

**SURVEY, EXCAVATION AND ASSESSMENT OF  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES IN THE NORTHERN  
PART OF ASHCOMBE AND RECORDING A 19th-  
CENTURY BRIDGE AT SIMONSBATH  
PROJECT REPORT**

**By Hazel Riley**



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By Hazel Riley

Date of report: May 2015  
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Hazel Riley BA (Hons), ACIFA, FSA  
Consultant in Landscape History, Management and Conservation Grazing  
The Furley Herd of Dexter Cattle  
New House Cottage  
Furley  
Axminster  
Devon  
EX13 7TR  
01404 881330  
*hazelfurleydexter@btinternet.com*

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*Frontispiece Simonsbath House and the 19th-century bridge on the northern bank of the River Barle (Hazel Riley)*



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Survey, assessment and limited excavations of the historic landscape features in the northern part of Ashcombe have recorded the remains of John Knight's pleasure grounds or designed landscape in Ashcombe. Most of the features recorded date from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but some may date from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries when Simonsbath Farm was the only documented settlement on Exmoor Forest. The terraced walks recorded in Ashcombe which provided the opportunity to enjoy views of the wider Exmoor landscape around Simonsbath were also part of John Knight's original plan for a formal landscape setting for Simonsbath House. The remains of the bridge at the confluence of Ashcombe Water and the River Barle were also recorded and interpreted as part of John Knight's designed landscape around Simonsbath House.

## ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

County: Somerset

District: West Somerset

Parish: Exmoor

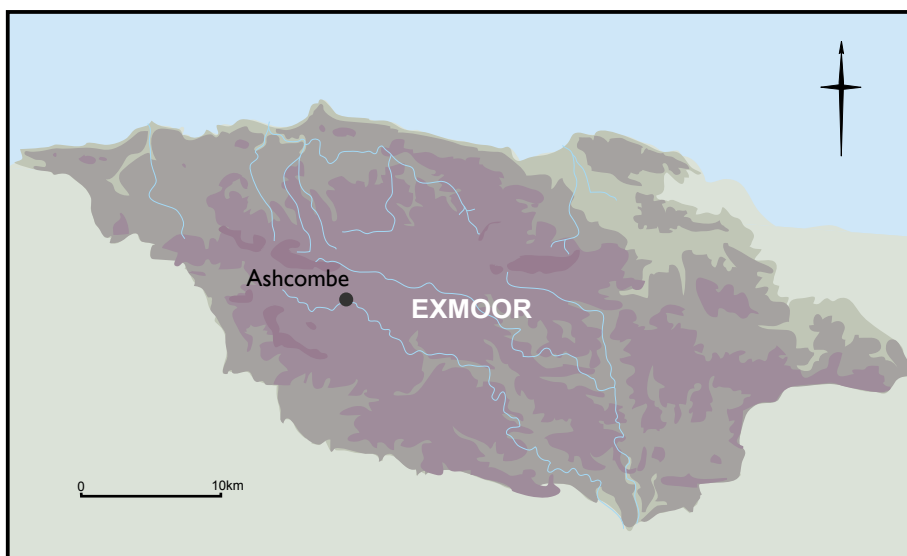
Exmoor HER: 22434 Ashcombe garden and plantation

Exmoor HER: 23036 Leat at Ashcombe

## INTRODUCTION

Ashcombe forms part of the designed landscape centred on Simonsbath and contains features which date from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Garrett 2004; Riley 2014a). The complex of buildings which includes Whiterocks Cottage and the Stables has been the subject of a recording project and a detailed ground plan has been made (Green *et al* 2012). Ashcombe contains a range of landscape features which relate to these buildings and to Simonsbath House. These include large outcrops of quartz which have been deliberately dug out and exposed; a number of paths, terraced into the hillsides; a leat which supplied water to Simonsbath House, and a large quarry which may have supplied the stone for the early 19<sup>th</sup> -century phases of Simonsbath House.

The area around Whiterocks Cottage, identified as John Knight's Garden by the River, was the subject of a large scale recording project after tree clearance by the ENPA



*Fig 1 Location map*

(Riley 2014). Paths lead from this garden around Ashcombe; the leat also forms part of the wider designed landscape. Recording, assessment and limited excavation of these features was required before restoration of the paths around Ashcombe by the ENPA. A 19<sup>th</sup>-century bridge over Ashcombe Water, on the northern bank of the Barle, east of Simonsbath Bridge, has been recognised as part of this designed landscape. Recording was required due to its vulnerable position close to the edge of the river (Riley 2014b).

### Location, topography and geology

The survey area is the northern part of Ashcombe Plantation, Simonsbath, centred at NGR SS 774 396 (Fig 1). Ashcombe Plantation occupies the lower part of the valley of Ashcombe Water, which runs from Great Ashcombe to its confluence with the River Barle east of Simonsbath Bridge. Ashcombe is a steep sided valley, with limited areas of level ground at the northern end of the survey area (Fig 2). The underlying geology consists of Kentisbury Slates of the Devonian formation ([bgs.ac.uk](http://bgs.ac.uk)).

