

Exmoor National Park
Historic Environment Report Series No 7

THE ROYAL FOREST OF EXMOOR: RESEARCH FRAMEWORK



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This report series includes interim reports, policy documents and other information relating to the historic environment of Exmoor National Park.

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Simonsbath Tower

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CONTENTS

	Page
SUMMARY	1
INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES	1
RESEARCH FRAMEWORK	3
THE ROYAL FOREST OF EXMOOR (ORIGINS – 1818)	6
THE RECLAMATION OF EXMOOR FOREST (1818 – 1897)	8
20TH CENTURY	11
SOCIAL HISTORY AND OTHER THEMES	11
DISSEMINATION	12
REVIEW AND EVALUATION	13
BILBLIOGRAPHY	13

SUMMARY

This document sets out the research priorities for the historic environment in the former Royal Forest of Exmoor. The priorities it lists were identified by those with an active interest in this area of Exmoor at a seminar at Ashwick in March 2012.

INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

A research framework for the former Royal Forest of Exmoor was proposed in an attempt to direct research and address the inability to answer with any degree of certainty some of the most basic questions related to the historical use and operation of this area of Exmoor National Park. The Exmoor Moorland Landscape Partnership Scheme (EMLPS) provided an opportunity to promote further research into the former Royal Forest of Exmoor, with funding available through the 'Treeless Forest' project. In order to facilitate the activities of this project and to structure future research and conservation activities in this area beyond the life of EMLPS, a research framework is needed.

The Exmoor Moorland Landscape Partnership Scheme is a three year Heritage Lottery Funded Landscape Partnership project launched in 2011, with the aim of 'helping people to enjoy and appreciate moorlands, and supporting those who take care of it'. The Treeless Forest project in particular aims to 'support voluntary conservation and survey work in the former Royal Forest of Exmoor', of which research and understanding of the features of this area form an integral part.

The two hundredth anniversary of the disafforestation of the Royal Forest of Exmoor and its subsequent purchase by the Knight family occurs in 2018, providing ideal opportunities to engage with the public to increase their understanding and awareness of an often challenging aspect of Exmoor's moorland heritage. The Former Royal Forest provides a unique opportunity to tell the story of dramatic changes to the moorland environment which took place within only a few generations and how the effects of 19th century 'reclamation' works are still visible in the landscape as it appears today.

BACKGROUND

There have been few publications on the history of the former Royal Forest of Exmoor. Those which cover the subject in detail include Orwin and Sellick 1970; MacDermot 1973; Burton 1989 and Siraut 2009. Of these, only Siraut's 'Exmoor: The Making of an English Upland', has been researched and published in the last 20 years. Other research into aspects of the Former Royal Forest has been conducted privately and directed by the interests of the researcher (such as Garrett 2004). Research such as this, although held by the Historic Environment Record for Exmoor National Park, is not widely disseminated to the public in an intelligible format. Without a framework with which to direct future research into the Former Royal Forest, it is likely to continue in this way.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this research framework is to provide a focus for future research into the former Royal Forest of Exmoor. By identifying those areas which pose the most pressing questions, it will enable progress to be made in broadening the general understanding of this central part of Exmoor National Park. This framework is intended to be utilised by externally funded projects (including EMLPS), groups (such as Simonsbath Conservation Volunteers, Universities, local societies) and individuals (including student placements) as a resource for beginning and implementing research into the former Royal Forest. Progress can be assessed against the research priorities set out in this framework, to determine its success in directing and promoting research into poorly understood areas of the Royal Forest of Exmoor.

This research framework was produced as a result of a seminar held on 23rd March 2012 at The Green Room, Ashwick. A number of people with a knowledge of or interest in the Former Royal Forest of Exmoor were invited to attend. This comprised:

Steven Pugsley (Chair)

Mary Siraut (Somerset Victoria County History)

Caroline Garrett (Nicholas Pearson Associates)

Professor Ralph Fyfe (University of Plymouth)

Dr Graham Wills (Simonsbath Conservation Volunteer Group lead)

Faye Balmond (Exmoor Moorland Landscape Partnership)

Rob Wilson-North, Jessica Turner, Sue Parkman, Sarah Rimes
(Exmoor National Park Authority)

