METRIC SURVEY OF LITTLE ASHCOMBE, SIMONSBATH
Exmoor Mires Project EAC15

PROJECT REPORT

By Hazel Riley

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OASIS PROJECT NO 211023

ABBREVIATIONS

EH English Heritage
EMP Exmoor Mires Project
ENPA Exmoor National Park Authority
GPS Global Positioning System
NMR National Monuments Record
OSGB36 Ordnance Survey National grid
OSTN02 Ordnance Survey transformation parameters for conversion of WGS84 coordinates to the Ordnance Survey National Grid coordinates
RCHME Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England
RICS Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors

LIST OF FIGURES AND IMAGE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

An extensive drainage system on Little Ashcombe was surveyed for the Exmoor Mires Project, on behalf of the Exmoor National Park Authority. The survey has shown that the drainage system is one of the earliest features of John Knight's reclamation and improvement of Exmoor's moorlands, and documentary evidence suggests that the drains were constructed in the 1830s.

INTRODUCTION

This survey of *c* 50 ha of land on Little Ashcombe was undertaken for the Exmoor Mires Project (EMP) on behalf of the Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA). The principal aim of the work was to carry out a metric survey of the area to identify, accurately locate, record and interpret extant archaeological features in the survey area. The landscape is dominated by an extensive system of drainage ditches, clearly visible on air photographs and Lidar images. The record and interpretation of this drainage system, together with other archaeological features in the area, was required in advance of mire restoration work carried out by EMP in the environs of Little Ashcombe (ENPA 2015). The report consists of two sections: the archaeological features and their historic landscape context are outlined and interpreted in the first section. The second section contains the evidence base for this in the form of a Site Gazetteer which presents the detailed results of the survey work.

Location, topography and geology

The survey area takes in the spur of land between Ashcombe Bottom and Clovenrocks Bridge, NE of Simonsbath, at the heart of the former Royal Forest of Exmoor and within Exmoor National Park (SS 77474, 40660 to 78494, 39714). The ground slopes to the NW from *c* 440m to the east of Prayway Head, down to *c* 380-390m west of Clovenrocks Bridge (Figs 1 & 2). The underlying geology is rocks of the Devonian period: slates of the Kentisbury formation. The northern part of the survey area has acid, loamy upland soils with a wet, peaty surface; to the south are more freely draining acid loamy soils (bgs.ac.uk). The current land use is rough grazing, with some improved grassland and some very wet areas.

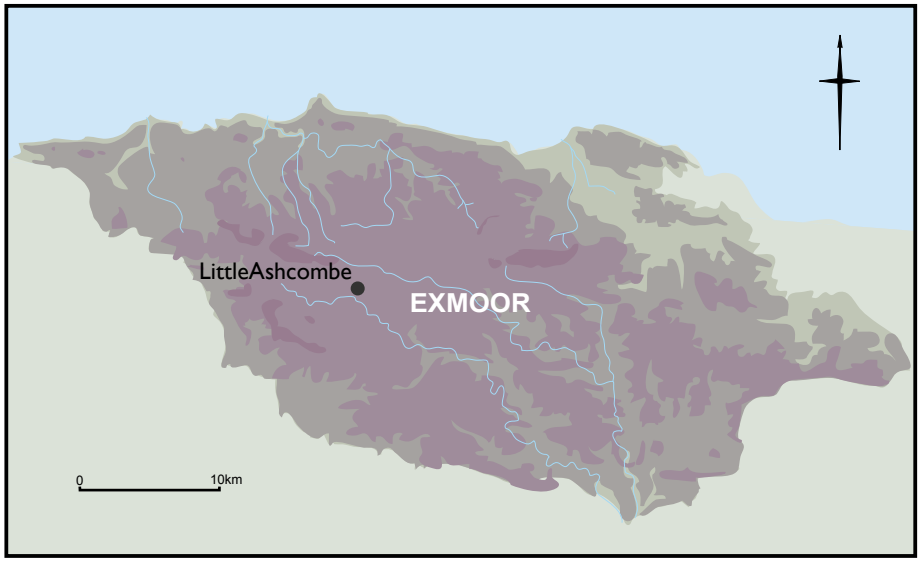


Fig 1 Location map

Site numbering

Each archaeological feature has been given a unique number with the prefix EAC15, and these numbers are used throughout this report: EAC15(201) to EAC15(208).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Little Ashcombe lies at the heart of the former Royal Forest of Exmoor, on the eastern edge of James Boevey's farm at Simonsbath, which was enclosed by 1670 (MacDermot 1973, 323). The land surrounding Simonsbath Farm was open moorland until John Knight purchased the former Royal Forest in 1820 (MacDermot 1973, 435). This can be seen on the first detailed maps of the area which date from the early years of the 19th century (Figs 3 & 4). John Knight began work on enclosing and improving his Exmoor estates in the 1820s. The south-facing slopes of the Barle Valley around Simonsbath were the first areas that Knight chose to improve for arable cultivation on the former Royal Forest. 'There were already at Simonsbath old inclosures of some 108 acres which formed the farm attached to the only farm on the forest, and east and west of these, at Honeymead and Cornham, he began to break the ground' (Orwin 1929, 34). This was done using bullock teams of six animals, paring off the turf with a broadshare, then spreading and burning the turf and liming. By 1845 2500 acres were broken and brought into cultivation in this way, and as early as 1824 a correspondent of the Sporting Magazine reported 'the disafforestation of Exmoor and the enclosure and cultivation of very large tracts of country' (Orwin 1929, 36-7; 38).

