

Exmoor National Park
Historic Environment Report Series No 5

BLACKPITS BARN A FIRST WORLD WAR BUILDING AT BLACKPITS, NEAR SIMONSBATH



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Author: Nicholas Dawson
Images: Nicholas Dawson; courtesy of Roger Thomas (2011)
Design: Pete Rae
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This report series includes interim reports, policy documents and other information relating to the historic environment of Exmoor National Park.

Further hard copies of this report can be obtained from the Exmoor National Park Historic Environment Record:
Exmoor House, Dulverton, Somerset. TA22 9HL
email her@exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk,
01398 322273

FRONT COVER:

Blackpits bungalow and the WWI ex-military building
(Photo Rob Wilson-North November 2006)

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BLACKPITS BARN

A FIRST WORLD WAR BUILDING AT BLACKPITS, NEAR SIMONSBATH

SUMMARY

This report describes the standing remains of a First World War building purchased by the Fortescue estate after the end of WWI and relocated to Blackpits near Simonsbath in 1920 where it was converted into shepherd's accommodation. The report also assesses the surviving remains against known WWI building types.

INTRODUCTION

Blackpits lies north of the village of Simonsbath, and on the Simonsbath to Lynton road, NGR SS 7640 4172. The site, which comprises a bungalow built in the 1950s and a First World War hut, is owned by Exmoor National Park Authority. Both buildings were put up by the Fortescue estate to provide accommodation for shepherds. This document is principally a report on the First World War structure and its current condition, but it also summarises the history and principal events in the recent landscape development at Blackpits. It builds on a summary report and some historical research that was carried out at the time the site was acquired by Exmoor National Park Authority (Wilson-North 2008).

LANDSCAPE DEVELOPMENT: SUMMARY OF KEY EVENTS

DATE	AROUND BLACKPITS	AT BLACKPITS
pre 1818	Royal Forest	Moorland with peat cutting; the date of the Simonsbath to Lynton road is unclear
1818	Enclosure of the Royal Forest	
1820s or 30s?	Creation of contour drainage from Exe Head to Warren	
Mid 19th century	Drainage and improvements at Lanacombe etc	Peat cutting
1890s	Knight family give up Exmoor, and the Fortescue Estate takes over the former Forest	
1916		Blackpits herding created; First building proposal at Blackpits (not carried out)
1920		Second building proposal at Blackpits (not carried out); about the same time a WWI military building is erected at the site for shepherd's accommodation. This structure was the only one at the site between 1920 and 1950.
1928?		Current Blackpits Bridge built
1920s or 30s?		Road improvement scheme between Blackpits site and Brendon Two Gates
c.1940	Military training on Exmoor	Searchlights and accommodation built at Blackpits (west of the bungalow). Traces of buildings survive.
1950		Present bungalow built