### PREVIOUS WORK

There is very little published information on the gardens and grounds of the Knight family's Exmoor residence, Simonsbath House. Roger Burton notes that Ashcombe Plantation was 'part of the former pleasure grounds of the old house' (Burton 1994, 130). Exmoor National Park Authority commissioned a report in 2004 to establish whether their land at Simonsbath, including Ashcombe, formed the garden or pleasure grounds of Simonsbath House (Garrett 2004). It also looked at the building history of the house and village and the wider landscape in the environs of Simonsbath. In particular, the report examined the documentary evidence on the history of Simonsbath House and its grounds. Fortescue material and modern recollections suggest that Ashcombe contained a naturalistic, woodland garden at least by the early twentieth century. It seems highly likely that this was based on an original Victorian layout (Garrett 2004, 28-32). The report summarises the evidence for the existence of

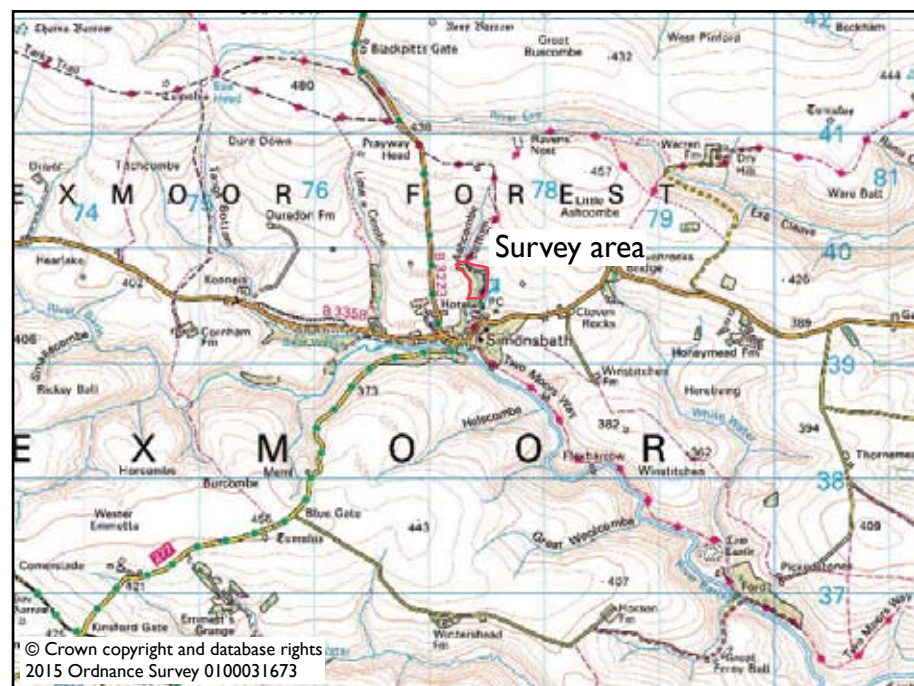


Fig 2 Survey location and topography

gardens and pleasure grounds in Simonsbath and this summary is used as the historical background to the historic landscape features surveyed in Ashcombe and discussed below.

Following the purchase of the White Rock Cottage building complex by the Exmoor National Authority, South West Archaeology were commissioned to undertake a desk based assessment and building survey of the complex in 2012 (Green *et al* 2012). The conclusions of this work form the basis for the role that the buildings at White Rock played in John Knight's gardens at Ashcombe and White Rock. The study of the buildings concluded that the original White Rock Cottage, as a cottage ornee, and a grotto, formed an element of the picturesque landscape around Simonsbath in the 1830s. White Rock cottages were also part of the estate centre, housing variously the school teacher, a shepherd, a land surveyor, gardeners and a gamekeeper in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As the village grew, the school at White Rock played an important role in the social development of the community, and has links with the present population as it remained in use until 1970 (Green *et al* 2012, 29).

A metric survey of the historic landscape features at White Rock Cottage and the southern part of Ashcombe recorded the remains of John Knight's designed landscape associated with Simonsbath House in the environs of White Rock Cottage. Two of the gardens mentioned in the 1830s – the Garden by the River and White Rock Garden – were located and surveyed. The terraced paths which linked Simonsbath House with these gardens and Ashcombe were also located and surveyed (Riley 2014a). That survey also included recording the ruined bridge at the northern end of Ashcombe and of part of the leat and terraced walks in Ashcombe (Riley 2014a, figs 16 & 19).

## **THE SURVEY AND EXCAVATIONS**

The course of the paths and the leat in the survey area is accurately shown on the OS 1<sup>st</sup> edition map. This map was used as the base map for the survey (Fig 3). A rapid walkover survey and assessment of the paths and leat, together with photography, was undertaken. A controlled sketch plan of the 19<sup>th</sup>- century wall around Ashcombe and an earlier boundary feature was carried out at a scale of 1:500. Profiles were recorded across the paths and the leat at a scale of 1:50. Two small excavations were carried out on the terraced path on the west side of Ashcombe to determine its structure. The locations of the excavation trenches, the profiles, plan, and features discussed below were all located on a geo-referenced copy of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition map. The bridge was recorded in February 2015.