Burton's work on John Knight's Exmoor estate accounts suggests that Little Ashcombe was one of the first areas to be improved: 'Other work carried out in 1836 included two major drainage schemes and a few minor ones. On Ashcombe, 628½ chains (a little over 7¾ miles) of Floting gutters were cut by George Crocombe, at a cost of £7 17s 1½d' (Burton 1989, 72).

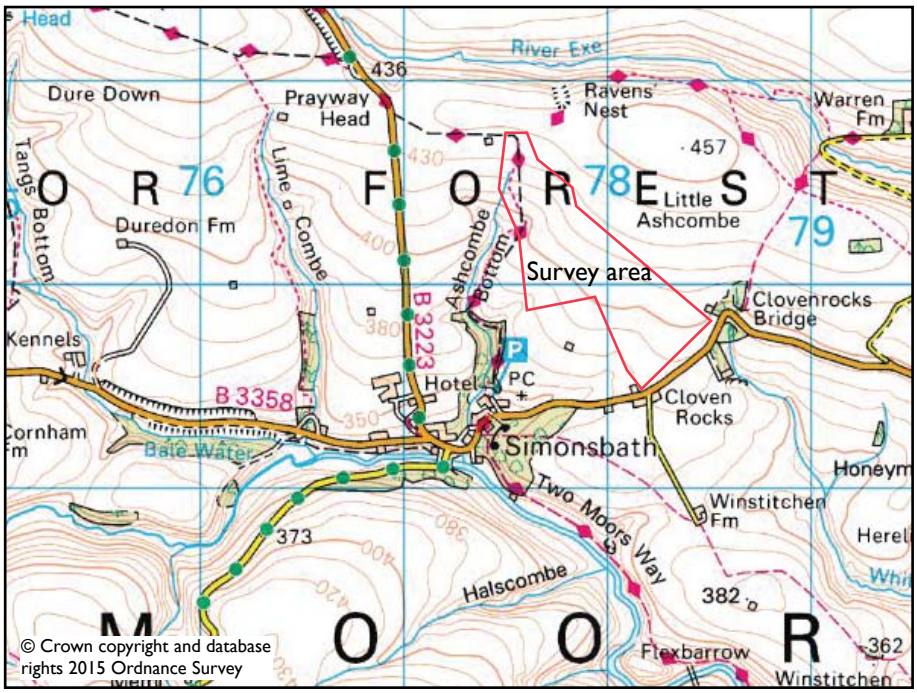


Fig 2 Survey location and topography

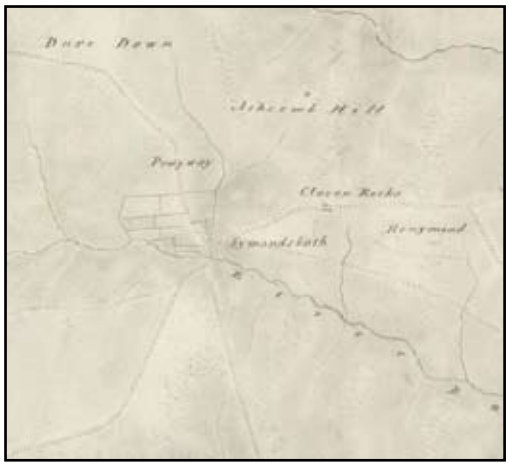
By the late 19th century the area is shown as enclosed, with small fields to the south of the survey area and larger enclosures to the north. Most of the northern areas are shown as rough pasture with some better land to the NE (Fig 5).

PREVIOUS WORK

The EH NMP project for Exmoor mapped the archaeological and historic landscape features of the whole of the National Park from air photographs (Hegarty and Toms 2009). The NMP transcription recorded drainage ditches centred at SS 7780 4019 and SS 7820 3979, which were interpreted as probably post-medieval in date and associated with the Knight family's attempt at agricultural improvement in the area (Exmoor HER 2339 and 2888). The features centred at SS 7780 3986 were interpreted as the remains of a post-medieval water meadow (Exmoor HER 2889).

THE SURVEY

The fieldwork was carried out during February and March 2015. The archaeological features were surveyed at a scale of 1:5000 using survey grade differential GPS in conjunction with the Lidar data for the survey area where the vegetation and boggy areas made access difficult. Two areas were surveyed at a larger scale to show the complexity of parts of the system (Area A) and the range of historic features (Area B). Profiles were surveyed across representative features in Area B.



The GPS-derived geodetic WGS84 coordinates were transformed to the Ordnance Survey National Grid (OSGB36) using the Ordnance Survey's grid transformation (OSTN02) in Leica's GPS post-processing software. Observation times were based on those recommended by the OS and the RICS in order to obtain accurate heighting information (OS 2010; RICS 2010). Figure 6 depicts the archaeological features at 1:5000 scale and shows the surveyed features with their EAC15 numbers.