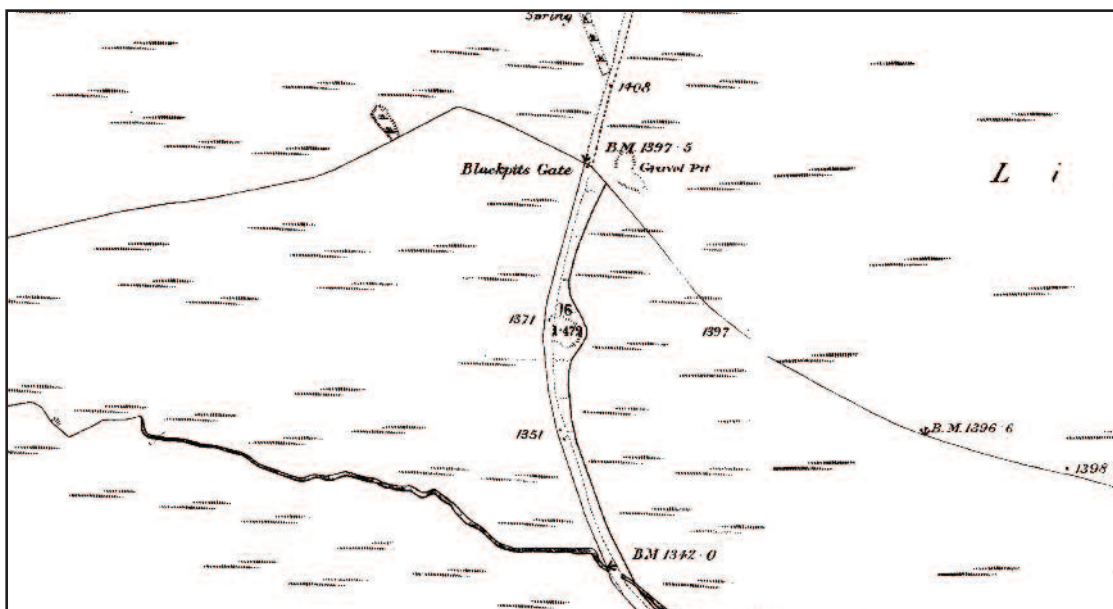
LANDSCAPE HISTORY

Before the enclosure of the Royal Forest in 1818 the area around Blackpits was unenclosed moorland with areas of peat cutting. The name 'Blackpits' with its various forms ('Black Pits', 'Blackpitts' etc) probably derives from the black peat of the surrounding moorland and is likely to refer directly to the hollows of the old peat workings in the vicinity. In the surrounding area are the vestiges of prehistoric farming and settlement in the form of barrows, cairns and standing stones.

The site now lies close to the Simonsbath to Lynton road, but it is unclear when this route was created. It has been suggested that it dates from medieval times, but this is currently uncorroborated. There was certainly a route crossing the Royal Forest to the west of Blackpits: it ran from Moles Chamber to Exe Head and thence over the moor to Hawkcombe Head and so to Porlock (see *Yesterday's Exmoor* Hazel Eardley-Wilmot, 1990).

Following the enclosure of the former Royal Forest, the Knight family began improvements which initially took the form of large scale land reclamation and drainage. It is likely therefore that some of the drainage around Blackpits was done in the 1820s and 1830s. Whilst large scale drainage schemes were installed at Lanacombe and on Exe Plain, no settlement was envisaged at Blackpits by either John or Frederic Knight (Orwin 1970).

At the end of the nineteenth century the former Forest passed to the Fortescue family and by 1916, a herding was created at Blackpits.

