

# Archaeological Building Survey

*of*

**COTTAGES AT HIGHER THORNE,  
EXFORD, SOMERSET**

*By R. W. Parker*

**For Mr and Mrs Sprake**

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## Contents

1.	INTRODUCTION	<i>Page:</i> 1
1.1	<b>Method</b>	1
1.2	<b>General Description</b>	3
2.	DOCUMENTARY AND MAP RESEARCH	3
2.1	<b>Map Sources</b>	3
2.2	<b>Leases and Other Sources</b>	4
3.	BUILDING SURVEY	4
3.1	<b>Exterior</b>	4
	<i>South Elevation</i>	4
	<i>West Elevation</i>	6
	<i>North Elevation</i>	6
	<i>East Elevation</i>	6
3.2	<b>Interiors: The Annexe</b>	7
	<i>Ground Floor,</i>	7
	<i>First Floor</i>	7
3.3	<b>Interiors: The Cottage</b>	7
	<i>Ground Floor,</i>	7
	<i>First Floor</i>	7
3.4	<b>Roof</b>	7
3.	CONCLUSION	7
	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	8
	SOURCES CONSULTED	8

## List of Illustrations

Fig. 1	Front elevation of the cottages at Higher Thorne. Looking north east.	<i>Page:</i> 1
Fig. 2	Extract from the Exford tithe map, surveyed by John Elliott in 1840 showing the farmhouse in pink.	2
Fig. 3	Extract from the OS First-edition map sheet XLV/12, dating from the 1880s, showing little change in the layout of the buildings since 1840	2
Fig. 4	Extract from the OS 2nd edition map, sheet XLV/12 of 1903, showing the partial demolition of a building to the south of the house and new buildings on the site of the cottages to the west.	2
Fig. 5	Detail of the blocked ?loading door in the south wall of the cottage above the porch.	5
Fig. 6	View of the drainage gully at the ear of the building showing running water at the footings.	5
Fig. 7	View of the building from the higher ground to the north, looking south west, showing the possible jambs (indicated) of an earlier, wide loading door at first-floor level in the rear wall.	6
Fig. 8	View of the main room in the annexe showing 1950s features and staircase.	9
Fig. 9	View of the main room in the Cottage showing 1950s doors, fireplace and fitted cupboards to the right of the fireplace, possibly of earlier 20th-century date.	9
Fig. 10	View of the eastern bedroom in the Cottage showing the character of the interior and an earlier door, possibly reused in this position.	10
Fig. 11	View of the roof structure showing the simple late 19th- or early 20th-century construction.	10



Fig. 1 Front elevation of the cottages at Higher Thorne, Looking north east.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Higher Thorne (SS 84222 38481) lies just off the B3224 on a steeply-sloping south-facing hillside almost a mile west of Exford, Somerset. The property includes a main dwelling house, which incorporates an earlier thatched wing but was extended or rebuilt in the 1950s, and a pair of cottages, lately used either as holiday accommodation or accommodation for estate workers (Fig. 1). The cottages are not Listed and are in poor condition due to persistent water penetration from the hill behind, into which they are terraced.

This report has been commissioned by the current owners of the property, Mr and Mrs Sprake, at the request of the Local Planning Authority, Exmoor National Park. The report aims to assist with determining the significance of the cottages in advance of an application for planning permission to demolish and replace them on a new site. The proposals include the landscaping of the site to improve the drainage to both the new buildings and the main house, which is also deeply terraced into the hillside.

### 1.1 Method

The archaeological works described in this report were carried out by R. W. Parker and Dr Nigel Browne in March 2012. A rapid visual survey of the building was made and a photographic record prepared in digital format. Manuscript notes were also made, which form the basis of this report. A rapid search of readily available documentary sources was made in order to set the house in its context and establish the date of and any possible earlier uses or functions for the cottages. As the survey was entirely non-invasive and much of the fabric is covered with modern renders and decorative finishes, the conclusions of this report must be considered provisional and may be subject to revision in the light of any future observations at the site. The main house and other estate buildings were not included in the visual or photographic survey.



Fig. 2 Extract from the Exford tithe map, surveyed by John Elliott in 1840 showing the farmhouse in pink.