Fig 3 (above left) Extract from the OS 1804 map North Molton showing the enclosures around Simonsbath Farm (bl.ac.uk)

Fig 4 (left) Extract from the 1818 Inclosure map for Exmoor Forest (SRO Q\Rde 140) (Reproduced with permission of the Somerset Heritage Trust, Somerset Heritage Centre)

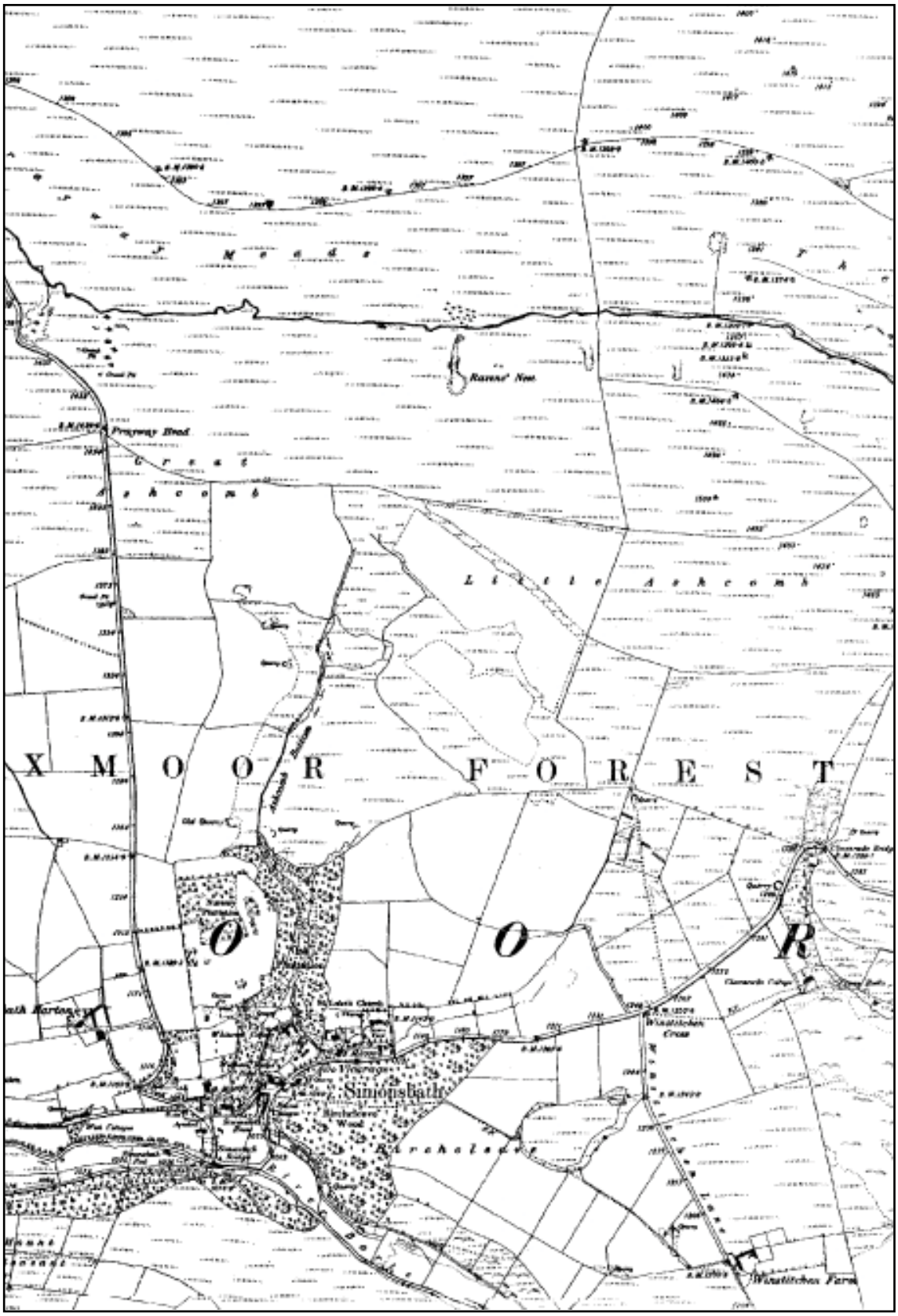


Fig 5 Extract from the OS 1st edition map

DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES

Routeways

Several hollow ways run SW/NE from Ashcombe towards Little Ashcombe and Exe Cleave, EAC15(201). The extent of the features is clear on the Lidar image for the area (Fig 7) and they can also be seen in the enclosed pasture fields on the SW side of the survey area where the hollow ways are clearly overlain by the enclosure banks and cut by part of the drainage system on Little Ashcombe (Fig 8). These are the earliest archaeological features located in the survey area and are the remains of routes across the former Royal Forest, dating from the medieval period or earlier. Simonsbath was an important river crossing in the medieval period and had a wooden bridge in the 16th century; such routes were used both as through routes for travellers and packhorses, and as drove roads for access to Exmoor's summer grazing for cattle and sheep (Riley 2015).

