

THE REDISCOVERY OF THE KNIGHT FAMILY ARCHIVE  
AND ITS IMPORTANCE TO EXMOOR

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**Introduction and Background**

At the heart of Exmoor National Park is the former royal forest of Exmoor. The forest has its origins in the centuries before the Norman Conquest and it existed until 1815. During this thousand-year long period the forest, which comprised open moorland, was used primarily for livestock grazing in the summer with animals being brought from nearby and as far away as Tawstock in north Devon (around 20 miles) (Siraut 2009). The history of the royal forest, its development, operation and administration has been exhaustively set out by MacDermot (1911) whose book *The History of the Forest of Exmoor* is still the key source. More recently, the Victoria County History produced a well-received publication series which included *Exmoor – The Making of an English Upland* (Siraut M 2009), which provides fresh information on the forest.

In 1815 the forest was enclosed by an Act of Parliament. This initiated a complex process of land allotment dependant on hearings to establish claims and ancient rights to the forest. The process took nearly three years and at the end of it the king's allotment was advertised for sale – a vast area of wild moorland without roads and with one house standing at Simonsbath. The successful bidder was John Knight whose offer of £50,000 for the 'king's allotment' was accepted in the summer of 1818. After that, Knight went on to acquire other parts of the forest and after several years owned around 16,000 acres.

The Knights were a well-established and very wealthy Worcestershire family whose fortune was acquired by carefully managing their interests in the iron industry (Ince 1991). For 200 years they had amassed this wealth and acquired estates, principally Lea Castle and Wolverley, as well as interests in Bromsgrove, although they also owned Downton Castle (Ludlow) and had short-lived ownership of Croft Castle. The family's principal ironworks was at Cookley on the River Stour and the family had also played an important role in the development of the canal network around Stourbridge in the second half of the eighteenth century in order to improve the connectivity of the works. During the same period two members of the

family, Richard Payne Knight and Edward Knight were highly respected collectors and connoisseurs. They have been described as the 'Light Knight' and the 'Dark Knight' respectively because of the tendency of one to be in the public eye whilst the other courted obscurity (Lane 1999); Recognising their significance certainly enables us to form a more balanced view of the Knight dynasty. The family's interests in agricultural improvement also began at this time so that, by the early nineteenth century, their work was described across the county of Worcestershire as 'spirited cultivation' (Pitt 1810, xii). John Knight therefore came to Exmoor from a practical family of iron masters, notable connoisseurs and highly respected land improvers. He bought Exmoor against a background of success and wealth in the west midlands over several generations and without any previous direct connection with Exmoor. It is a surprising move and perhaps the enigma at the heart of the story.

Once he had acquired Exmoor, John Knight set about its improvement. This chapter in Exmoor's history has long been understood through the insightful, but nevertheless particular, prism of Charles Stewart Orwin. Orwin published his masterly *Reclamation of Exmoor Forest* in 1929, and demand for it has led to several later editions: in 1970 with Roger Sellick's revisions, and more recently a further edition in the careful hands of Victor Bonham-Carter (1997). Although a remarkable and detailed study of a subject that Orwin himself describes as 'one of the greatest achievements ... the nineteenth century has to show', it nevertheless tends to constrain a broader understanding of the Knight family which is a necessary backdrop to a fuller understanding of what was achieved on Exmoor. 'Reclamation' itself is not an easy subject to grasp, and especially so in an Exmoor context. Orwin's account benefited from conversations with a descendant of John Knight but is heavily led by his own interest in agricultural economics and history. There are two essential omissions from Orwin's approach. Firstly, there was little attempt to relate what he understood about reclamation to what survived in the landscape. In other words, his account does not fully take into account the physical evidence of the buildings, fields, drains

and other features. Secondly, he was limited by the lack of documentation, especially from the early years of the Knight endeavour on Exmoor.