Dr Lee Bray (Exmoor Mires Project)

Professor Henry French (University of Exeter)

Mike Jones (Exmoor Mines Research Group)

Richard McDonnell

Veryan Heal, Vanessa Straker (English Heritage)

John Bradbeer (North Devon Archaeological Society)

Monica Raynor (West Somerset Archaeological & Natural History Society)

David Lloyd

Dr David Brabban, Dr Ken Mills, Wendy Mills
(Simonsbath Conservation Volunteers)

FORMAT OF THE DAY

The day began with a series of short presentations. Mary Siraut summarised the current state of knowledge of the Royal Forest of Exmoor, drawing on research undertaken for Exmoor: the making of an English upland. Caroline Garratt spoke about the reclamation of the forest, under the Knights, and Ralph Fyfe discussed the potential for paleoecological research in the forest as an alternative to historical and archaeological sources. Following this the attendees divided into four groups to discuss and draw conclusions as to research priorities for the former Royal Forest.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

INTRODUCTION

The reclamation activities of the 19th century have removed many of the visible archaeological remains within the former Royal Forest. This is in part due to the application of techniques such as steam ploughing, which leave a legacy for the industrial revolution on Exmoor in the projects, buildings and structures initiated by the Knight family. In spite of this, a number of pre-knight features remain, although not always distinguished from their later additions.

POLICY CONTEXT

The policy context for this Research Framework is derived from the South West Archaeological Research Framework (SWARF) (Webster 2008) and the Historic Environment Research Framework for Exmoor National Park 2010-15 ('Exmoor Research Framework') (Exmoor National Park Historic Environment Report Series No 1). Within these two documents the following priorities have been identified:

SWARF	Exmoor Research Framework
17 (p282)	
38 (p 288)	Priority 7
42,43 (p290)	Priority 8
45 (p290)	
	Priority 9
	Priority 11
	Priority 12
	Priority 13

This Research Framework also has synergy with the National Heritage Protection Plan and the following Measures contained in it:

Measure 1: Foresight. ICI (data gathering to assess significance)

Measure 3: Identification of assets, 3A4 (Identification of terrestrial assets via non-intrusive survey)

Measure 4: Assessment of Significance and character, 4B1 (Historic water management); 4B2 (Traditional industry and mining).

Measure 5: Responses – protection of significance, 5A4 (Supporting local communities in protecting heritage assets).

Exmoor Moorlands Historic Environment Research Priorities 2011-15 (Exmoor National Park Historic Environment Research Report No 2) sets out more focused priorities for research into the former Royal Forest:

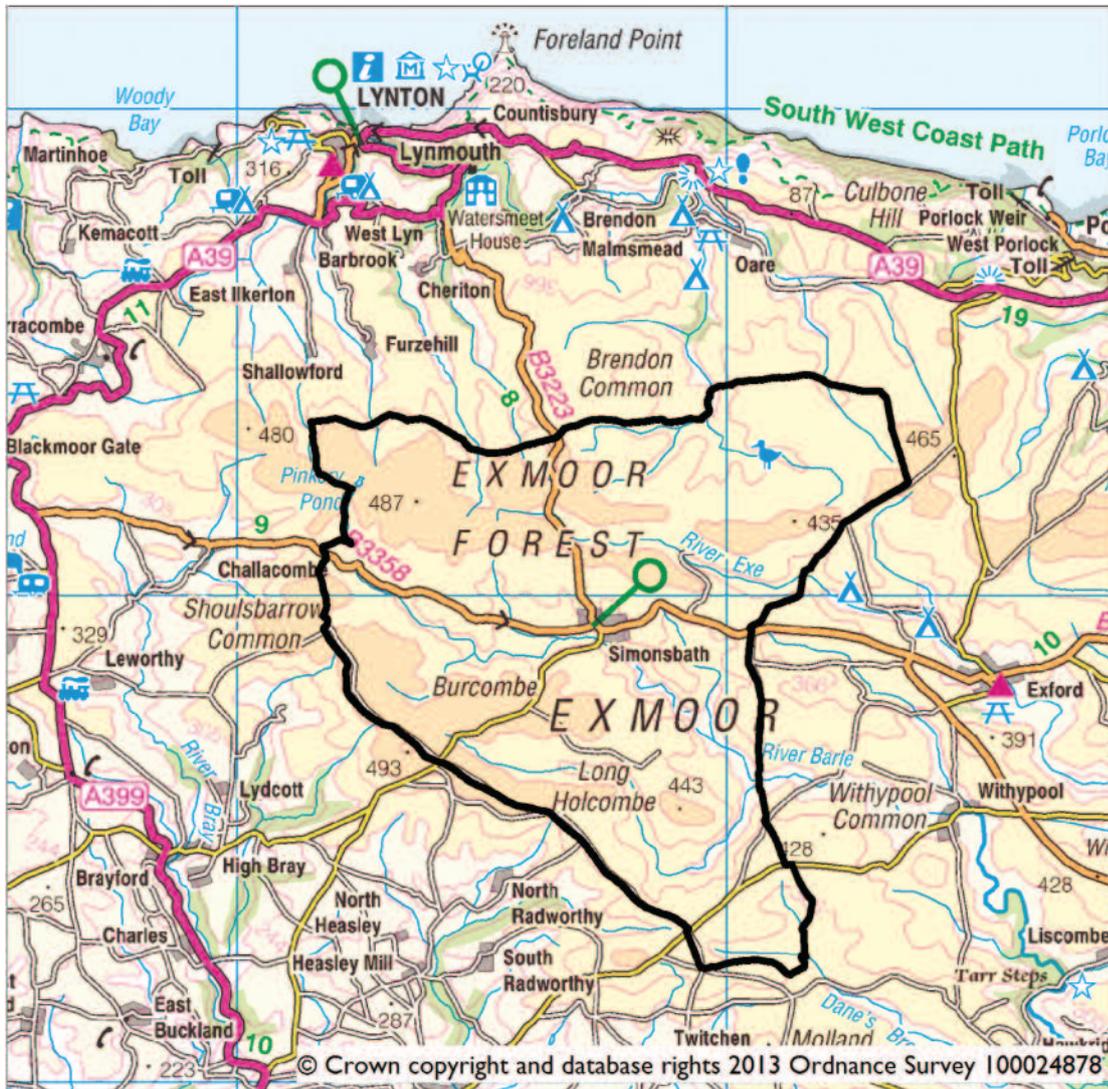
PRIORITY	METHODS
To understand the nature of 19th century reclamation.	Walkover surveys and ground truthing of air photographic and LiDAR data is needed. Selected, large scale topographic surveys are also needed.
To understand the social history of Reclamation.	Detailed local history research is needed, which builds on the work of the VCH and Roger Burton.
Link the 'Treeless Forest' project which forms part of the Landscape Partnership Scheme to the work of the VCH.	
Resolve the 'Molinia debate' in the Royal Forest. Was the medieval Forest swaled? Palaeo-ecological sampling and dating at key valley mire sites.	Palaeo-ecological sampling and dating at key valley mire sites.
Understand the range of mining features on the moorland, especially in the light of work by Exmoor Iron at Roman Lode.	Large scale survey; LiDAR analysis, geophysical survey, palaeo-ecological sampling, small scale excavation.
To properly understand the form of the boundary markers of the Royal Forest (including the 19th century boundary)	Condition surveys, map regression. Link to the 'Treeless Forest' project.
Understanding the full extent of Knight structures, especially small scale structural features which are vulnerable to destruction.	Under the 'Treeless Forest' project carry out surveys to identify and record such structures
To understand the chronology of reclamation and to identify pre-reclamation features from the medieval and earlier periods which are obscured by 19th century developments (i.e. Emmett's Grange 'early phases' like barrows, enclosure etc)	Detailed ground surveys, map regression, geophysical surveys etc.

RESEARCH PRIORITIES

1. THE ROYAL FOREST OF EXMOOR (ORIGINS – 1818)

- 1.1. The origins of the Royal Forest are not understood and are a priority for further research. There is potential for this to be partly carried out through looking at the origins of other Royal forests in England.