### **Archive arrangements**

A CD containing copies of the excavation plans, section drawings and photographs, together with this report and archive survey photographs, has been deposited with Exmoor HER.

### **Site numbering**

All of the features discussed below have been given a number with the prefix AC. Features already recorded in the 2014 survey of the gardens (Riley 2014a) have that same number; new features are numbered AC24-AC28 (Fig 3).

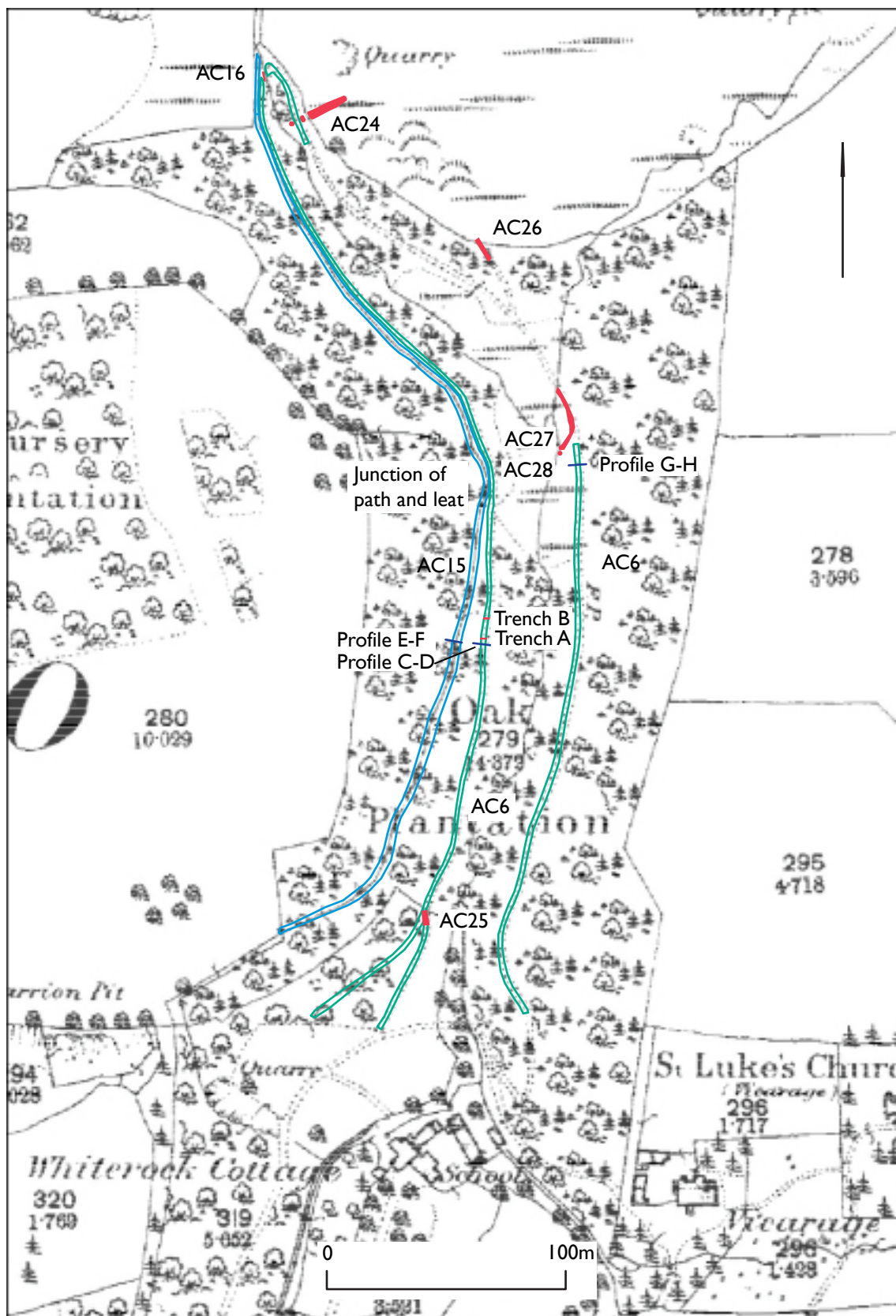


Fig 3 Location of the paths, leat and other features in Ashcombe

## DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE HISTORIC LANDSCAPE FEATURES

### Medieval and early post-medieval features

At the northern end of Ashcombe, on the east side of Ashcombe Water, a substantial earthen bank with a ditch on both sides is clearly overlain by John Knight's boundary wall (AC24) (Fig 4). The bank is also cut by the path around Ashcombe (Figs 4 and 5). This is a survival of the pre-19<sup>th</sup> century landscape, when the area was part of Simonsbath Farm, established in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. The 1818 Inclosure map for Exmoor Forest shows the enclosures of Simonsbath Farm to the west of Ashcombe Water, but no features to the east which would correspond to this boundary are depicted. This boundary does seem to relate to a boundary which is mapped on the west side Ashcombe (Fig 6). A similar boundary was recorded in the 2014 garden survey and was interpreted as enclosure and access relating to Simonsbath Farm (Riley 2014a,15).