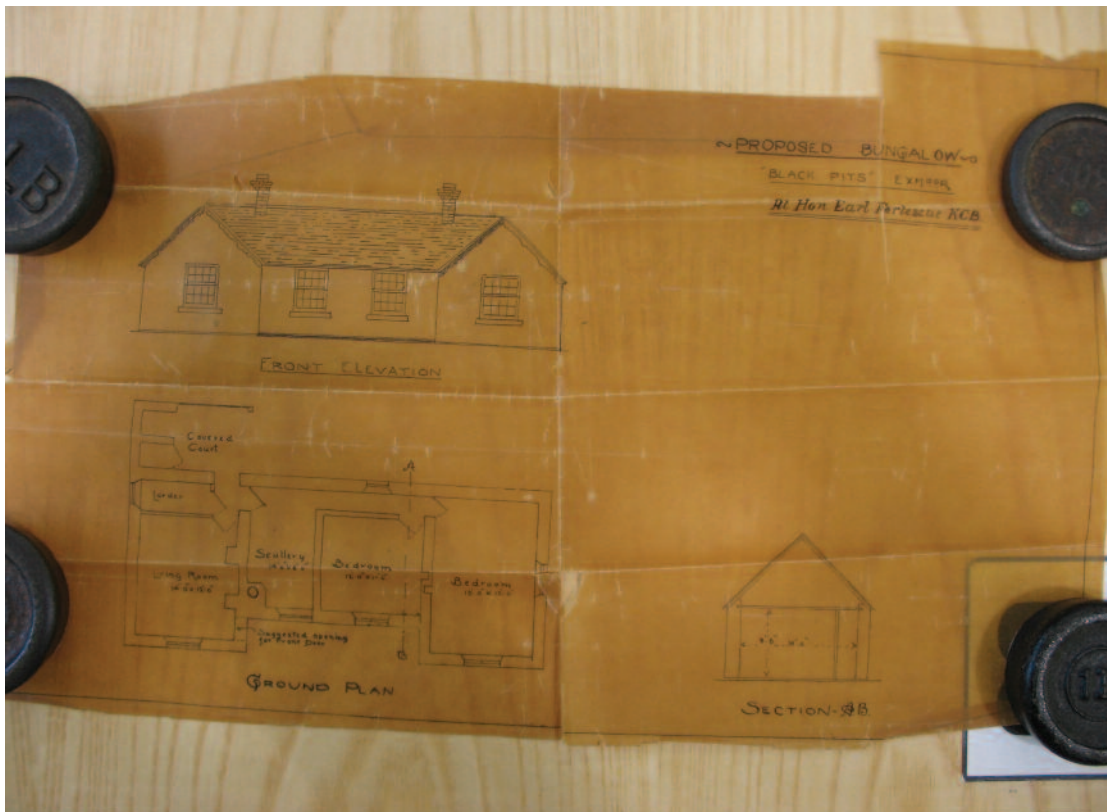


Ordnance Survey first edition 25 inch mapping of c.1890, showing Blackpits Gate, gravel pits and quarries (probably ballast quarries for the road and enclosure boundary)

HISTORICAL NOTES

The first documented proposal for a building at the Blackpits site dates from 1916 (in the Dulverton Rural District Planning Notifications; Dr R Dunning pers comm).

In 1920 a second proposal was put forward for a building at Black Pits.



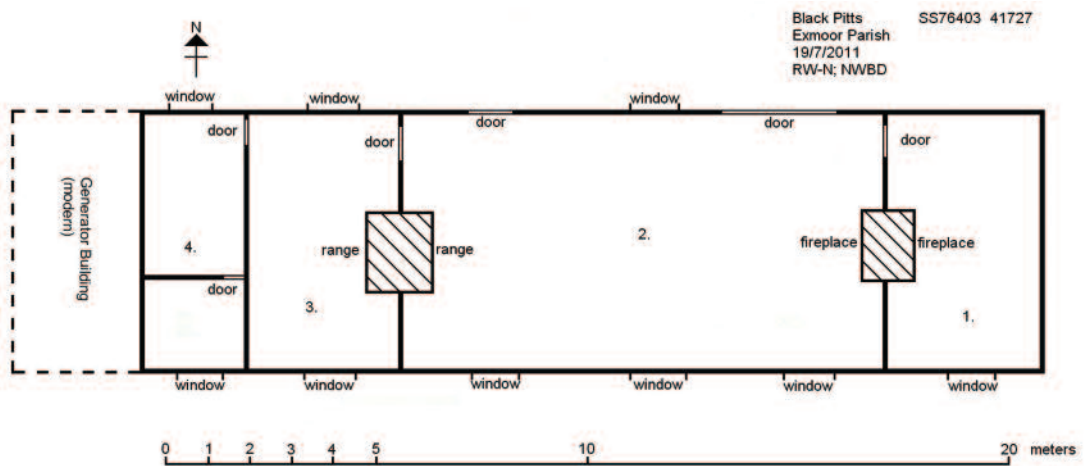
Elevation drawing for a proposed bungalow at Black Pits (1920) (Devon Record Office)
The proposal was never carried out.

At roughly the same time as the bungalow proposal, it seems that plans were made to acquire a WWI military building. A sketch plan, stamped 'H.O.H. Etheridge, Civil Engineer 17 August 1919', exists in the Devon Record Office. Written in pencil on the sketch is 'Lot 2, Barrack hut for South Molton'. A small photograph of the building is pinned to the sketch plan:



Above: Plan of the original First World War building before its relocation to Blackpits (Devon Record Office)

Below: Plan of Blackpitts Barn in 2011 (Nick Dawson)





The First World War building in its original location before relocation to Blackpits (Devon Record Office)

The WWI military building was re-erected at the site following its purchase by the Fortescue Estate (the original purpose and location of the WWI building is currently unknown). The building was converted to shepherd's accommodation and was subsequently used as a store. These circumstances have ensured its survival to the present day. Based on the first edition Ordnance Survey mapping of c. 1890, there were no structures at Blackpits until around 1920 when the WWI building was erected, and then would have stood in an isolated position in largely open moorland. Subsequent developments (currently undated) took the form of the creation of fields to the east and north and the planting of shelter belts.

In 1950 the present bungalow was built with funding from the government in the form of Hill Farm Improvement Grants.