Map showing the boundary of the Royal Forest of Exmoor



— Exmoor Forest Boundary

- 1.2. Across the former Royal Forest are the archaeological traces of packhorse ways. These require detailed recording and mapping. More and less extensively exploited areas may reveal more about the ways in which the Forest of Exmoor was accessed and traversed. Oral history may provide some information on earlier route ways across the Forest.
- 1.3. Settlements around the former Royal Forest are inextricably tied to its fortunes. These settlements – both extant and abandoned – vary in scale and complexity and include as examples: Hoar Oak, Longstone Wells, Badgworthy and Darlick. Detailed historical research into these settlements and archaeological recording of the buildings is needed.
- 1.4. During the medieval period iron was mined within the Royal Forest. Research is needed into the economics, context and setting of this industry.
- 1.5. The movement and control of livestock into the Royal Forest was closely managed. Previous research has focused on the identification of telling houses, but future work should look at the creation and changes to the Forest Boundary, the overall management of animals entering /leaving the forest, the detailed survey, recording and excavation of possible telling houses (and comparison with similar sites from elsewhere).
- 1.6. Historical research should focus on the exploitation of the Forest, its economic value to the Crown and uses of the land for purposes other than hunting.
- 1.7. During the Commonwealth, the management of the Forest changed. Although this was for a very brief period, these changes may be reflected in some of the archaeological features across the Forest. Detailed research is needed to establish the date of these features (such as the rabbit warren at Warren Farm and Boevey's house at Simonsbath).
- 1.8. Research is needed to establish why and when the Royal Forest passed to Somerset.
- 1.9. The effect of the Norman regime on social organisation and trade, as well as land management, is not well understood and further research is needed.

2. THE RECLAMATION OF EXMOOR FOREST (1818 - 1897)

- 2.1. Studies of the Reclamation of Exmoor have often viewed it in relative isolation. There is a need to put the 19th Century reclamation activities into a wider local and national context.



View of Simonsbath from Mount Pleasant about 1900

- 2.2. The timescale of the Knight's reclamation activities within the Former Royal Forest of Exmoor is poorly understood. A chronology needs to be established for the enclosure of the Forest following its purchase from the crown, including an understanding of the location of the early Knight Enclosure boundaries within the Forest.
- 2.3. The forest boundary has rarely been considered in its entirety. A record of the form and detailed composition of the Forest boundary is needed to enable it to be understood as a monument in its own right.
- 2.4. The economics of the Knight Reclamation schemes on Exmoor have been the focus of little investigation in their own right. An understanding of the Knight's vision for Exmoor could be assisted through economic modelling of their model estates (such as Emmett's Grange).

- 2.5. A comparative study of the similarities and differences of Knight Farms would enable determination of whether a standard model existed. If such buildings are found to reflect the origins of their residents, this study may enable greater understanding of the social history of the forest during the reclamation period. The reasons behind the success of some farms (e.g. Honeymead) over others needs to be better understood. This could be pursued through detailed case studies examining documentary material, oral history and fieldwork to ascertain this economic basis.
- 2.6. The social context of the reclamation of Exmoor is of great interest. Census research would allow the determination of the origins of residents of the forest, particularly in villages such as Simonsbath, whose residents must have moved in from outside the forest. A link between children born on Exmoor to farmers from the East Midlands is suggested. Detailed census research would enable any link between the area of origin of the Knight family and Exmoor to be determined.
- 2.7. The origins of Simonsbath itself are in need of further research, to determine its history both immediately after the purchase of the Forest by John Knight, and in the preceding centuries. For example it is not understood whether buildings predate James Boevey's House in the village, but answering this would aid understanding the operation of the Royal Forest.
- 2.8. A large number of features associated with water infrastructure management have been dated to the reclamation period of the forest. A better understanding of the purposes and function of such features is needed and would advance overall understanding of the Knight family's intentions on Exmoor.