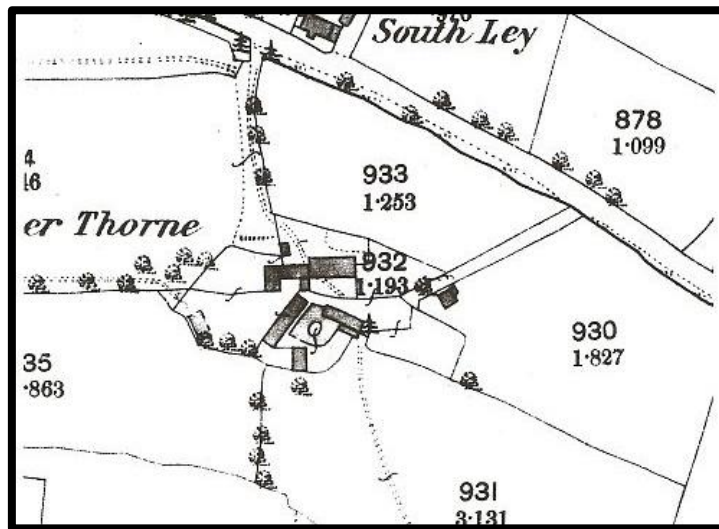


Fig. 3 Extract from the OS First-edition map sheet XLV/12, dating from the 1880s, showing little change in the layout of the buildings since 1840

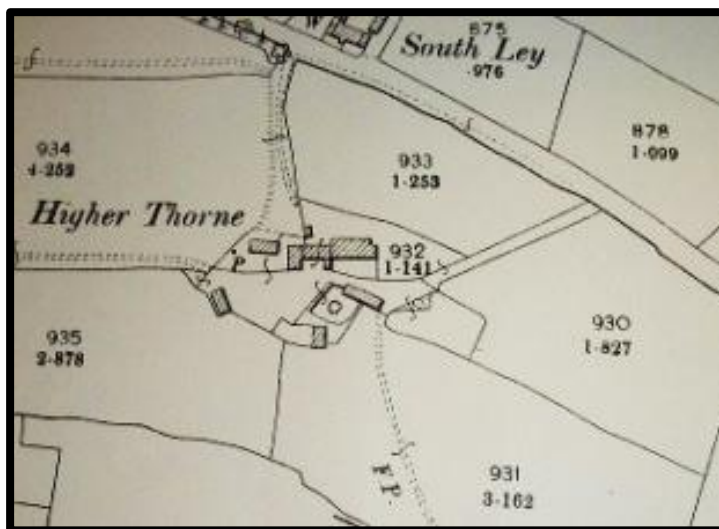


Fig. 4 Extract from the OS 2nd edition map, sheet XLV/12 of 1903, showing the partial demolition of a building to the south of the house and new buildings on the site of the cottages to the west.

## 1.2 General Description

The cottages occupy a two-storey rectangular structure terraced into the hillside to the west of the main house. Although it appears to originate as a single building, the interior is currently divided into a three-bedroomed house (The Cottage) and a smaller one-bedroomed dwelling (The Annexe). The walls are of stone rubble with dressings of wire-cut red brick to many of the openings, under an asbestos slate roof. The chimneystacks lie at the western end of the main two-storey portion of the building and approximately two thirds of the way along the ridge, separating the larger from the smaller house. At the west end is a single-storey extension with a hipped roof containing a kitchen and bathroom. At the eastern end is a lean-to extension on the frontage containing a further bathroom. Both of these structures seem certain to be additions to the original building, possibly in the context of its conversion to residential use.

The rear of the building is terraced deeply into the hillside, which rises above first floor level, but has been cut away to form a deep gully surrounding the building on two sides. There appear to be several natural springs within the hillside: water runs copiously out of the rock faces to the rear of the cottage and the main house and is dispersed by a gully running along the rear wall.