**Blackpits bungalow, the WWI ex-military building and shelter belt
(Photo Rob Wilson-North November 2006)**

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The remaining structure consists of a single storey building 21.4m (70 feet 2½ inches) long by 13m (52ft 8 inches) wide with four interior rooms. The walls consist of a wooden frame with exterior corrugated iron cladding. The wooden frames are built in sections 2.1m (6ft 9inch) wide with timbers of 0.12x0.09 (4x3inch). Within rooms 1, 2 and 4 the walls have interior cladding of 1.22x0.6m (4x2ft) plaster on hessian panels attached to the wooden frame and then covered by wooden panelling. The roof is constructed of more modern corrugated iron sheeting supported by wooden trusses consisting of a tie-beam, kingpost and struts. The divisions between rooms 1 and 2 as well as 2 and 3 are constructed of brick. The fireplaces and the stacks built in the dividing walls are constructed of stone with brick quoins. Throughout the structure there are also a number of modern divisions consisting of chicken wire and wood for the keeping of livestock. At the structure's western end a modern generator building has been added.

Out of the four rooms room 1 contains the most complete interior with its walls of wooden panelling as well as a ceiling of lath and plaster. The room also

contains a cast iron fireplace in the western dividing wall and has a window in the south wall. Room 2 is the largest room with a fireplace at its east end and a range at its western end. The interior wall cladding is absent as well as the lath and plaster ceiling, however there is evidence of the latter on one of the room roof beams. Within the northern wall are two doors and a window; in the southern wall are three windows. The floor is of concrete. Room 3 as with room 1 still contains most of the interior wall cladding and ceiling. In the eastern wall is what appears to be a kitchen range and to its right is the remains of a cupboard. In both the room's northern and southern walls are single windows. The flooring in room 3 is wooden planking. Room 4 also still retains most of the ceiling and wall cladding. A single window is present in both the northern and southern walls.



Section of plaster on hessian panelling (Photo Nicholas Dawson July 2011)



North side of the Blackpits WWI building (Photo Nicholas Dawson July 2011)



South side of the Blackpits WWI building (Photo Nicholas Dawson July 2011)



Interior wall cladding wooden panels over plaster panelling found in Rooms 1, 3 and 4
(Photo Nicholas Dawson July 2011)



Lath and Plaster Ceiling
(Photo Nicholas Dawson July 2011)



Interior of Room 3 showing remains of possible cupboard in alcove to right of the range
(Photo Nicholas Dawson July 2011)



Interior of Room 2 showing the roof trusses (Photo Nicholas Dawson July 2011)



Interior of Room 4 (Photo Nicholas Dawson July 2011)



Cast iron fireplace located in Room 1, western wall (Photo Nicholas Dawson July 2011)



Cast iron fireplace and stone with brick quoined chimney stack located in Room 2, eastern wall
(Photo Nicholas Dawson July 2011)



