, tits including willow tit and, in winter, field fares and redwing.

Animals include dormice (see nature trail pages), red deer, roe deer, brown hares and badgers.

Activities: Tree identification, dating hedgerows by species counts, weaving willows, making a wicker fence, making a woodland shelter. Gerald will demonstrate and share his skills with visiting groups.

Bridleways and footpaths: We have a new 4 km bridleway around the farm, which is open to the public, as well as two footpaths. There is a map in this pack which shows the routes.

Activities: Visits are welcome from pony clubs and riding schools, to ride all or part of the bridleway. There is an area by the lake where ponies can be tethered while riders stop for a picnic.

Crops: We have 115 acres of arable fields, which are this year planted to spring barley and maize or in set aside. The crops are being grown for cattle feed for local dairy farmers. Six metre field margins are left around most of these fields to benefit wildlife.

Activities: Examining seed heads to identify crops. Discussing uses of different crops. Looking for wildflowers and grasses in the field margins and discussing benefits of field margins for wildlife. .

Meadows/sheep: We have 100 acres of undulating grassland, which is used for grazing sheep between April and October. No fertilisers or other chemicals have been applied for 12 years, resulting in a rich mix of grasses, clovers and other plants.

Activities: Discussing uses of sheep and wool. Identifying topography and watersheds, making drawings of the landscapes.

Lake & Ponds: We have a mature lake spanning nearly two acres, which is home to a variety of water birds and is in a very tranquil setting, away from any sight or sound of habitation or traffic.

Activities: Pond dipping, bird and wild flower identification.

Moorland: Land, previously drained for growing crops, has been allowed to revert to Culm Measure (typical mid-Devon moorland), to encourage skylarks, curlew, lapwing and snipe to return to their traditional nesting grounds. The skylark population, in particular, has exploded in the 5 years since this policy has been followed, and hares benefit from the cover provided by the rushes.

The moorland is grazed by sheep from April to October as part of the environmental management programme.

Activities: Bird and plant identification.

Farm Profile

History:

There was a Domesday manor on this site which was called Derta or Derte. After the Norman invasion in 1066, it was given by William the Conqueror to a French lord called William de Poilley. He may not have been Norman - the name comes from Burgundy, where they were Lords of the Castle of Pouilly sur Saone. His tenant was called Ralph, after whom the farm was named - Ralph de Derte became over time Dart Raffe.

The farmhouse has had a somewhat chequered history - it was at one time a monastery. It is thought to have been defended by the Royalists in the Civil War, but was defeated by the Parliamentarians, who went on to sack the castle at Worlington. Cannon balls have been found near the house.

The barn which is used for school visits is built of cob and stone with very old 'A' frame roof timbers, and is around 500 years old. It was once a tithe barn, where grain was stored for the benefit of the Church. Tithe barns were used in feudal England to store the produce paid as a tax to the parish priest by the local occupants of the land. In the Middle Ages, monasteries often controlled the collection of tithes over a wide area and, as a result, constructed sizeable tithe barns.

There have been more dramatic events in the last hundred years: there was a serious fire in 1935, when the thatched roof was destroyed and the house gutted, and in 2001, the animals on the farm were all culled when foot and mouth disease reached the neighbouring farm.



The photo above shows farming at Dart Raffe in the 1920s, with a hayrick being made with a horse drawn hay-sweep. There are some old farm tools and small machinery on display in the old barn.

Soil:

The soil is clay loam over either clay or red stony shale, varying from good, free-draining arable land to Culm Measure moorland.

Landscape:

The farm is on land ranging from 150m to 185m – a mix of flat land and valley slopes.

Who lives and works here:

The farm is run by Gerald Manning and Gill Edwards. Gerald has lived and farmed at Dart Raffe for most of his life, and was also until recently a Board Member of the Environment Agency. Gill was until two years ago a business analyst.

Like most farms, we employ specialist contractors to carry out much of the work in the fields, such as ploughing and harvesting, as a whole range of large farm machinery is required which is very costly to buy.

Encouraging Wildlife:

The range of activities under our Environmental Stewardship Schemes include recreation of lowland moor, pond creation, preservation of old meadows, extensive tree planting, preservation and restoration of hedgerows and maintenance of uncultivated 6 meter field margins around the arable fields. The farm has won the Bronze Otter trophy from the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group for the most outstanding example in Devon of integrating conservation with commercial farming practices.

Other Enterprises:

- Undercover storage for caravans and motorhomes
- Grass keep for horses and ponies
- Coarse fishing in the lake and trout fishing in the Little Dart river