## 2. DOCUMENTARY AND MAP RESEARCH

### 2.1 Map Sources

The earliest map showing the layout of the buildings on the site available at the time of the documentary research is the tithe map prepared by John Elliott in 1840 (Fig. 2). This map shows the dwelling house in pink, corresponding to the older, eastern portion of the present dwelling. To the west of this is a large complex of buildings, surrounding three sides of a courtyard, coloured grey to identify it as an agricultural complex, or at least as non-residential. The site of this building corresponds to the site of the more recent, 1950s part of the existing dwelling (It is possible that some elements of this complex may have been retained and incorporated into the modern house). No buildings are shown on the site of the Cottage and Annexe, which appears as open ground or as part of the farmyard. To the south of the dwelling house three buildings are arranged in an irregular formation around a large pond: a long narrow building to the west, a short, square building to the south and a larger, 'L'-shaped building to the north east. There is a further small structure in an orchard to the north of the dwelling house and another, of similar size, close to the driveway leading up towards the Exford road. Unfortunately only the dwelling house is identified by colour and the specific functions of the other buildings are uncertain.

The 1st edition OS map, sheet XLV/12, dating from the 1880s (Fig. 3), shows that there has been no significant change in the buildings. The site of the cottages remains undeveloped, though a hedgerow or boundary has been established across the yard. The buildings to the west of the dwelling house are still present (their apparent change of alignment since 1840 is more likely to be a draughtsman's error than evidence of rebuilding), as are the buildings surrounding the pond and the peripheral buildings to the north and east. The footprint of the house has changed slightly and a projection to the rear is no longer evident. It is possible that this had simply been absorbed by the addition of lean-to structures to the same depth on either side and thus showed no more in plan. It thus seems unlikely that any significant building campaigns had occurred at Higher Thorne during the mid and late 19th century.

The 2nd-edition OS map, dating from 1903, is the first to show any evidence of a structure on the site of the Cottage and Annexe (Fig. 4). A rectangular block is shown which must be identical with this building. The footprint of the house, and the agricultural buildings to the west of it, has not changed significantly, but the long building to the west of the pond, south of the house, has a much narrower footprint, which may suggest that it had been substantially reduced or partially demolished. Several of the peripheral buildings have also been demolished. The block now represented by the Cottage and Annexe may have been constructed to replace one of these lost buildings.

The map does not permit the identification of the functions or age of any of the buildings and the best that can be said is that, apart from the cottages, most of the farm buildings pre-dated 1840. Only the farmhouse and cottages survive today.

## 2.2 Leases and Other Sources (based on research by Dr Nigel Browne)

The search for documentary sources relating to Higher Thorne has revealed no documentary evidence specifically describing the house and farm buildings. The hearth tax return for Exford parish does not survive and the surviving documents relating to the property are unhelpful.

A document of 1708 (SRO D\P\exf/5/4/1) records that the property was rated at 1 pise, that it is, it was required to maintain 1 pise (or 17 feet) of the churchyard boundary. This rating is comparable with other small tenements in the parish, the larger or more valuable properties being rated at two or three pises.

An indenture survives recording the sale, in 1718, of 'All that messuage or tenement called or commonly known by the name of Higher Thorne, alias Overthorne, now in the possession of William Tutball..[also Lower/North Withycombe now in the possession of Roger Cooke]...together with all houses, edifices, buildings, barns, stables, stalls, *etc.*' by Francis Squire (then the incumbent of Exford) to 'Silvester Gregory the younger, of Exford, yeoman' (SRO DD\BR\py/66). Unfortunately the description of the buildings given above is certainly generic.

The Land Tax assessment of 1766 lists Silvester Gregory as paying £2/12/4 for Higher Thorne (for comparison, Lower Thorne was rated at £1/15/4; Larcombe £2/12/4 and Ashett £2/10/1). All subsequent valuations remained at £2/12/4. Silvester Gregory was succeeded by William Gregory, who was listed as proprietor in 1781-1791 and by Elizabeth Gregory, presumably his wife, who was listed as proprietor and occupier in 1795. The property seems then to have been divided into three parts, all of which were subsequently acquired by William Gregory's widowed daughter, Sarah Halse, upon her marriage to James Clatworthy, yeoman, of Exford, at Bishopsnympton, Devon, on the 16th of march 1816 (SRO Q/REL 8/4a). James Clatworthy is listed as a 'gentleman' in a list of those fit for jury service in 1816 (SRO Q/RJL 8/5 &5a).