### The terraced paths

The 2014 garden survey identified several terraced paths in the Garden by the River. One of these paths, AC6, leads right around Ashcombe, crossing the river by a bridge, now in ruins, at the northern end (AC16). A path from Simonsbath runs to the Garden by the River (AC7,9) and joins the path AC6 close to the garden boundary. Following clearance of laurel in spring 2015, details of this junction are now clear. A flight of

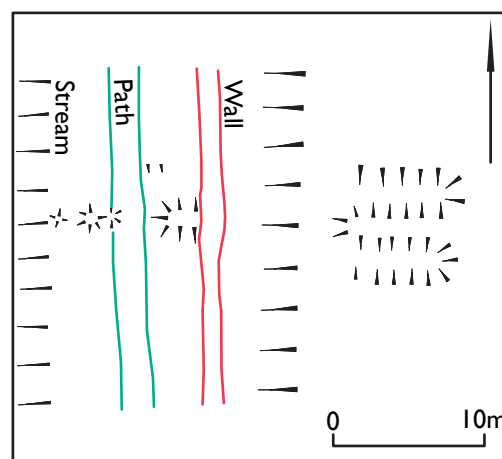


Fig 4 (above left) The bank at the NE end of Ashcombe (Hazel Riley)



Fig 5 (above) Plan of the bank at the NE end of Ashcombe (1:500)

Fig 6 Extract from the Exmoor Forest Inclosure map showing the enclosures at Simonsbath Farm (SRO QVRde 140) (South West Heritage Trust, Somerset Heritage centre)

stone steps connects the two paths (AC25) (Fig 7). The clearance has also allowed the path to be followed on the ground right around Ashcombe. On the west side of Ashcombe, the path is a substantial terraced walkway which runs from the boundary of the Garden by the River for some m where it joins the leat (AC13, below) (Fig 8). The recent clearance work shows that the path here was well constructed with a stone retaining wall on the down slope side and extra stonework where water runoff down the steep valley side was a problem (Figs 9, 10, 11)

The terraced path runs up to the leat and joins it to run along the side of the leat. It is difficult to say from the field evidence whether the leat or the path is the earlier feature; there is no sign of the course of the terraced path below the leat, suggesting that the leat may have already been in existence when the path was constructed and the awkward junction may conceal a flight of stone steps like those to the south (Riley 2014a, fig 16). This junction of path and leat was clearly an important feature in the designed landscape of Ashcombe (below).

To the north of this junction, the path runs along the east side of the leat, using the retaining bank (Fig 12). At the northern end of the combe, the remains of the bridge which took the path across the stream were recorded as part of the 2014 garden survey (Riley 2014a, figs 19 & 20).



*Fig 7 (above right) Flight of stone steps connecting the lower terraced path to the main path around Ashcombe (Hazel Riley)*



*Fig 8 (right) Looking north along the terraced path on the west side of Ashcombe (Hazel Riley)*



*Fig 9 (top) Detail of the retaining wall on the downslope side of the terraced path on the west side of Ashcombe (Hazel Riley)*