The Knight family's reclamation of Exmoor was driven initially by John Knight who brought his wife and six young children to Lynton – there was nowhere suitable to live on Exmoor forest – in 1820. John Knight's improvements focused on creating a great estate with a mansion at Simonsbath and with two in-hand, state-of-the-art farms, Cornham and Honeymead. According to Orwin the family lived, initially, at Castle Heights in Lynton, and in 1830 they moved to Simonsbath and resided in what is now Simonsbath House Hotel. In 1837 John Knight left Exmoor – apparently for his wife's health - and they moved to Jersey and then to Rome where they remained until he died in 1850. On leaving Exmoor, John Knight left the Exmoor enterprise in the hands of his 25-year-old son Frederic Winn Knight, who, driven primarily by a lack of finance, changed the direction of reclamation and adopted a pattern of tenanted farms across the estate; in the end around fourteen farmsteads were built across the former forest. In 1879 Frederic Knight's only son predeceased him and Frederic was faced with the prospect of no heir. He tried to interest his nephew in purchasing Exmoor but this failed. Eventually he sold the reversion of the forest to the Fourth Viscount Ebrington at Castle Hill, South Molton, Devon and the Knight family's involvement in Exmoor came to an end. Frederic Winn Knight is buried in the churchyard of St Luke's church, Simonsbath.

#### **Modern research on the former Royal Forest**

Whilst the forest and its reclamation have long been described and understood through E T MacDermot and C S Orwin, an assessment of the associated archaeological evidence has long been absent. The English Heritage National Mapping Programme, whose aim is to record England's archaeology from evidence contained in aerial photographs, carried out a project on Exmoor between 2007 and 2009. The dissemination of a key aspect of that study – the evidence for farming and reclamation since the twelfth century to the end of the nineteenth century – took the form of a book, *The Archaeology of Hill Farming on Exmoor* (Hegarty with Wilson-North 2014) about a third of which focuses on the royal forest.

The landscape of the former forest has also benefitted from a great deal of recent archaeological

study. Since 2006 the Exmoor Mires Project (now Exmoor Mires Partnership) has worked to restore moorland hydrology in the interests of improving water quality whilst also improving the biodiversity of the area (Bray 2015, 13-14). Archaeological fieldwork has been undertaken as part of mitigation for this project and this has led to detailed archaeological walkover surveys and case studies into aspects of the moorland history and archaeology, all funded by South West Water. As a result of this extensive fieldwork and research there is a rapidly growing body of information about the process of reclamation, seen from an archaeological perspective.

#### **Modern research in Simonsbath**

In 2013 Exmoor National Park acquired a group of buildings in the centre of Simonsbath village with a view to establishing whether the buildings could be used for the benefit of the community, local businesses and visitors. The buildings had been used as the village school until it closed in 1970 and it then served as an outdoor education centre until the late 1990s since when it has been largely unused.

On acquiring the buildings, research was commissioned into various aspects of the site: the school's history (Siraut 2014), the sequence of the standing buildings and the archaeology of the adjacent Picturesque gardens and so on. Subsequent uncovering of internal and external wall surfaces revealed the phasing of the building complex in more detail, so that a confident sequence can now be established. The group began as a pair of single storey workers' cottages of two rooms each, known as White Rock Cottage. To these were added the school room in 1857. Thereafter a sequence of unsympathetic extensions were added, in piecemeal fashion, so that eventually the workers cottages have been almost entirely subsumed. This matters because it is now hard to perceive the earliest buildings in themselves, but equally they have lost any visual relationship with the designed landscape to the north, of which they were clearly a part. This landscape seems to have been laid out by John Knight and broadly follows principles evident in Picturesque landscapes (see Pugsley 2017).

As the understanding of the buildings progressed it became increasingly evident that there was an extreme paucity of documentation about the earliest days of reclamation in particular, but also about its subsequent development. For an early nineteenth



*Fig. 1 The Knight family archive. A selection of the papers laid out in Dulverton following their discovery. (photograph Pete Rae)*

century estate of this size, the absence of surveys, estate maps, accounts and correspondence was highly unusual. At the heart of this was a lack of information about John Knight himself, the creator of the enterprise. Not a single portrait of him was in existence.

Research led to the British Museum where a scrapbook compiled by John Knight's daughter, Isabella, contains a series of portraits of members of the family, including John Knight (see Wilson-North 2017). Of wider interest is the fact that it also contains a number of drawings by Edward Lear who was a friend of the Knight family when they lived in Rome, and who often stayed with them. Lear's drawings are of views around the Villa Taverna (where the Knight family lived in the summer months) and cartoons drawn, apparently, for Isabella. There was also a sequence of cartoons of Lear and Charles Allanson Knight (one of John Knight's sons), on horseback in the Abruzzi (Lear, ed Noakes 2006; 62-70 and 483), but these appear to have now been removed from the scrapbook where Noakes seems to have seen them.

