

HOAR OAK VALLEY, EXMOOR FOREST, SOMERSET:
AN EARLY 19TH-CENTURY LABOURERS' COTTAGE
ON JOHN KNIGHT'S EXMOOR FOREST ESTATE

Exmoor Moorlands Landscape Partnership Scheme
Project Report

By Hazel Riley



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By Hazel Riley

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OASIS NUMBER: I29593

ABBREVIATIONS

EH English Heritage

ENPA Exmoor National Park Authority

HER Historic Environment Record

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

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ABSTRACT

A detailed metric and photographic survey of the ruined stone structures on a knoll at the head of the Hoar Oak Valley has resulted in a new interpretation of the site. The structures are the remains of Hoar Oak Cottage, Exmoor Forest, built by John Knight in 1835 for workers at the nearby stone gatepost factory. The cottage was abandoned by 1851 and the site was used as a sheepfold until the 1880s.

INTRODUCTION

This survey of the ruined structures at the head of the Hoar Oak Valley was undertaken for the Exmoor Moorlands Landscape Partnership Scheme on behalf of the Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA). The principal aims of the work were: to carry out a large scale metric survey of the site and its immediate topographic location; a photographic survey of the structures; to locate permanent survey markers near the site for future work and to interpret the date and function of the structures based on this detailed recording work (Wilson-North and Balmond 2012).

Location, topography and geology

The site lies on a steep sided rocky knoll on the west side of the Hoar Oak Valley, at 384m, in Exmoor Forest and within the ENPA (SS 7468 4232) (Fig 1). The knoll lies just downstream from the ford where Long Chains Combe joins the Chains Valley to form the Hoar Oak Valley. The knoll is overshadowed by the steep spur of Hoar Oak Hill immediately to the west (Figs 2 and 3). The underlying geology consists of Devonian rocks – slates of the Combe Martin series (www.bgs.ac.uk).

Site numbering

The site is recorded in the Exmoor National Park HER: Monument UID MSO 6988 and in the English Heritage NMR: SS 74 SW 78 (Monument UID 895578).

PREVIOUS WORK

The site is mentioned in 1890 by Page. Although he describes the location as the upper end of Farley Water, the following description probably refers to the Hoar Oak