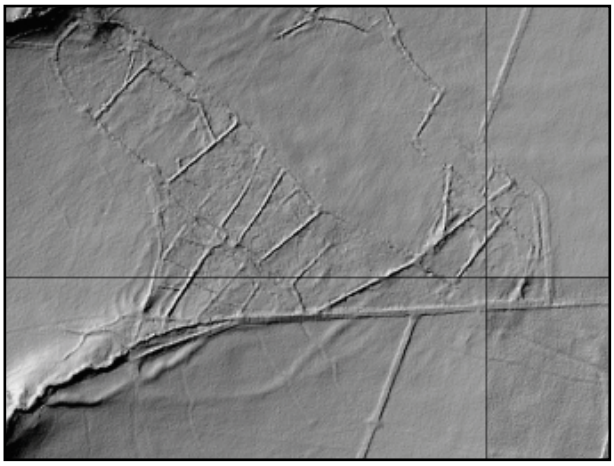


Fig 7 Extract from Lidar data showing the routeways overlain by the drainage system on Little Ashcombe (based on data supplied by South West Water) (© Geomatics)

Fig 8 Looking NE up the routeways EAC15(201) on Little Ashcombe (Hazel Riley)

Drainage

An extensive system of drainage ditches, EAC15(202), runs across the survey area from the northern end of Ashcombe at SS 77474, 40660 to Clovenrocks Bridge at SS 78494, 39714, covering an area of *c* 28ha (Fig 6). The system is designed around two long drainage channels which run with the slope. The higher horizontal channel does not follow the contour but is laid out to collect water from the NW and the SE, which is then drained via several channels which run downslope to Ashcombe Water. The lower horizontal channel is set out along the contour of the hillside. (Fig 9). Numerous interconnecting straight channels running across the contours take water from these channels to drain it into the headwaters of Ashcombe Water (Fig 10). The lower horizontal channel also discharged water directly into the headwaters of Ashcombe Water at its west end (Fig 11). In the centre of the drainage system a long channel dog-legs down the hill to join a deep drain which runs into the lower horizontal drain. Further channels help to move water from this area (Figs 12 & 13). The field boundaries here respect this area of drains, indicating that the drains were laid out before enclosure took place. At the south of the survey area the remains of ploughed over drainage channels are visible in fields which have been improved in the 20th century (Figs 7 & 8). These appear to be part of the main drainage system, not separate catchwater meadows as suggested by the NMP records. The banks of spoil along the edges of the most of the channels are from the original construction, but also suggest that they have been kept clear for a number of years (Fig 13).

Fig 9 (above left) Looking NW along the lower horizontal drainage channel (Hazel Riley)

Fig 10 (above) Looking SW down one of the vertical drainage channels (Hazel Riley)

Fig 11 (left) The NW end of the lower horizontal drainage channel. The enclosure bank has been repaired where the channel discharged into the headwaters of Ashcombe Water (Hazel Riley)