Further original research led to a descendant (by marriage) of John Knight, who had been visited by Roger Sellick whilst he was working on the second edition of Orwin's *Reclamation of Exmoor forest* in the 1960s. Sellick had seen a number of portraits

and papers on that occasion and made notes of what he saw (which are now in the Devon Heritage Centre). Enid Teague-Knight had married Richard Ayshford Knight (John Knight's great grandson) in 1956. Five years later Richard Knight died without issue. Mrs Teague-Knight inherited the Knight family papers in Richard's possession. Richard Ayshford Knight had transferred the Knight family seat, Wolverley, to an educational trust in 1944 on the death of his father, and it therefore seems probable that he retained all or at least a significant portion of the family papers at that time, which subsequently passed to Mrs Teague-Knight. With Mrs Teague-Knight's permission the Knight archive was brought to Exmoor in late 2016 and has been catalogued (I am grateful to Helen Blackman at the Exmoor Society for carrying out this work) and a number of the documents relating to Exmoor have been scanned. Mrs Teague-Knight kindly agreed that all of the papers should be passed into the care of the South West Heritage Trust, and this was carried out by the author in the summer of 2017.

#### **Contents of the Knight archive**

The Knight archive contains a very extensive body of material relating to a number of aspects of the family's activities and properties: Exmoor,

Bromsgrove, the Cookley ironworks; it covers a period from the 1740s to the 1940s. However, most of the material relates to the management of the Exmoor estate in the nineteenth century.

The Knight archive will require a full assessment in the coming years and a number of documents will require conservation before they can even be opened and examined. Nevertheless, an initial description and assessment of this material is worthwhile in order that it may enter the consciousness of those engaged in researching Somerset's past and its great families. First of all the material is well provenanced and is clearly the residue of the Knight family papers that remained in Wolverley, Worcestershire when it was disposed of in 1944. It is also clear that the papers reflect a range of the Knight family's property and financial interests. The material comprises a large collection of letters to and from members of the family as well as from third parties. There are also mortgage documents, valuations, accounts, leases, schedules of deeds, livestock books, indentures, a few plans and miscellaneous papers. A significant proportion of the material comprises detailed valuations of Knight properties done to support litigations in Chancery.

From an Exmoor perspective the value of this material cannot be overstated. There are a number of reasons for this but most important of all is that a small part of it sheds light on the initial years of the reclamation of Exmoor. Of especial value is 'No 1 Exmoor Abstract 1819', which is a detailed account book for most of 1819 through to March 1820. To understand its significance, it is necessary to lay out the timeline of John Knight's acquisition of Exmoor: In July 1818 his bid for the forest was accepted, but it was not until March 1820 that he concluded the purchase. The account book falls in the intervening period. It is therefore perhaps surprising to find that the account book describes a period of frenetic activity on Exmoor in the summer of 1819. Work had commenced on building the 29-mile-long boundary around the forest, and was well advanced. Roads were under construction linking Simonsbath with the outside world, two farms built, cottages erected, 148,000 turves cut for fuel. In January 1820 we find records of payments for clearing snow in order to dig the foundations for the new mansion – and this a mere 18 months after John Knight knew he had secured the acquisition. Before the discovery of this account book the date of the building of the mansion was unknown. There are also records of stone being quarried, drains cut