During the 19th century Higher Thorne appears to have been occupied by farmers (*ibid.*), and as the map evidence shows that there was little change in the footprint of the buildings between 1840 and 1900, it is possible that these were tenant farmers with little interest in remodelling or rebuilding. This may have changed in the 20th century, when the house appears to have risen in status. The reminiscences of Dick Lloyd, an elderly Exford man living in Molland were recorded for the Exmoor Oral History Archive in 2001. He recalled that Higher Thorne was the home in the early 20th century of a former solicitor from South Molton, named Crocker, and his wife. Mrs Crocker continued to live there after her husband's death, becoming profoundly eccentric in the years before and during the Second World War (Exmoor Oral History Archive, Dick Lloyd Summary, CD1, Track 1/5). Although the mental decline of Mrs Crocker is not directly relevant to this project it may be surmised that the property was much neglected during her illness, and this may explain the extent of 1950s refurbishment and rebuilding evident in both the main house and the Cottage.

## 3. BUILDING SURVEY

### 3.1 Exterior

#### *South Elevation*

The south elevation is of rubble construction, painted cream, and is three bays in width. All the existing windows to the ground and first floor rooms have wide, horizontal openings fitted with 20th-century casement windows. The first-floor windows have relatively slight timber lintels, whereas those on the ground floor have shallow brick-arched heads. The modern porch replaces an earlier, gabled porch, of which traces remain under the present porch roof. The entrance door to the western house has a substantial four-panelled door with glazed upper panels set within an ovolo-moulded frame. The general impression would be of a late 19th- or early 20th-century building, were it not for the blocked opening immediately above the porch roof (Fig 5). This is a tall, rectangular opening with stone jambs and a shallow, arched head of stone or brick. It is of quite different character from the other openings, which may therefore be cut in to the walling, or might represent enlargements of earlier openings. The blocked opening is too deep for a window; it resembles a first-floor loading door or loft door, which may suggest that the building has been converted into residential accommodation from an earlier agricultural use.



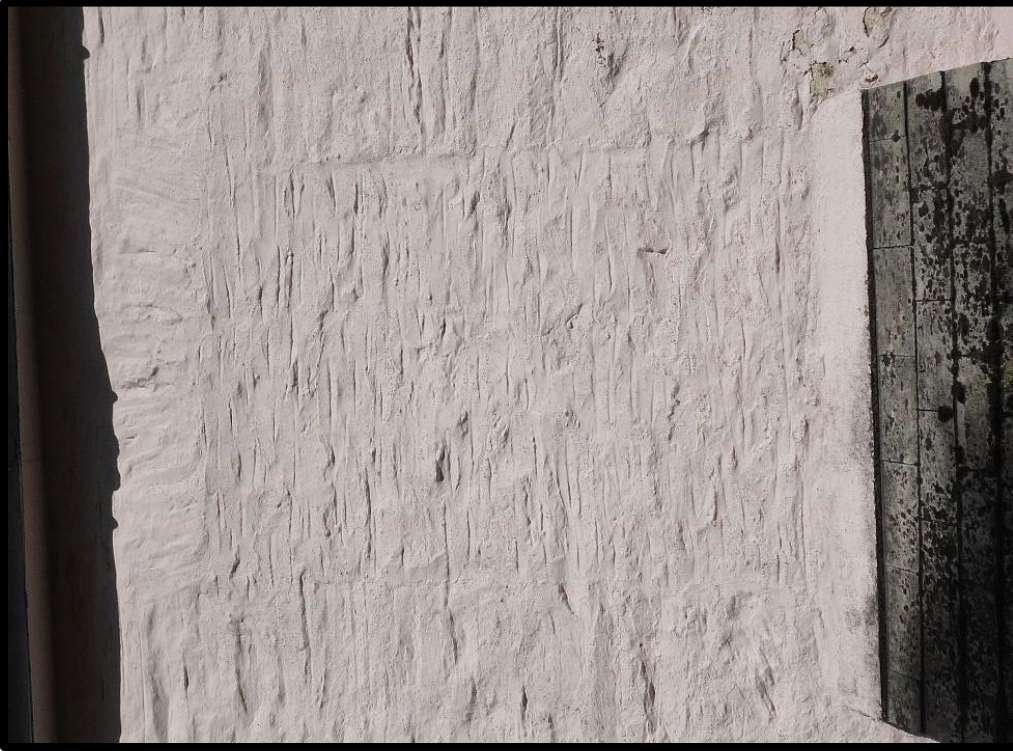


Fig. 5 Detail of the blocked ?loading door in the south wall of the cottage above the porch.