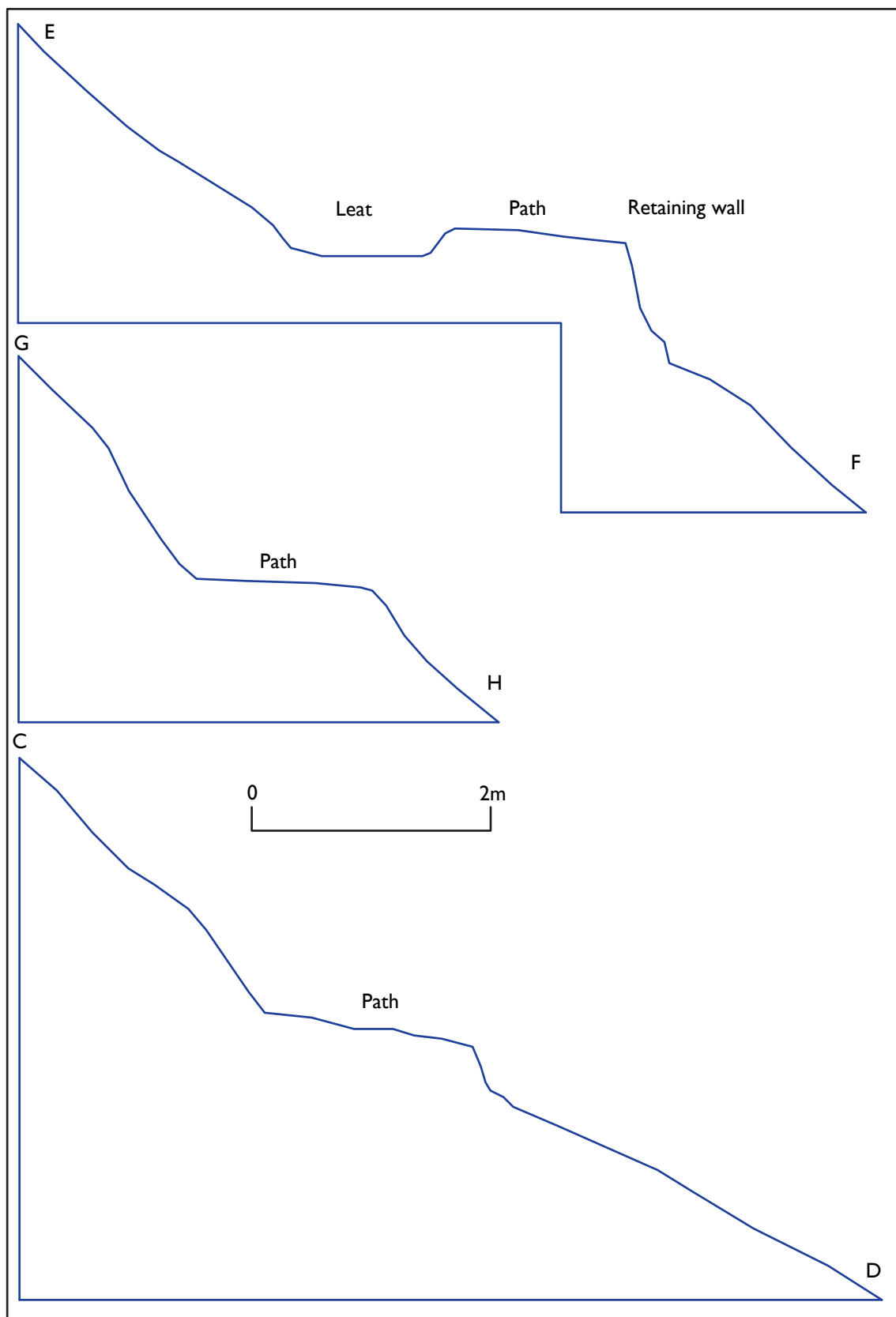


Fig 11 Profiles across the terraced path (C-D and G-H) and the leat (E-F)

The path on the east side of the combe is less clear on the ground. At the NE end of Ashcombe the path from the bridge is visible for some 37m (Fig 13). A later farm/forestry access track and turning place overlies the 19<sup>th</sup>-century path (Fig 14). The remains of the path are visible between the modern track and the river. The 1<sup>st</sup> edition map shows a path leading from Ashcombe out into the open land on Great Ashcombe, some of the first land enclosed and improved by John Knight (Riley 2015). The remains of a terraced path and the original gap in John Knight's boundary wall are still visible (Fig 15).

To the south of this, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century path is obscured by vegetation but it can be traced for some 20m. It survives as a stony bank with a hollow or path to one side (Fig 16). A hollow way, AC26, 10m long runs from this path to the edge of the river, opposite the junction of the leat and terraced path on the western side of the combe (Fig 17). The appearance of the hollow way and its relationship to the recorded 19<sup>th</sup>-century path suggest that it is be part of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century designed landscape of Ashcombe, but consideration should be given to the possibility that it may be a much earlier feature which has been re-used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The importance of this part of the designed landscape is further emphasised by what appears to be a mound placed where the hollow meets the water's edge (AC27). Two large Douglas firs stand on the mound and their roots may have contributed to its formation (Fig 18).



*Fig 10 (above) Stonework below the terraced path where water runoff crosses it (Hazel Riley)*



*Fig 12 (above right) The leat and terraced path on the west side of Ashcombe (Hazel Riley)*



*Fig 13 (right) The path and John Knight's boundary wall at the NE end of Ashcombe (Hazel Riley)*



*Fig 14 (above right) A modern access track & turning place overlaid the 19th-century path (Hazel Riley)*



*Fig 17 (below) The hollow way leading to Ashcombe Water (Hazel Riley)*

*Fig 15 (above) The gap in John Knight's boundary wall where a path leads from the pleasure grounds in Ashcombe to recently enclosed fields (Hazel Riley)*

*Fig 18 (bottom) Mound with Douglas fir by the water's edge in the east side of Ashcombe (Hazel Riley)*

*Fig 16 (below) The remains of the 19th-century path in the east side of Ashcombe (Hazel Riley)*

*Fig 19 (bottom left) Terraced path on east side of Ashcombe (Hazel Riley)*



To the south of this, the current path rejoins the 19<sup>th</sup>-century terraced path, where it is similar in appearance to the path on the west side of Ashcombe (Figs 11 & 19). In general, the path survives in poor condition compared to that on the west side of the combe, this is due to the very wet nature of the valley sides here. Only a few, short lengths of retaining wall are visible (compare Figs 19 & 20 with Figs 8 & 9), but the presence of numerous flat slabs laid on the path as repairs suggests that some retaining walls have been robbed out recently (Fig 21). The path leads into the Garden by the River where runs past the large quartz outcrop close to the ENPA car park (Fig 22). The construction of the parking areas has destroyed the rest of the path, but the 1<sup>st</sup> edition map shows that it doglegged down to cross Ashcombe Water north of Whiterocks Cottage.