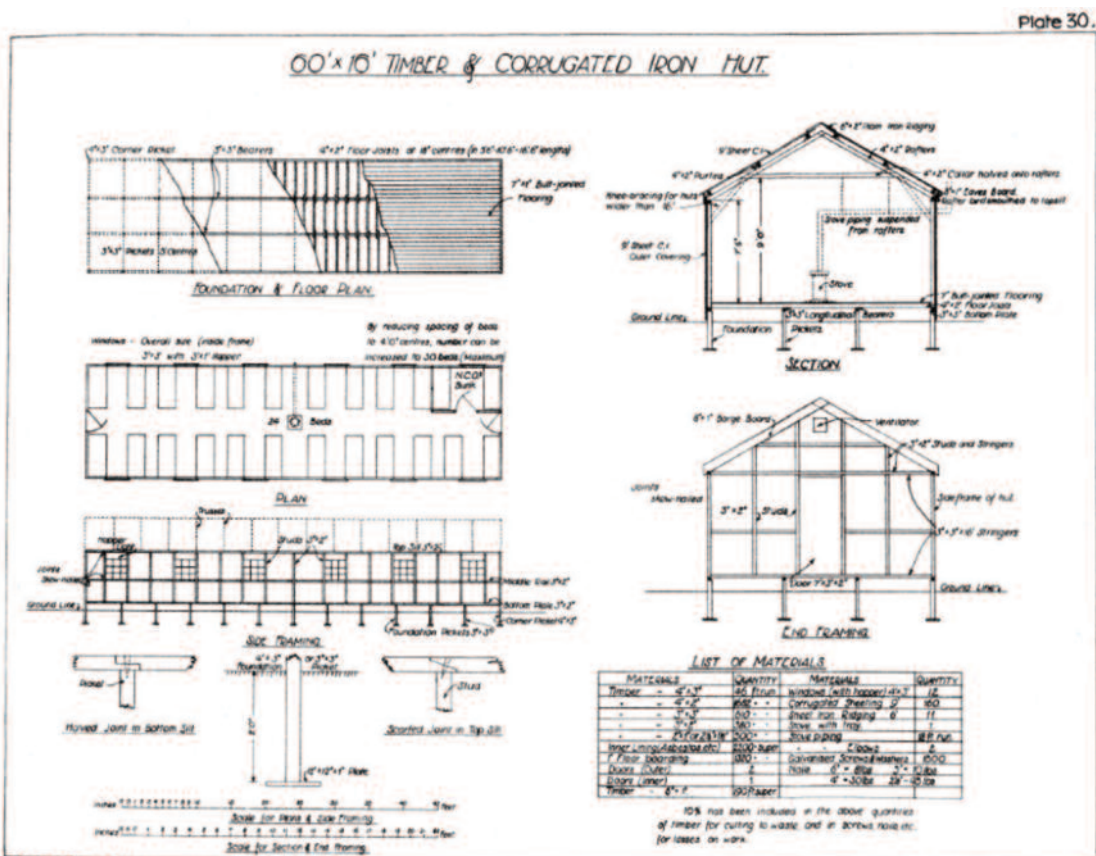
Range with iron frontage located in Room 2, western wall (Photo Nicholas Dawson July 2011)



Iron range with 'Castle Hill 1918' moulded onto front, located Room 3 east wall (Photo Nicholas Dawson July 2011)

ASSESSMENT

Of the original First World War structure it would seem that little remains apart from the wooden frame and corrugated iron of the wall (and even this may be a replacement). When compared to the sketch plan of the original structure made for the Fortescue estate just before purchasing the building, it shows that the whole of the original interior had to be removed and that all that remains is the shell. The roof is also not the original as it is made of more modern materials and the pitch is much steeper than shown in the 1920s photograph of the structure at its original location. This according to an account previously given by Mr Stan Curtis is due to the threat of, or the actual occurrence of snow, causing the original roof to collapse. The two large dividing walls and the chimney stacks are most likely from the 1920s conversion of the building into shepherd's accommodation. It would also seem logical that the interior plaster panels and wood panelling as well as the lath and plaster ceiling was also put in at this time.



Plan of a 'Standard 60-ft' Timber and Corrugated Iron Hut (Thomas 2011)



'Standard 60-ft' huts at Penally (Thomas 2011)



Felt clad 'Standard 60-ft' hut in the background (Thomas 2011)

R J C Thomas Military Support Officer for English Heritage has kindly commented that: 'The hut is based on the 'Standard 60-ft' hut of a pre-Great War design that was used throughout the war and for many years thereafter.' Thomas also suggest that 'although the framework wasn't fully pre-fabricated in the modern sense, these structures were built in a modular way and could be put together in a number of lengths and plan-forms; they could be clad in a number of materials, corrugated metal sheeting, flat asbestos cement sheeting that looks like plasterboard, plasterboard water-proofed using bitumastic paint or tacked felt, or timber weather board.' Thomas identifies the Blackpits original layout as 'either a hospital doctors' or officers' accommodation hut.' According to Thomas, these types of structure were 'once very common indeed, hundreds, if not thousands of these structures were sold off during the early 1920s for cricket pavilions, WI halls, village memorial halls, reading rooms, and even bungalows.' (Thomas 2011)

STATEMENT OF HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The WWI building is an unusual survival in national terms. However, the fact that it is not in situ in its original context and that it has been largely reclad internally with the addition of features (such as fireplaces) reflecting its use as shepherd's accommodation, detract from its significance as a WWI structure. However, the survival of this building, and especially its internal fittings, provides a valuable, and possibly unique insight into social conditions on Exmoor at the beginning of the twentieth century.

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