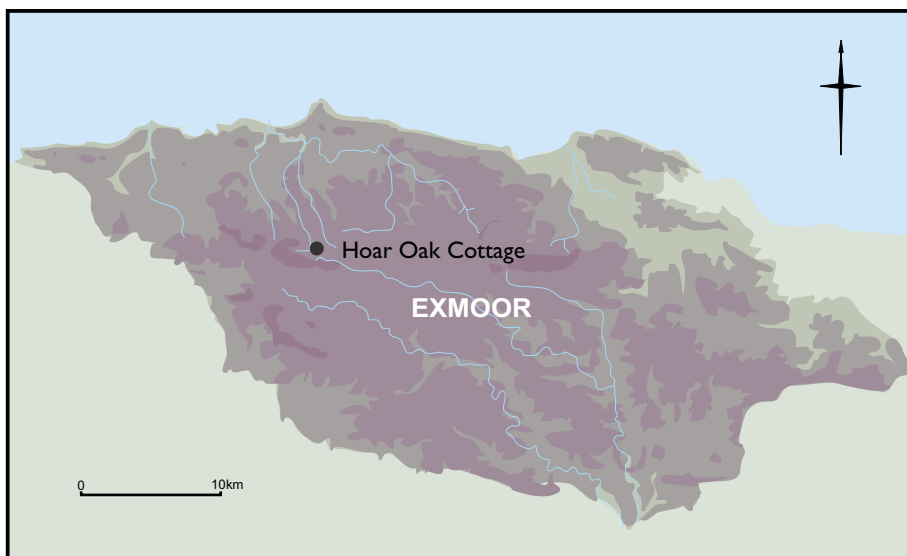


Fig 1 Location map

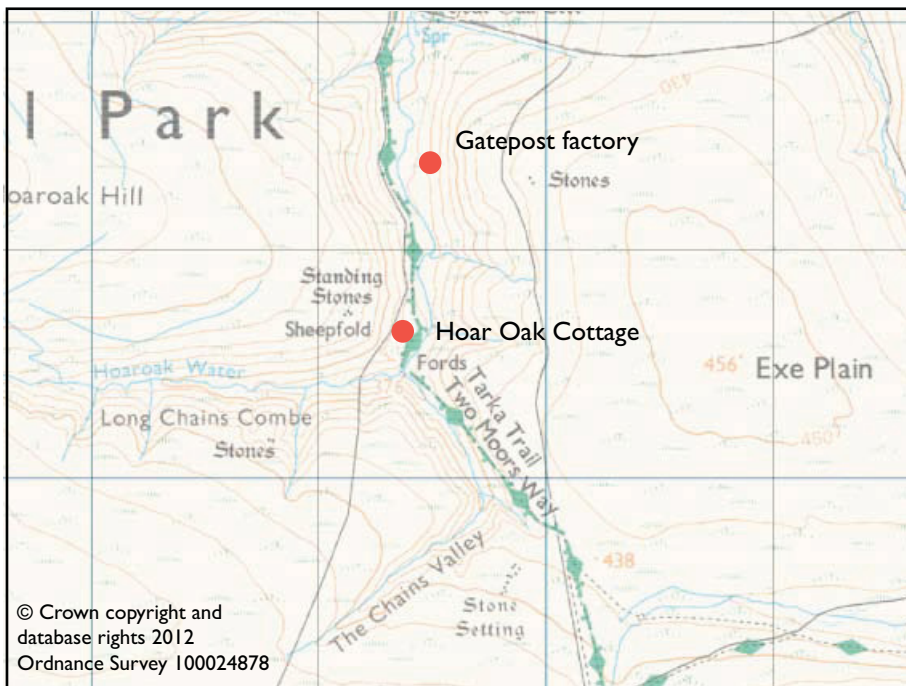


Fig 2 (above) Air photograph of the site looking north up the Hoar Oak Valley (NMR 26882/2) (© English Heritage)

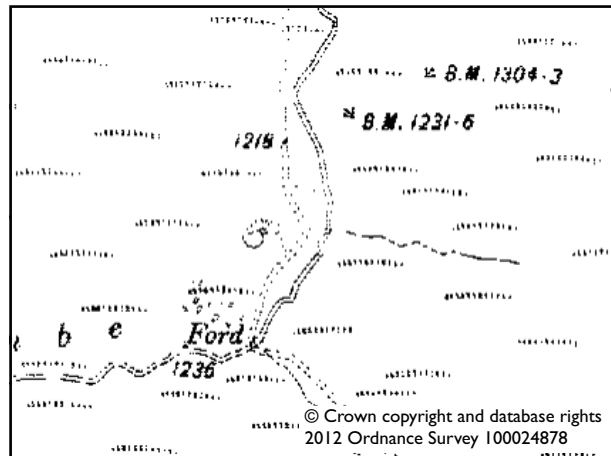
Fig 3 Location of the site in the Hoar Oak Valley

structures: ‘On an eminence at its head stand the ruins of a shepherd’s cottage, and below is a solitary and forsaken sheepfold and a quantity of scattered stones’ (Page 1890, 124). MacDermot, writing in 1911, records that John Knight built new cottages for his estate workers and shepherds and that the ruins of one of these lies in Long Chains Combe near Hoar Oak (1973, 436). Burton suggests that the shepherd’s cottage lies on the east side of the Hoar Oak Valley and places it high up on the hillside, east of the structures on the knoll, by a tributary stream at c SS 7490 4225. He interprets the structures on the knoll as a sheepfold, used in the late 19th century (Burton 1989, 77; 115; ‘Map of Exmoor’).

The structures were considered by the RCHME survey of the area in 1995. The remains were described as a D-shaped enclosure with a contemporary structure at its NE side and interpreted as a sheepfold and shepherd’s hut dating from the mid-19th century (EH NMR SS 74 SW 78).

The 1st and 2nd edition Ordnance Survey maps (1891; 1904) show the knoll topped by a teardrop-shaped enclosure with a small square building on its NE corner; no structure is shown on the opposite hillside at Burton’s suggested site for Hoar Oak Cottage (Fig 4).

Fig 4 Extract from OS 2nd edition map (1904)



THE SURVEY

The site was surveyed at a scale of 1:250 using survey grade differential GPS (Fig 5). 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). Profiles were drawn across representative sections of the walls (Fig 6); their locations are shown on Figure 5. Fieldwork was carried out in May 2012; the photographic record was made on 12th May 2012.