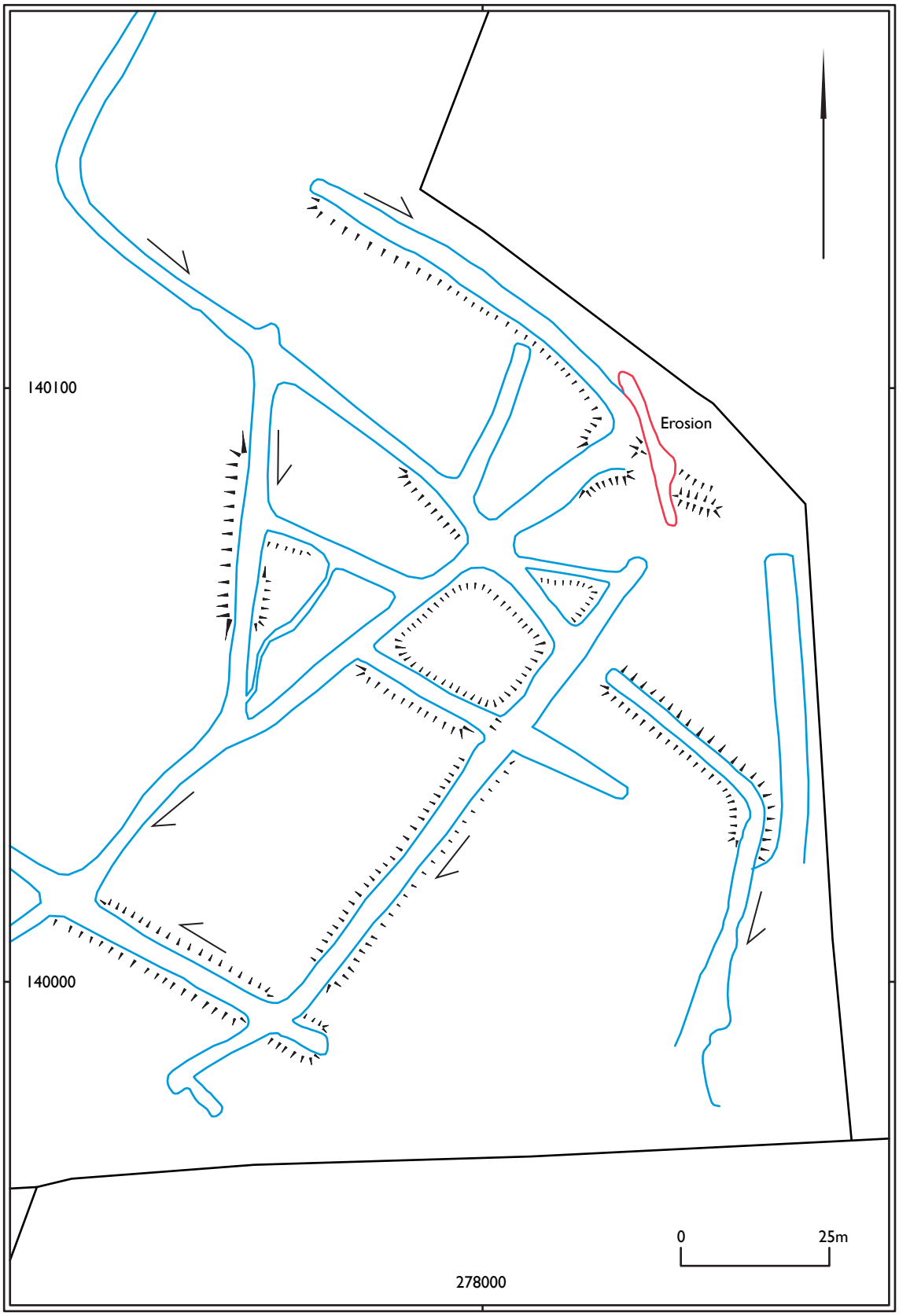


Fig 12 Area A survey plan (1:1000)

Iron prospection

Two long, narrow trenches, EAC15(203,204), with banks of spoil on both sides lie to the SE of the survey area (Figs 14 & 15; Front cover). The trenches do not connect with the drainage system and are different in profile to the drainage channels, suggesting that they are trenches dug for ironstone prospection (Fig 16). They were probably dug during the 1850s when Frederic Knight was seeking to exploit the minerals from his Exmoor estates. In 1858 the Plymouth Iron Company worked Honeymead Mine and probably dug shafts and adits north of the Simonsbath to Exford road east of Honeymead Post. The trial trenches on Ashcombe could have been associated with this phase of iron exploitation on Exmoor. John Knight also initiated some mineral exploration: in 1846 the lease was sold for Wheal Eliza copper mine in the Barle Valley *c* 2kms to the south of Ashcombe (Burton 1989, 144; Orwin 1929, 117).

Stone quarries and track

Three stone quarries lie within the survey area, EAC15 (205,206,207); they were probably dug to provide stone for the enclosure banks. The largest, EAC15 (207), seems to post-date the drainage system. It is shown as "Quarry" on the OS 1st edition map (Fig 5), suggesting that it was in use at the end of the 19th century. The track EAC15 (208) links the quarry with the Simonsbath to Exford road clearly overlies the drainage system (Figs 17 & 18). It was probably used to transport stone from the quarry, but it could also have been used for heavy agricultural machinery such as the steam plough.

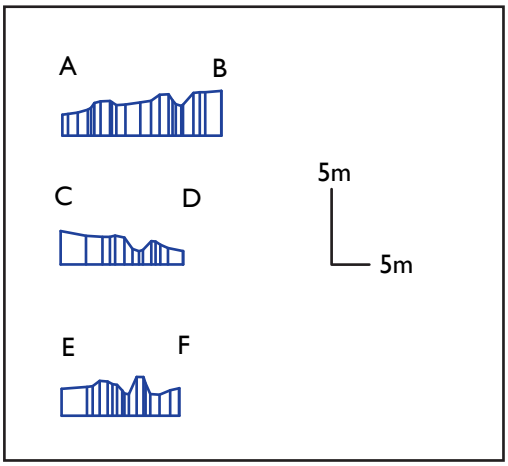


Fig 13 (above left) Looking SW down one of the vertical drains in Area A (Hazel Riley)

Fig 15 (left) Looking SE down iron prospecting trench EAC15(204) in Area B (Hazel Riley)

Fig 16 (above) Profiles of iron prospecting trenches (AB, CD) and drainage channels (EF) (vertical scale x2)