### The leat

A substantial leat, AC15, runs from the north boundary of Ashcombe along the west side of the combe. The southern part of this was surveyed and described as part of the 2014 garden survey (Riley 2014a). South of the junction of the leat and terraced path, the leat comprises a silted up channel, cut into the valley side, with a substantial retaining wall on the downslope side (Figs 11, 23 & 24). North of this junction the path around Ashcombe uses the edge of the leat (Fig 12). The leat takes water from Ashcombe Water at the northern end of Ashcombe; the water is piped and the channel has been infilled from here for about 90m.



*Fig 20 (above right) Terraced path with fragmentary retaining wall on east side of Ashcombe (Hazel Riley)*



*Fig 21 (above) Recent repairs to the path, east side of Ashcombe (Hazel Riley)*

*Fig 22 (left) The terraced path and quartz outcrop by the ENPA car park (Hazel Riley)*





*Figure 23 (above left) The silted leat channel, south of the junction of the path and leat (Hazel Riley)*

*Figure 24 (above right) The retaining wall, south of the junction of the path and leat (Hazel Riley)*

## **EXCAVATIONS**

Two trenches were excavated across the terraced path on the west side of Ashcombe to investigate the structure of the terrace and the nature of the surface of the path (Front cover and Fig 3). The southern trench showed that the path was 2.2m wide and formed by cutting into the valley side to a depth of c 0.4m and using this material to form the path. There was very little stone used on the surface of the path, but a well built retaining wall was uncovered on the eastern side of the path (Figs 25-28). A clay field drain was set into the path, under tumble from the cut, showing that the path was a well designed and constructed feature (Fig 29).

Trench B was dug 8m to the north of Trench A. The path here was constructed in the same manner as Trench A, but was paved with numerous large stone slabs, probably originally covered with earth to form a level surface to walk on (Figs 25, 30, 31).

*Fig 26 (below right) Trench A from the west (Hazel Riley)*

*Fig 27 (below left) Cut for the terraced path, Trench A (Hazel Riley)*



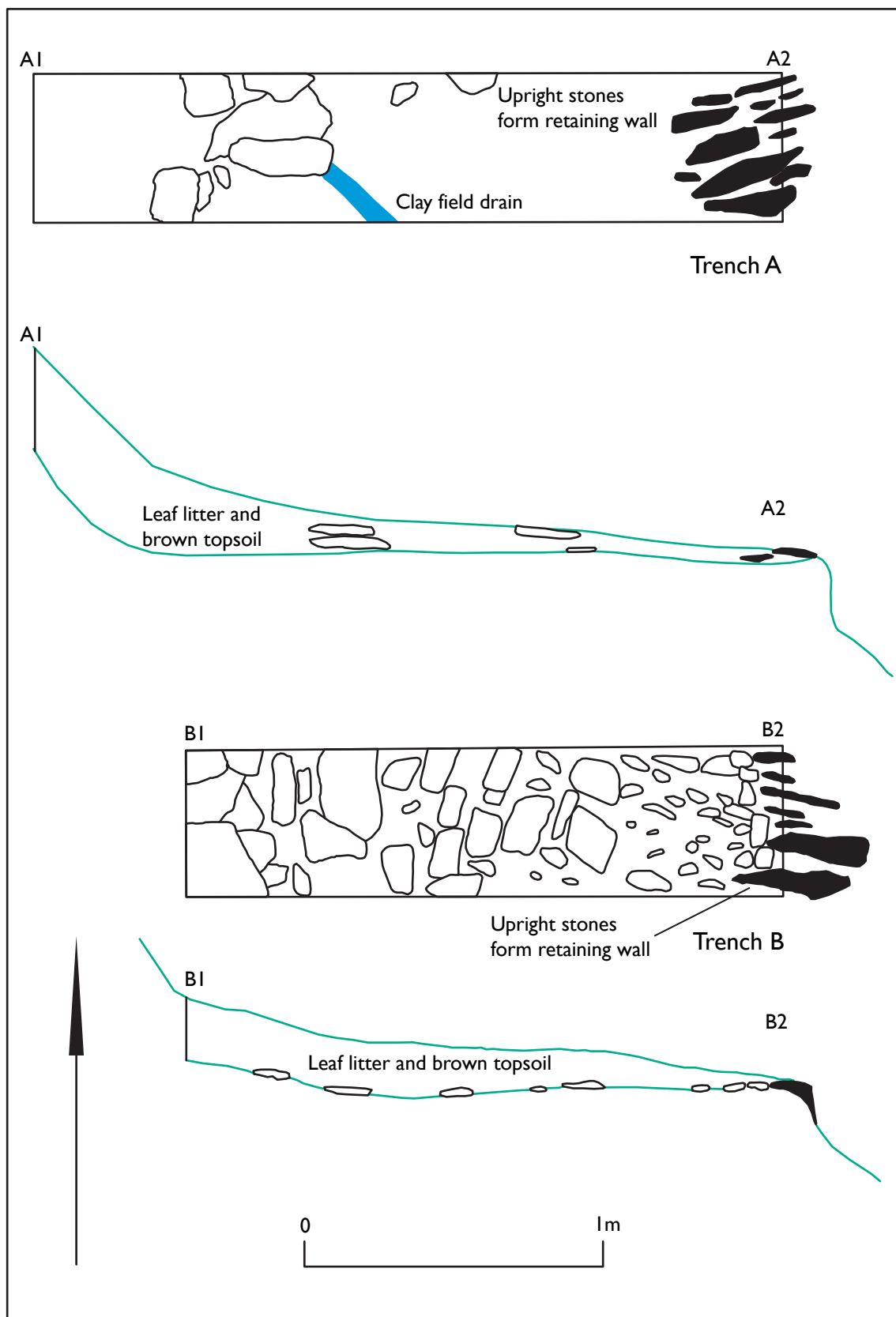


Fig 25 Plans and sections, Trenches A and B (1:20)