Location and coordinates of permanent markers

Two survey markers were located on top of the knoll to the SW and NE of the site and the coordinates of the top of a fence post were obtained (Fig 5, X,Y,Z). The National Grid coordinates of these are:

Survey peg X	Eastings 274671.469	Northings 142316.412	Height 386.172
Survey peg Y	Eastings 274695.771	Northings 142326.625	Height 383.933
Top post Z	Eastings 274661.580	Northings 142321.098	Height 387.982

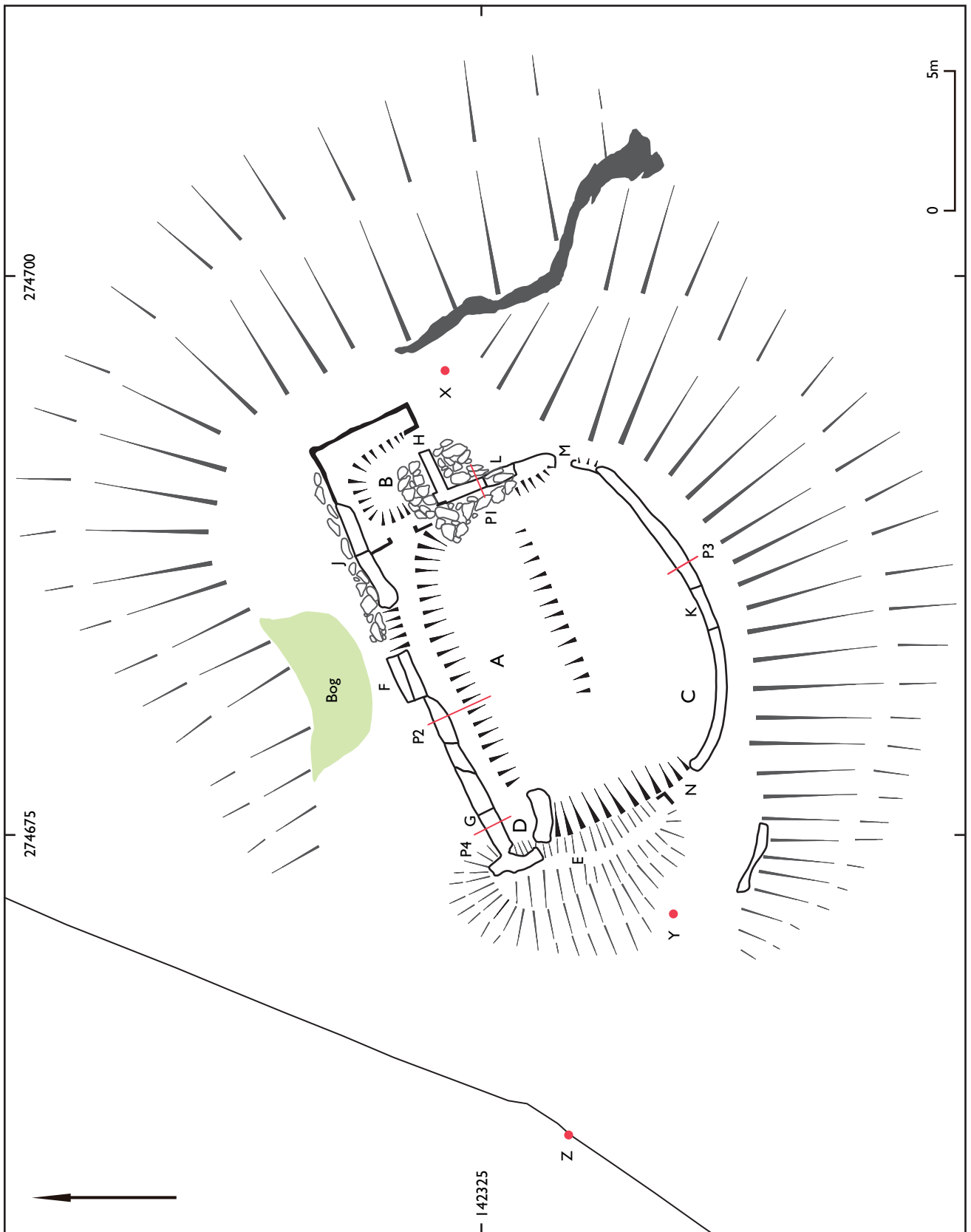
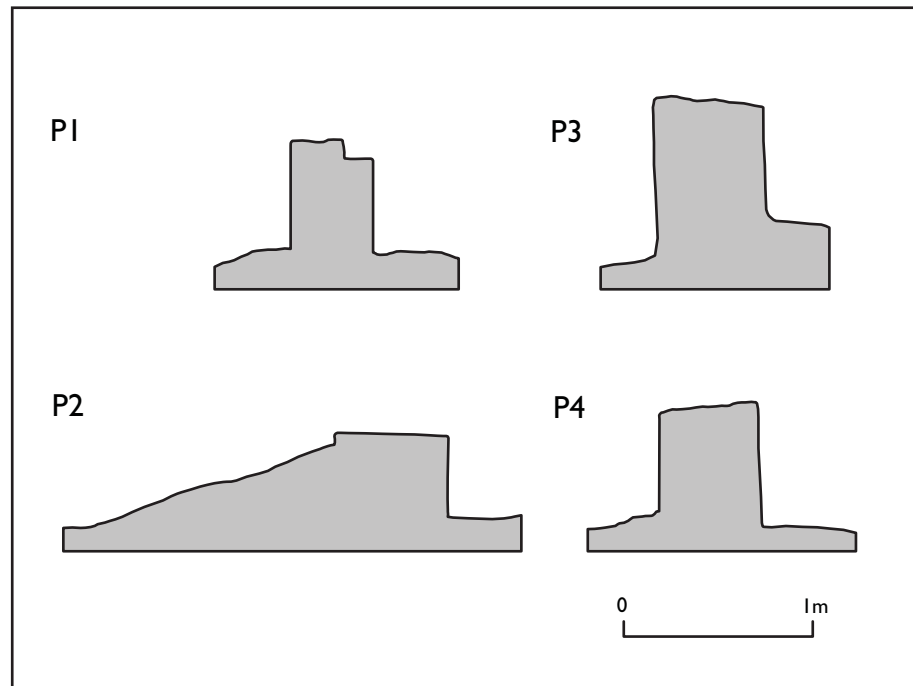