Fig. 6 View of the drainage gully at the ear of the building showing running water at the footings.





Fig. 7 View of the building from the higher ground to the north, looking south west, showing the possible jambs (indicated) of an earlier, wide loading door at first-floor level in the rear wall.

#### *West Elevation*

The western end of the building is largely masked by the single-storey, hipped-roofed extension containing the kitchen. This is clearly an addition to the earlier building as a clear building break is visible in the walling. This part of the house may have been added in the 1950s, as the window and door openings have concrete lintels. The chimney stack at the western end of the house seems to lie outside the original gable wall and may well be an addition of the same period.

#### *North Elevation*

This elevation has few window openings and is separated from the hillside by a deep drainage gully (Fig. 6). There is one small ground-floor window opening, which seems certain to be inserted. This has a segmental head of red brick and a concrete window sill. There are three first-floor window openings, one of which, at the eastern end, was formerly a doorway and is now connected to the higher ground to the north by a short concrete bridge. The central opening has a timber lintel and red-brick jambs, while the western opening is lower and smaller than the others. The jambs of this latter opening appear to have been cut through earlier stonework and then repaired in concrete. All of these openings seem to have been inserted, the only trace of any earlier features are in the vicinity of the central window, on each side of which traces of vertical disturbances in the stonework may be discerned (Fig. 7). The window seems to occupy a large area of blocking, within an earlier, wide doorway at first-floor level. If this is the case there must formerly have been a bridge across the drainage gully to this doorway, or, alternatively, the hillside may have continued to the rear wall of the building, as in a 'bank barn', allowing access at ground level to the first-floor interior. There may have been an access road along the rear of the building prior to the excavation of the drainage gully. The gully may have been dug when the building was converted to residential use, possibly in an attempt to resolve issues of damp and water penetration.

#### *East Elevation*

This elevation seems originally to have been entirely featureless and consisted of a tall, plain gable end of stone rubble. A pair of openings, forming the entrance doorway and window of the principal room of the smaller of the two cottages, was cut through the lower part of the wall in the mid to late

20th century, possibly in the 1950s as part of a programme of works involving the construction of the main dwelling and the improvement or conversion of the cottages.

### 3.2 Interiors: The Annexe

#### *Ground floor*

The interior of the annexe is almost entirely devoid of historic features, having been completely refurbished in the 1950s (Fig. 8). The fireplace, doors and staircase in the main ground-floor room are all of this period. The extension to the south containing a bathroom retains handsome plumbing fittings of the same period.

#### *First Floor*

The first-floor room in the annexe is approached from the main ground-floor room by an open staircase and well. There is no ornamental balustrade, though there is a possibility that such a balustrade is concealed within the existing low parapet to the stair well. No other features of interest remain.

### 3.3 Interiors: The Cottage

#### *Ground floor*

The interior of this building also shows evidence of extensive refurbishment in the mid-20th century. This shows particularly in the internal doors, many of which are horizontally-panelled four-panelled doors with Bakelite door furniture typical of the period (Fig. 9). The ground floor of the main volume of the building contains one large and one smaller room and there are two further rooms, a kitchen and bathroom, in the extension to the west. The staircase climbs from the smaller of the two ground-floor rooms over an under stair cupboard. There is no evidence to show whether or not the internal partitions pre-date the 1950s, though the presence of a domestic fitted cupboard, with plain panels, in a recess adjoining the fireplace in the principal room may suggest that the building had been in use as a residence earlier.

#### *First Floor*

On the first floor, as below, the interior fixtures seem to date from the 1950s. Only two earlier doors survive. One has four plain panels and opens from the main landing to the western, rear, bedroom. The other is a handsome partially-glazed door with margin lights of coloured glass and glory stars at the corners (Fig. 10). This has possibly been reused from an internal porch or lobby, perhaps originally within the front door. There are no other features of historic significance.