Pinkery Pond, constructed by the Knights during the reclamation of the Forest. Photo: Lee Bray

- 2.9. The area around Simonsbath is known to contain the beginnings of a designed landscape, associated with Simonsbath House. As this landscape was never finished and no plans are known, this area should be the subject of a detailed study, placing it within the context of other identified designed landscapes. This may enable a purpose to be determined for some of the features of this landscape whose use is poorly understood. Caroline Garratt's study is a thorough study of this topic, but its research recommendations need to be pursued. A degree of speculation is advocated into what John Knight may have envisaged for Simonsbath.
- 2.10. Although it is understood that the Knight's made several attempts at arable farming on Exmoor, the success rates of these experiments are not known. Determining which crops were grown in the former Royal Forest, and the success, rate is necessary to understand the history of farming in this area.
- 2.11. A sequence and chronology of the allotments of the Former Royal Forest needs to be established. This should include ownership of the land and lead on further to how this is reflected in the landscape as it appears today.
- 2.12. Research is also needed into quarrying; especially small scale quarries and their relationship to geology. Are they opportunistic activities by individuals or a concerted 'estate-wide' enterprise?
- 2.13. Drainage is a major feature of the Knight's reclamation. Whilst the extent of the drainage schemes has been well mapped, there is still a need for detailed field survey on sample areas. The chronology of the drainage schemes is also poorly understood. It is not clear whether drains were dug as part of an extensive enterprise or on a more piecemeal basis, and further analysis of the field archaeology alongside documentary sources might shed light on this area.
- 2.14. There has been speculation about whether there was a 'Knight' style of reclamation. Equally, were there differences in approach between John and Frederic?

3. TWENTIETH CENTURY

- 3.1. The former Royal Forest area was used for a range of military activities during the Second World War. There is still potential to capture memories of this period through oral history recordings, although this is a resource which will cease to be available with the gradual loss of the last generation able to recall life at this time.
- 3.2. Exmoor's military archaeology is widely dispersed and vulnerable to gradual erosion and disappearance. A detailed record of these features would enable future research.
- 3.3. As records become declassified, a new resource for research into activities on Exmoor during WW2 may become available. This may help to explain the purpose of many of the sites within the Former Royal Forest.

4. SOCIAL HISTORY AND OTHER THEMES

- 4.1. To date there has been no detailed study of place names within the Royal Forest. Understanding the origin of Forest names, farm names and field names should aid understanding of the operation of the Forest. At a basic level, this might identify which are 19th century names and which are earlier. An oral history of field names would be of use in this study as there is no Tithe Map for the Forest itself.
- 4.2. The Forest landscape has been an inspiration for visitors and local people. Further research is needed to understand the extent of this.
- 4.3. Hunting has played, and continues to play, a significant role in the area of the former Royal Forest. Research is needed to quantify the existing information about hunting and to identify gaps in this record.
- 4.4. Peat cutting has been widespread across the Forest and its adjoining commons, but has always been carried out at a farm scale rather than as an industrial activity (as is the case on Dartmoor). A detailed study of this activity is needed to bring together archaeological information, oral history, documentary and photographic sources, the evidence from the built environment (peat stores). Such a study might include: the impact of

mires – loss of visible peat cutting, loss of access to peat cutting; the application of new technology – e.g. is it possible to calculate the volume of peat removed by peat cutting; parallels and differences to Dartmoor's peat cutting industry; the uses of peat – industrial or domestic.



Peat cutting on Brendon Common

- 4.5. Around the edges of the former Royal Forest are a series of inns or former inns. Little research has been done into their origin, operation and significance.

DISSEMINATION

The former Royal Forest of Exmoor is an area generally considered to be poorly understood by members of the public. Greater interpretation is therefore required in order to reach out to a wider range of audiences. A number of ways of achieving this have been suggested and include:

- A book on the Knight enterprise with a title such as 'the last village' or 'the last parish in England'.
- A 'Field Guide' to the Royal Forest.
- A series of archaeology themed walks, which could include the former Royal Forest area.
- Exmoor National Park Historic Environment Record (ENPHER).
- Web based sources, possibly hosted by ENPA.

- Exmoor National Park Historic Environment Report Series.
- County and National Journals.
- Other grey literature such as local archaeological society newsletters and journals.

REVIEW AND EVALUATION

2018 marks the 200th anniversary of the purchase of the Royal Forest of Exmoor by John Knight. This presents an opportunity to engage with the public to promote understanding of this significant development in Exmoor's history.

Progress should be assessed against the priorities identified in this document by reconvening the group detailed above to review research into the former Royal Forest of Exmoor in 2017.

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