*Fig 28 (above) detail of retaining wall, Trench A (Hazel Riley)*



*Fig 31 (below) Retaining wall, Trench B (Hazel Riley)*

*Fig 29 (above right) Detail of the clay field drain, Trench A (Hazel Riley)*

*Fig 32 (bottom) The old road south of Pound Cottages, Simonsbath (Hazel Riley)*

*Fig 30 (below) Trench B from the south (Hazel Riley)*

*Fig 33 (bottom left) The bridge at the entrance to Simonsbath House (Hazel Riley)*



## THE BRIDGE AT THE CONFLUENCE OF ASHCOMBE WATER AND THE RIVER BARLE

The OS 1<sup>st</sup> edition map shows several paths and tracks which cross Ashcombe Water and its tributaries (Fig 3). Two bridges took the terraced paths over the river in Ashcombe; further downstream a bridge formed part of the entrance to John Knight's unfinished mansion behind Simonsbath House. At the confluence of Ashcombe Water with the River Barle a bridge, AC28, took the old road from Simonsbath Bridge, running along the north bank of the river for some 100m before turning north to the village centre (Fig 32).

The extreme weather conditions which caused the Lynmouth Flood Disaster in August 1952 also affected the Barle and its tributaries. The top of Simonsbath Bridge was washed away and water from Ashcombe quickly flooded the Exmoor Forest Hotel. The floodwaters also damaged or destroyed all of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century bridges in Ashcombe (Siruat nd; information from Rob Wilson-North). The bridge at the entrance to Simonsbath House was substantially rebuilt after this (Fig 33) but part of the bridge over the old road by the River Barle has survived. The structure survives as the bridge abutments, the arch, and the roadway over the bridge. A substantial ash sapling on the north side of the structure has caused damage to the arch (Figs 34-36). A photograph from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century shows the bridge taken from the south bank of the River Barle. It was constructed of several courses of flat slabs of local shillet with upright shillet slabs and some quartz blocks forming a decorative parapet (Fig 37).



*Fig 34 (above right) The southern face of the bridge at the confluence of Ashcombe Water and the River Barle (Hazel Riley)*



*Fig 35 (right) The northern face of the bridge showing damage to the arch by large ash sapling (Hazel Riley)*



*Fig 36 (top) The old road to Simonsbath on the north bank of the River Barle (Hazel Riley)*

Historic photographs and the 1<sup>st</sup> edition map show that the area between Simonsbath House and the River Barle was open meadow or pasture, with a few scattered trees, perhaps suggestive of parkland in front of the house (Figs 3 & 37). This stone bridge was probably built to replace a muddy track over a ford which would spread across the fields in muddy conditions. The bridge which takes the road to St Luke's Church over a tributary of Ashcombe Water is similar in construction and stands in good condition (Fig 38). This bridge was presumably built by 1856 when St Luke's was consecrated, and it seems to echo the style of the structures built a few decades earlier as part of John Knight's designed landscape at Simonsbath. The possibility that the bridge by St Luke's is actually part of John Knight's designed landscape at Simonsbath should also be considered: the walls on each side of the road to the church are built differently to the bridge and meet it somewhat awkwardly.

## CONCLUSIONS

Ashcombe contains a remarkably complete designed landscape, mostly dating from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The excavations have shown that the terraced paths were well designed and well built structures, and the appearance of the rest of the village of Simonsbath seems to have been influenced by John Knight's designs.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Shirley Blaylock and Sopia Thorogood carried out the excavation. The work of Caroline Garrett (2004) and South West Archaeology (Green *et al* 2012) forms the historic landscape context for this survey.



*Fig 37 (left) Simonsbath House and the bridge in the early 20th century (from Burton 1994, facing p 26)*



*Fig 38 (above left) The bridge by St Luke's Church, Simonsbath (Hazel Riley)*

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Siuat nd Memories of the 1952 flood [englandspastforeveryone.org.uk](http://englandspastforeveryone.org.uk)

## SITE GAZETTEER

AC6 Location: West side of Ashcombe NGR 277317 139466 to 277297 139859

East side of Ashcombe NGR 277421 139730 to 277407 139468

Type: TERRACED WALK

Period: VICTORIAN

Description and interpretation: A terraced path, 2-2.5m wide, runs through John Knight's Garden by the River, and through Ashcombe, giving views out to the wider landscape around Simonsbath. Two excavations were carried out on the path in 2015, following clearance of laurel. This showed that the path was constructed by digging into the hillside and using the stones and subsoil to make the path and retaining wall.