### 3.4 Roof

The roof void is accessed by a hatch in the ceiling above the stairs in the annexe and extends across both properties. The roof timbers (Fig. 11) are of slight scantling and consist of common rafters braced at intervals by struts to a beam running parallel with the ridge at the level of the ceiling joists. There are horizontal ties at intervals and one level of purlins on each side of the roof. There is no evidence of any earlier roofing or any part of the structure which might pre-date the late 19th or early 20th century.

## CONCLUSION

It seems likely that the building was originally constructed in the late 19th- or early 20th-century as an agricultural building, perhaps to replace one of the buildings south of the farmhouse, near the pond, which had been partially demolished. The building may have been designed to serve as a bank barn or a stable with lofts over. The lofts were accessible by a large doorway in the north wall of the building, to which was opposed a smaller doorway in the south. This might suggest that the upper floor was used for hand threshing, since the doorways would have allowed a draught for winnowing. There is no evidence of grouped doorways in the lower part of the south wall, which would seem to preclude the use of the building as a shippin. It may have functioned as a small stable, entered through a single

doorway flanked by windows, with a separate tack room in the eastern part, perhaps heated by a fireplace or stove. Apart from the basic shell of the building it is unlikely that any significant historic features survive from this period, though the first-floor structure might contain evidence of hatches for loft ladders or mortices for posts supporting the stallwork.

The building may have been converted into residential accommodation in the early 20th century, perhaps when the property became a small gentry estate and ceased to be run principally as a farm. The cottages may have provided separate accommodation for servants or estate workers who could not be accommodated in the main farmhouse. At this time the deep drainage gully at the rear of the building may have been excavated in an attempt to improve the drainage. The agricultural doorways in the south and north walls were blocked and new windows were cut in to light the replanned interior. Few internal features remain from this period: the fitted cupboard in the large ground-floor room and some of the doors upstairs seem to be the only survivors.

In the mid 20th century both the house and the cottage were substantially refurbished and indeed, partially rebuilt. It is possible that the property had suffered a long period of neglect during the occupation of the eccentric Mrs Crocker. The main dwelling house was extended by the addition of a substantial new wing on the site of earlier farm buildings, and the cottage was almost completely refitted. The windows and internal doors were replaced and the interior may have been replanned, with new staircases to the upper floors and a new service wing in an extension to the west, containing a kitchen and bathroom. The annexe was also provided with a new bathroom. The buildings have remained little altered since these interventions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was commissioned by Mr and Mrs Sprake on the advice of their architect, Ross Campbell, at the request of Exmoor National Park heritage Environment Team. The survey was carried out on the 19th of March 2012 by R.W. Parker and the documentary and map research was carried out by Dr Nigel Browne.

The author wishes to thank Mr and Mrs Sprake, Mr Campbell and the building contractors at Higher Thorne for their assistance on site (not least with arranging access to the annexe by demolishing a door). Thanks are also due to Lucy Browne of the Westcountry Studies Library and the staff of the Somerset Record Office.

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D\P\exf/5/4/1 Copy of a list of the Church pises, date 15 March 1708  
 Q/REL 8/4a Land Tax Assessments  
 DD\BR\py/66: Indenture dated 11 October 1718  
 DD\RI.WI/ Indenture dated 30 December 1815  
 Q/RJL 8/5 & 5a: 'List of persons qualified to serve on Juries within and for the Parish of Exford for the year 1816'  
 D\P\exf/4/1/1 Churchwardens accounts and vestry minutes for Exford.  
 Tithe map of Exford entitled *A Map of the Parish of Exford in the County of Somerset.*  
*Surveyed by John Elliott 1840.*

### **Ordnance Survey Maps**

OS 1st-edition 25 inch map Sheet XLV/12 (c1880).  
 OS 2nd-edition 25 inch map Sheet XLV/12 (1903).

### **Other Sources**

Exmoor Oral History Archive, Somerset County Council Archive Service: Recording of Dick Lloyd of Molland, recorded 2001





Fig. 8 View of the main room in the annexe showing 1950s features and staircase.



Fig. 9 View of the main room in the Cottage showing 1950s doors, fireplace and fitted cupboards to the right of the fireplace, possibly of earlier 20th-century date.



Fig. 10 View of the eastern bedroom in the Cottage showing the character of the interior and an earlier door, possibly reused in this position.



Fig. 11 View of the roof structure showing the simple late 19th- or early 20th-century construction.