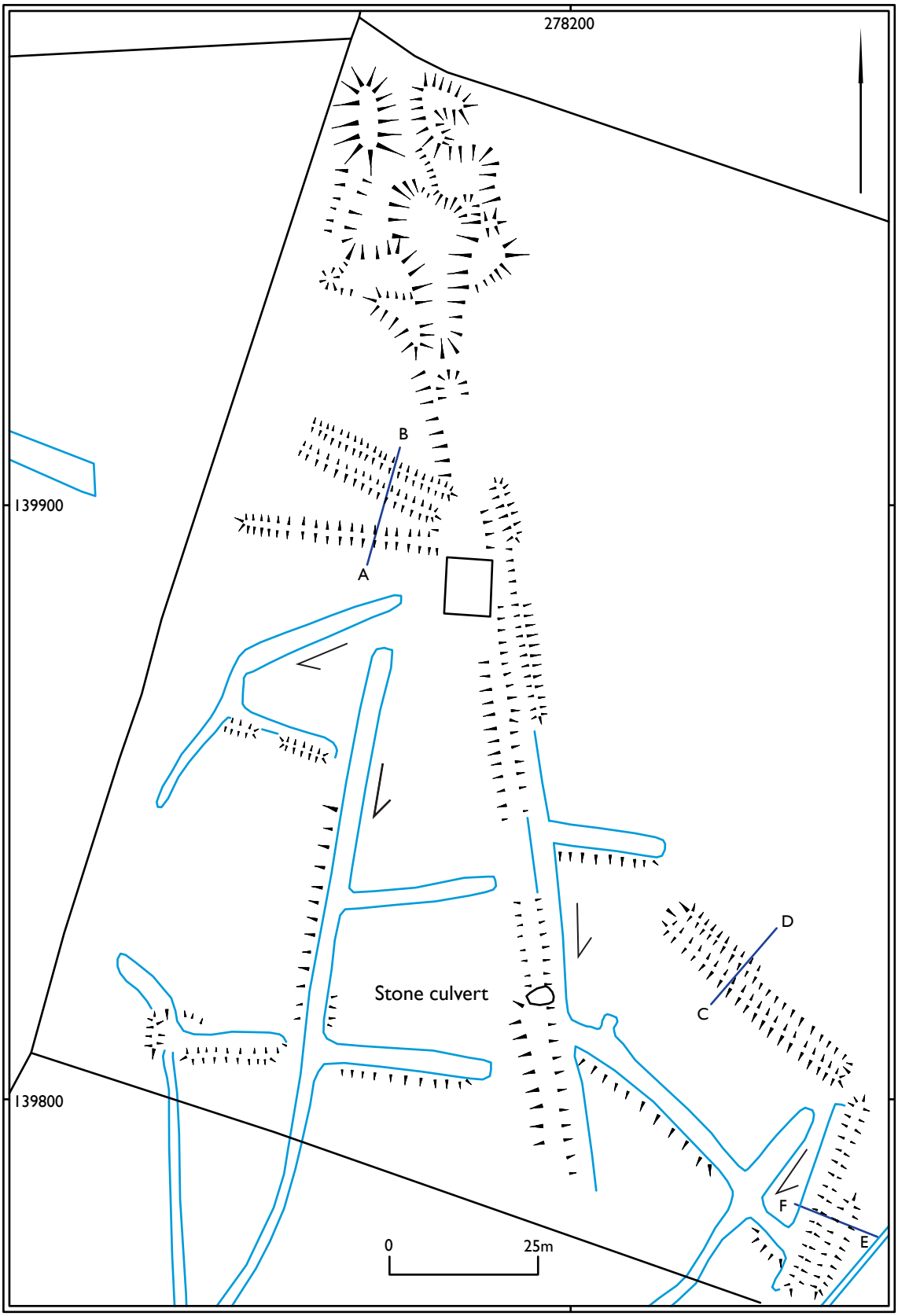


Fig 14 Area B survey plan (1:1000)

THE DRAINAGE SYSTEM ON LITTLE ASHCOMBE AND THE RECLAMATION OF EXMOOR

The drainage system on Little Ashcombe is clearly a significant feature of the historic landscape. It lies close to John Knight's mansion in Simonsbath and drains into Ashcombe Water, part of John Knight's designed landscape around Simonsbath (Garrett 2004; Riley 2014). The field evidence suggests that the drainage system pre-dates the enclosure of the fields on Little Ashcombe. Given that the area around Simonsbath was one of the earliest to to be enclosed by John Knight, the remains of the drainage system must be one of John Knight's very first enterprises on his Exmoor estate. This agrees with the documentary evidence which refers to cutting over 7 miles of gutters on Ashcombe in 1836 (Burton 1989, 72). There are no other drains evident on air photographs on or around Great and Little Ashcombe (Hegarty and Wilson-North 2014, fig 1.11), suggesting that this drainage system is the one cut in 1836.

The designed landscape around Ashcombe used the river, with terraced walks and bridges leading the vistor around the combe. A leat also took water from Ashcombe Water to Simonsbath House (Riley 2014). The drainage system channelled water into Ashcombe but was most likely constructed for reclamation and improvement of moorland for agriculture in the first instance, rather than for the provision of extra water into the Ashcombe Pleasure Grounds.

Fig 17 (above left) Stone quarry EAC15(207) in Area B (Hazel Riley)

Fig 18 (left) Looking south down the track EAC15(208) south of the stone quarry in Area B (Hazel Riley)

Recent work has suggested that the drainage system on Little Ashcombe is later than the 1830s. Frederic Knight appointed Robert Smith as his agent in 1848. Smith introduced the leases on the 'Lincolnshire principle' to the south west: the landlord provided buildings and a ring-fenced enclosure, the tenant was responsible for further improvements to the farm such as draining, fencing and liming (Hegarty and Wilson-North 2014). Smith was a great advocate for drainage as the key to reclamation and improvement. As well as the many miles of surface drains or sheep drains cut on the high moors, Smith gives options for hill farmers wishing to drain land which is made wet by the presence of a spring line. For occasional springs on moderately sloping land Smith advises:

> *making horizontal drains of some length across the declivities of the hills, and thus conduct or empty them into the nearest brooks or open ditches. But should these horizontal ditches run in line with the strata or strike on the country, it will be necessary to keep them a little below the porous stratum that supplies the water and cause occasional upright drains to be driven across them; by this means the upper line of water issuing from behind some impervious bed or rock will be effectually tapped and cured*
> *(Smith 1856, 373).*

Hegarty and Wilson-North suggest that the Ashcombe drainage system was set out on these principles (2014, 38-9).

The census records and Burton's painstaking examination of the people who lived and worked on the Exmoor estate in the 19th and 20th centuries suggest how Little Ashcombe was farmed in the later part of the 19th century (Burton 1994).