References: AC6a\_N\_27APR15\_HRILEY; AC6b\_E\_27APR15\_HRILEY; AC6c\_S\_27APR15\_HRILEY; AC6d\_E\_27APR15\_HRILEY; AC6e\_N\_27APR15\_HRILEY; AC6f\_W\_27APR15\_HRILEY; AC6g\_N\_27APR15\_HRILEY; AC6h\_N\_22APR15\_HRILEY; AC6j\_N\_22APR15\_HRILEY; AC6k\_N\_22APR15\_HRILEY; AC6l\_N\_27APR15\_HRILEY; AC6m\_S\_27APR15\_HRILEY; AC6n\_S\_15MAY15\_HRILEY; AC6p\_S\_15MAY15\_HRILEY; AC6q\_N\_15MAY15\_HRILEY; AC6r\_S\_15MAY15\_HRILEY;

AC13 Location: NGR 277303 139502 to 277296 139868

Type: LEAT

Period: POST-MEDIEVAL

Description and interpretation: A leat runs from the north end of Ashcombe Plantation to Simonsbath House. It comprises a channel, 4m wide and 0.5-1m deep, rock cut in places. The downslope edge has a stone revetment for much of its course. The leat was diverted by 1902 and the feature became part of the designed landscape at Ashcombe. It supplied water to Simonsbath House in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it may well have its origins in the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century.

References: AC13a\_W\_22APR15\_HRILEY; AC13b\_N\_22APR15\_HRILEY; AC13c\_N\_22APR15\_HRILEY; AC13d\_N\_22APR15\_HRILEY; AC13e\_N\_22APR15\_HRILEY

AC24 Location: NGR 277322 139846

Type: BOUNDARY BANK

Period: POST-MEDIEVAL

Description and interpretation: A bank with ditches on both sides lies at the NE end of Ashcombe. The bank is 20m long, 4m wide and 1m high, the ditches are 0.8m wide and 0.8m deep. The feature is overlain by John Knight's boundary wall and cut by a

path which runs around Ashcombe and could be associated with enclosure and access relating to Simonsbath Farm which was established in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century.

References:AC24\_E\_22APR15\_HRILEY

AC25 Location: NGR 277365 139508

Type: GARDEN STEPS

Period:VICTORIAN

Description and interpretation:A flight of seven stone steps give access from the lower terraced path to the main walk around Ashcombe.The steps are 3.8m long and 1.7m wide.

References:AC25\_NW\_22APR15\_HRILEY

AC26 Location: NGR 277389 139789

Type:TERRACED WALK

Period:VICTORIAN

Description and interpretation:A terraced path, 3m wide, at the NE end of Ashcombe leads north from the main walk around Ashcombe to Great Ashcombe. Part of the original opening in John Knight's boundary wall survives.

References:AC26a\_NE\_27APR15\_HRILEY;AC26b\_E\_27APR15\_HRILEY

AC27 Location: NGR 277424 139707

Type: HOLLOW WAY

Period: POST-MEDIEVAL

Description and interpretation:A hollow, 10m long, 2m wide and 1.1m deep runs from the path around Ashcombe to the east bank of Ashcombe Water; opposite the junction of the path and leat on the opposite bank. This could be part of John Knight's designed landscape in Ashcombe, perhaps re-using an earlier feature. The area needs clearing of fallen trees before further interpretation.

References:AC27\_SW\_15MAY15\_HRILEY

AC28 Location: NGR 277422 139702

Type: MOUND

Period:VICTORIAN

Description and interpretation:A circular mound on the eastern bank of Ashcombe Water is 2m in diameter and 1m high. A Douglas fir is growing on the mound. It may be a product of the planting, but it does seem to emphasise the importance of the junction of the path and leat on the opposite side of the valley.

References:AC28\_SW\_15MAY15\_HRILEY

The bridge at the confluence of Ashcombe Water and the River Barle

Location: NGR 277271 139093

Type: BRIDGE

Period:VICTORIAN

Description and interpretation:The remains of a small stone bridge lie on the north bank of the River Barle at the confluence of Ashcombe Water and the River Barle.

The remains comprise the bridge abutments, arch and the roadway. The arch rises from 0.6m high at the abutment end to 1m high at the central keystone; the span is

2.18m wide and 4.4m long. A large ash sapling has displaced one of the keystones on the northern side of the bridge. This is one of several bridges over Ashcombe Water built by John Knight in the 1830s and formed part of a designed landscape around Simonsbath. The bridge was in good repair in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (photograph in Burton 1994, facing p 26) and was probably damaged in the 1952 floods.

References: Ba\_W\_13FEB15\_HRILEY; Bb\_W\_13FEB15\_HRILEY; Bc\_N\_13FEB15\_HRILEY; Bd\_S\_13FEB15\_HRILEY; Be\_S\_13FEB15\_HRILEY; Bf\_SW\_13FEB15\_HRILEY; Bg\_E\_13FEB15\_HRILEY; Bh\_N\_13FEB15\_HRILEY