Fig 5 Plan of the structures (1:250)

Fig 6 Profiles across the walls (1:50)



DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE

The knoll just below the confluence of Long Chains Combe and the Chains Combe forms a conspicuous topographic feature in the Hoar Oak Valley (Fig 7). It is up to 0.9m high and the top forms an area of level ground 24m NE/SW and 17m NW/SE, close to the stream and to the well marked packhorse route along the Hoar Oak Valley.

The letters in the following description are shown on Figure 5. The structures on the knoll comprise: the remains of a rectangular building (A); a ruined square building (B) on the NE end of building A; a gently curving wall (C) to the south of these structures forms a small enclosure or yard in front of building A. A small, rather irregular structure (D) lies at the SW end of building A and a large outcrop of rock occupies the west side of the knoll (E). All are built with local slate.



Fig 7 The knoll from the south and the gatepost factory



Building A

Building A is a rectangular structure which measures 12.8m NE/SW by 6.7m NW/SE (externally). The NW side of the building is formed by a ruined drystone wall which is 0.7m wide and 0.8m high. The inner face of the wall is obscured by fallen stone, creating a bank 2m wide and 0.8m high. The wall has been reinforced by a stone buttress and the remains of this measure 2m x 1m x 1.4m high (F). This is built just above a very boggy area on the north edge of the platform (Fig 8). Traces of mortar on the NE part of this wall also indicate repairs to the building.



The NE side of the building is formed by a ruinous drystone wall. Its north end is a stony bank, 2.5m wide and 0.5m high and this also forms the SW wall of building B; to the south it survives as a well built wall up to 1m high (Fig 9). The SE side of building A is formed by a scarp, 8m long and 0.25m deep. The SW side has been disturbed by the small structure D, but the corner of the building can be seen on the outer face of the NW wall (G) (Fig 10)



Building B

Building B is 5m square (externally) and has walls of stone rubble, 0.8m wide, 1m high, with external wall facing visible on the NW and NE sides. Part of the SW side stands to a height of 0.8m. An entrance gap 1m wide lies on the SW side of the building (H) (Fig 11). A gap on the NW side suggests that there was access to this building from building A. A joint (J) in the outer face of the wall indicates that this small square building was built up against building A.



*from top Fig 8 Buttress on NW wall Building A
 Fig 9 NE wall of Building A
 Fig 10 NW wall Building A
 Fig 11 Building B*

Wall C

A gently curving drystone wall (C) lies on the south side of the knoll and follows its shape (Fig 12). The wall is 18m long, 0.75m wide, up to 0.9m high and forms an enclosure or yard, 13m long and 5m wide, in front of building A. A small part of the wall has been rebuilt (K). An entrance (L) at the NE corner gave access from the yard to building B; just to the south of this a small gap (M) is a more recent break in the wall. The main entrance to the yard and building A was at the SW corner, where a track with a stone retaining wall leads up to a gap between the wall and the rock outcrop (N).