In the 1860s a number of smallholdings were created around Simonsbath from land which was surplus to the requirements of Mr Torr, who took the tenancy of Simonsbath House and 120 acres in 1858. The former tenant, Charles le Blanc, had farmed 600 acres and the records of the new holdings all include the phrase "land late le Blancs", indicating that they were created no earlier than 1858. The earliest tenants of these holdings were Exmoor estate men. William Fry, Frederic Knight's former nurseryman, was farming 100 acres by 1865, this increased to 217 acres in 1865. There is no mention of the name of his farm in the Exmoor estate records, but in 1872 William Fry advertised for keep for his bullocks and horses in the North Devon Journal, giving his address as Ashcombe farm. There was no house associated with the farm: he lived at a cottage in Simonsbath. Ashcombe farm could therefore be the land between Ashcombe and the boundary of the Honeymead Allotments.

William Fry could have been responsible for cutting and maintaining the drainage system on Little Ashcombe, but the documentary evidence does lend more weight to the drains being cut in the 1830s, as part of John Knight's first efforts at reclamation around Simonsbath. William Fry certainly maintained the gutters, and their efficacy is shown on the OS 1st edition map where areas of better land lie within rough grazing inside the drainage system (Fig 5). The drains also carry some water at present and this pattern of drained and wetter ground is still evident.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Lee Bray organised access and provided background material; Matt Sully supplied enhanced versions of the Lidar data and Rob Wilson-North helped with interpretation of the features.

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EAC15 SITE GAZETTEER

EAC15(201)
Location: 277567, 139881 to 277872, 13949
Type: HOLLOW WAY
Period: MEDIEVAL
Description and interpretation: Two areas of hollow ways lie on Little Ashcombe, NE of Simonsbath. Centred at SS are four hollow ways which run SW/NE from Ashcombe towards Exe Cleave. The remains are visible on Lidar images and can also be seen on the ground where they are *c* 5m wide and up to 0.75m deep. Some fragments of hollow ways lie to the west, centred at 278336, 139671. These are the remains of routeways across Exmoor Forest and date from at least as early as the medieval period.
References: EAC15(201)_ NE_10MAR15_HRILEY

EAC15(202)
Location: 277474, 140660 to 278494, 139714
Type: DRAINAGE SYSTEM
Period: AD 19th century (1800-1899AD)
Description and interpretation: A drainage system covering *c* 28ha lies to the NE of Simonsbath on the lower slopes of Great and Little Ashcombe. The drains consist of two horizontal channels which run NW/SE along the hillside. These are linked by a complex system of interconnecting ditches running NE/SW from these channels which serve to channel water into the tributary streams of Ashcombe Water. The drainage system was constructed in the early 19th century and was part of John Knight's

reclamation and improvement of Exmoor Forest.
References: EAC15(202a)_ NE_10MAR15_HRILEY 2875
EAC15(202b)_ SW_10MAR15_HRILEY

EAC15(203)
Location: 278166, 139905
Type: PROSPECTING PIT
Period: AD 19th century (1800-1899AD)
Description and interpretation: A long, narrow trench with spoil banks on both sides lies on Little Ashcombe, NE of Simonsbath. It is 25m long, 3m wide and 1m deep. It is not connected to the extensive drainage system in the area, EAC15(202), and is most likely to be a prospecting trench for ironstone, dug in the 1850s when Frederic Knight was seeking to exploit the minerals on his Exmoor estates.
References: EAC15(203)_NW_17FEB15_HRILEY

EAC15(204)
Location: 278229, 139818
Type: PROSPECTING PIT
Period: AD 19th century (1800-1899AD)
Description and interpretation: A long, narrow trench with spoil banks on both sides lies on Little Ashcombe, NE of Simonsbath. It is 40m long, 3m wide and 1m deep. It is not connected to the extensive drainage system in the area, EAC15(202), and is most likely to be a prospecting trench for ironstone, dug in the 1850s when Frederic Knight was seeking to exploit the minerals on his Exmoor estates.
References: EAC15(204)_SE_10MAR15_HRILEY

EAC15(205)
Location: 277621, 140278
Type: QUARRY
Period: AD 19th century (1800-1899AD)
Description and interpretation: A small quarry lies on Little Ashcombe, NE of Simonsbath. The quarry is a sub-rectangular pit, 10m long, 7m wide and up to 2m deep and was probably dug in the 19th century to provide stone for the nearby enclosure walls.
References: EAC15(205)_NE_10MAR15_HRILEY

EAC15(206)
Location: 277902, 140324
Type: QUARRY
Period: AD 19th century (1800-1899AD)
Description and interpretation: A small quarry lies on Little Ashcombe, NE of Simonsbath. The quarry is a sub-rectangular pit, 16m long, 15m wide and up to 1m deep and was probably dug in the 19th century to provide stone for the nearby enclosure walls. The quarry lies on the edge of the extensive drainage system on Little Ashcombe, EAC15(202), and appears to post-date this.

EAC15(207)
Location: 278173, 139949
Type: QUARRY
Period: AD 19th century (1800-1899AD)
Description and interpretation: The quarry is a sub-rectangular pit, 30m long, 25m wide and up to 2m deep and was probably dug in the 19th century to provide stone both for the nearby enclosure walls and for use elsewhere on the Knight estate, as a track, EAC15(208), links the quarry with the road to the south. The quarry lies on the edge of the extensive drainage system on Little Ashcombe, EAC15(202), and appears to post-date this; it was still in use at the end of the 19th century and is shown on the OS 1st edition map.
References: EAC(207)_N_10MAR15_HRILEY

EAC15(208)
Location: 278179, 139920 to 278249, 139500
Type: ROAD
Period: AD 19th century (1800-1899AD)
Description and interpretation: A broad, raised track runs from the Simonsbath to Exford road east of Winstitchin Cross NW to the quarry EAC15(207). It is 7m wide, 1m high and 425m long. The track was built on the west edge of one of the drains which make up an extensive system on Little Ashcombe, EAC15(202). The remains of a culvert which took the track over a drain survives at 278195, 139817. The track was still in use at the end of the 19th century and is shown on the OS 1st edition map. The track was probably built in the later part of the 19th century for transporting stone from the quarry to the Simonsbath to Exford road; its scale does suggest that it may have been used to take heavy agricultural machinery - such as steam ploughing equipment - onto Little Ashcombe.
References: EAC15(208)_S_10MAR15_HRILEY

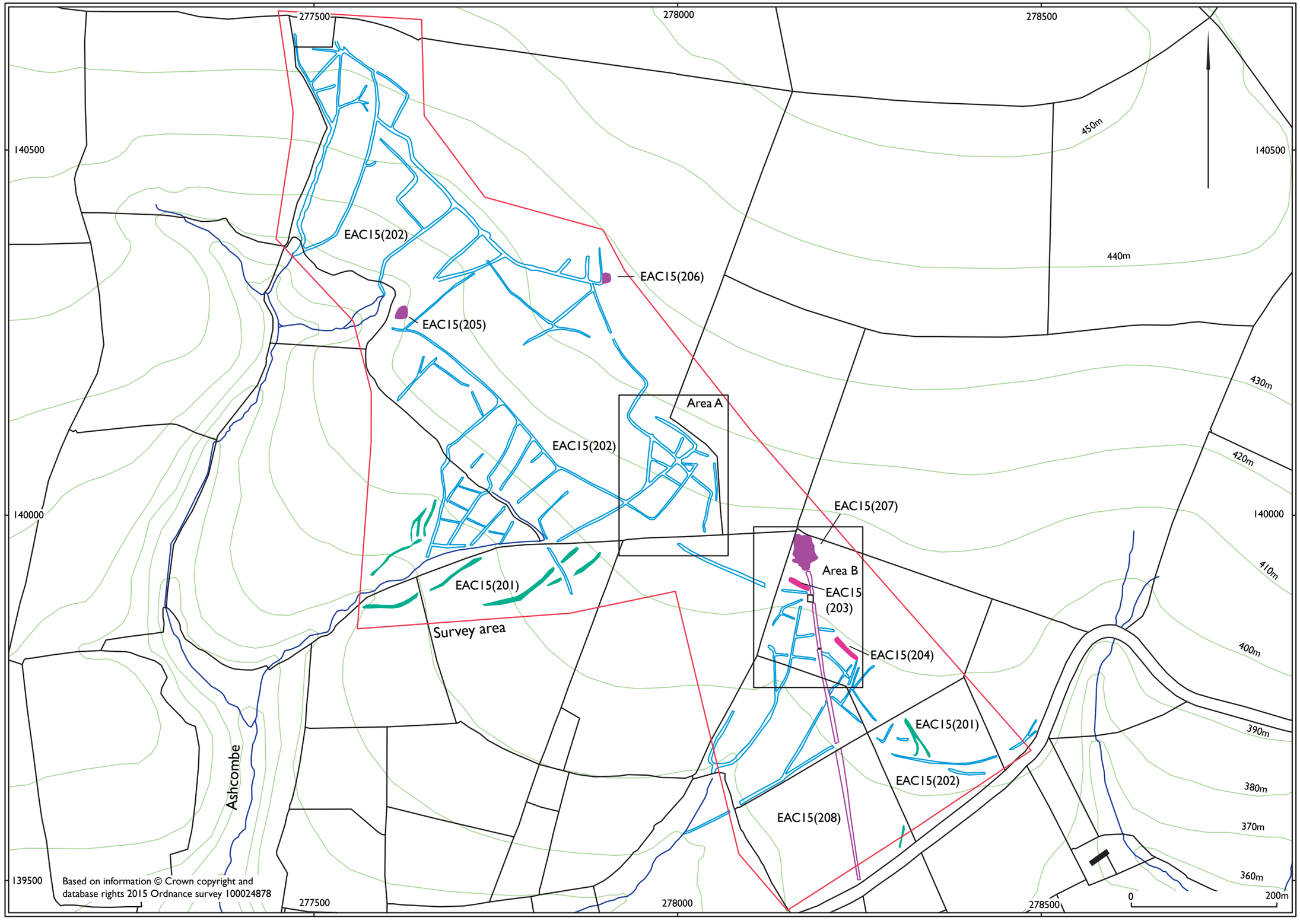

Fig 6 Little Ashcombe survey plan with EAC15 site reference numbers (1:5000)