*Fig 12 (top) Outer face wall C
Fig 13 (above) Structure D*

Structure D

Structure D lies on the SW end of building A and is 3m NW/SE, 3m NE/SW and 0.8m high (externally) (Fig 13). It is formed by a drystone wall which fills the gap between the corner of building A and the rock outcrop on the NW side. A rather irregular drystone wall forms the SE side, the SW side uses the rock outcrop and the NW side is open.

INTERPRETATION

The remains on the knoll are interpreted here as the remains of a cottage with a store room or similar outbuilding on its NE end and a small enclosure or yard on its south side. A small structure on the SW end of the cottage is a later shelter. The dimensions and layout of the cottage, outbuilding and yard are very similar to small agricultural workers' cottages built on Exmoor and in other parts of the south west in the 18th and 19th centuries. For example, Larkbarrow Cottage was built in the 1850s just to the SW of Larkbarrow Farm and the remains show that it was a rectangular building 13.5m x 8.2m with four rooms (Jamieson 2001, 25). A cottage with a very similar ground plan in the Blackdown Hills was home to a large family of agricultural workers in the mid-19th century; excavations showed that the outbuilding was used as a store room (Riley 2010).

This was Hoar Oak Cottage, one of the cottages built by John Knight in the late 1820s and 1830s for labourers on his Exmoor Forest estate (MacDermot 1973, 436). Hoar Oak Cottage in Exmoor Forest is recorded in the Census Returns for 1841 when four Irish labourers lived there, but not in any other Census Returns (Burton 1989, 74). The explanation for the cottage being built here, in the remote upper reaches of the Hoar

Oak Valley, lies a few hundred metres down the valley where the hillside is strewn with large stone slabs (Fig 7). These are roughouts for stone gateposts which were used across Knight's Exmoor estate. (Riley and Wilson-North 2001, 139-141; figs 5.22; 5.23).

Burton notes that in the Knight Estate labour accounts for July 1835, Ambrose Ridd's bill for laying on 17 square of thatch at 2s 6d a square came to £2 2s 6d, and associates this with thatching Hoar Oak Cottage (Burton 1989, 77; 250). This was the rate for thatching buildings, the rate for ordinary rick thatching was 5d a square. A thatched roof is also indicated by what remains at the site. Only a small fragment of roof tile and a piece of slate were noted during the survey. The remote location suggests that carting thatch was preferable to carting roofing slate to the building site. The thatched roof may have contributed to the very short time period that the cottage was occupied. It was built in 1835, occupied in 1841 but not in 1851 and ruined by 1890 (OS 1st edition map; Page 1890, 124). The reinforcing of the cottage wall by the buttress suggests that the NW side of the building was vulnerable both to the unstable ground as well as to the prevailing weather. When workers at the gatepost factory were no longer needed the cottage was abandoned. The stone from the cottage may have been used elsewhere, it would have been a convenient source of material for patching the track and nearby ford.

The survival of the yard wall and the later structure between the corner of the cottage and the rock outcrop suggest that the site may have been used as an enclosure after the cottage was abandoned, probably for sheep. Hoar Oak Cottage in the parish of Lynton lies 1.3km down the valley and was a small farm in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was leased by Frederic Knight in 1867/8 and became the farmstead for the Hoar Oak (or Chains) herding in the later part of the 19th century when one of Frederic Knight's Scottish shepherds, William Davidson, moved there (Burton 1989, 115-116). A circular sheep stall at Gammons Corner, built c 1880, was part of the Hoar Oak herding. This purpose built enclosure made the structures on the knoll redundant.

MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

Significance

The remains of the cottage at the head of Hoar Oak Valley are an important part of the story of the reclamation of Exmoor Forest by John Knight. The association of documentary evidence with this site provides a context for the social history of this remote part of Exmoor. The identification of Hoar Oak Cottage at this site has also provided some dating evidence for the nearby undocumented gatepost factory.

Rebuilding or restoration of the walls

Any rebuilding or restoration work at the site must take into account the different elements identified in this survey. The fallen stone around the cottage, outbuilding and shelter may well contain structural and/or cultural evidence from the 1830s and 1840s, so any disturbance of this material must be carried out in conjunction with archaeological recording work.

General management

The main threat to the site is from erosion and poaching on the north slopes of the

knoll. Currently this is within 2m of the NW wall of the cottage, with the worst areas c 5m to the NW. This erosion and poaching should be monitored.

Interpretation and access

There is scope for interpretation work, including images which reconstruct the cottage, its occupants, and life at the gatepost factory in the 1840s.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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