and cottages being built. The named cottages built by John Knight are single storey and built in a style reminiscent of Scottish crofters' cottages – they have evocative names, such as Limerock Cottage, White Rock Cottage, Cloven Rock Cottage and Warren. Few survive unaltered, but a combination of the ones that do survive and historic photographs allows an impression to be built up. They often were built in remote locations and were perhaps a means of establishing ownership in a wild and previously uninhabited landscape; equally, their siting – with some on dramatic rocky knolls – may owe something to the Picturesque movement which seems to have influenced John Knight. Also mentioned in the account book are the digging of two canals, the Prayway and the Warren, begun in 1820. For those familiar with Exmoor, the Pinkery Canal is well known and has long been associated with John Knight, although its original purpose remained unknown. Various commentators have suggested explanations. However, the account book makes it clear that John Knight constructed two canals – one on the north of the Exe valley and one on the south – seemingly crucial to his enterprise. It is also clear that the Prayway canal he mentions, is the same as the later-named Pinkery Canal. In fact, both the Prayway and the Warren are still traceable on the ground over most of their courses. Whilst the function of both still remains unknown it seems likely that they were built to convey lime across the wild moorland estate as a prelude to breaking the ground to improve it. Whether they were ever used remains unclear.

There are also account books from Osmund Lock (1839–40) and John Litsom (1840–41), John Knight's agents, as well as miscellaneous other papers relating to John Knight's time on Exmoor. Also of interest are a series of letters from Frederic Knight to his father who was then living in Rome. They begin in 1841 (with a few letters to his mother before her death in 1841) and end with the last letter written two weeks before John Knight's death in 1850. Frederic details activity on Exmoor and other Knight estates and is candid about progress, their dire financial situation and local people. Other family letters survive, but none provide such a useful sequence as these.

After John Knight's death, Frederic ran the Exmoor estate from Simonsbath as well as spending time in Wolverley and, as a Worcestershire MP for 44 years, in London where he lived in Portland Street and Dover Street. Perhaps partly as a result of being by necessity in various locations there is a

large amount of correspondence with his agents on Exmoor. These letter series will shed considerable light on the management of Exmoor in the 1850s and 1860s. There are bundles of letters from Robert Smith who was Frederic Knight's agent and who lived at Emmett's Grange, as well as a series of letters from Robert Smith's successor Frederick Smyth.

The Knight archive provides an immense resource for further research into Exmoor and the Knight family's wider ownership. However, it is clear that there is still potential for further material to be found relating to the beginning of reclamation. In a sense, the fast pace of reclamation that John Knight began in 1819, emphasises that this was a masterminded project with a clear overall plan and detailed attention to its execution. The Exmoor Abstract 1819 account book shows massive expenditure over a period of 9 months from July 1819 to March 1820. This was before Knight had paid for the King's Allotment. In that document it is clear how he: begins his mansion, builds a network of roads, excavates two canals,

builds two farmhouses and yards with attendant water management systems and encloses the forest (29 miles of boundary). In order to achieve this he must have had a very clear idea of what the overall plan was. This is important because people have perceived what the Knights did as somewhat *ad hoc*. The Abstract makes it clear that he progressed quickly on all fronts of the endeavour. The timescale is also important: he only knew that he had bought the Forest in July 1818, so within 12 months he was able to begin work on the ground on all fronts at a frantic pace. This is a man with an overall plan and clear vision. Underlying his approach was the need to establish a workable infrastructure to drive reclamation. To date though, any such supporting documentary evidence in terms of plans, surveys and accounts has not been found.

John Knight brought massive wealth to Exmoor and seemingly boundless energy combined with practicality and pragmatism. Despite this, the Knight family's fortunes on Exmoor were dogged by lack of finance exacerbated by an uncertain inheritance. This became apparent as early as



Fig. 2 The landscape around Simonsbath and the valley of the River Barle. In the foreground is Cornham farm built by John Knight in 1820, his deerpark is in the valley upper right, and Simonsbath lies in the upper centre. (photograph by Damian Grady; copyright Historic England 2017, 33022\_022)

1824 when John Knight's cousin Richard Payne Knight died without a direct heir and the future of his mansion, Downton Castle was disputed; it eventually became a matter of lengthy and costly litigation. In turn this fostered such bad feeling within the wider family that it must have taken its toll on John Knight himself. In addition, poor health seems to have been a factor (John Knight is said to have left Exmoor on account of his wife's health). Perhaps as much as any of these is the immovable nature of Exmoor – its very high rainfall and poor soils.

John Knight's legacy is in a changed landscape on Exmoor, but it is also in the ambition and vision of what is the last and largest single land reclamation project in England. These newly discovered documents show John Knight's energy and also convey some of the reasons why his ambitions were never achieved. They both shed detail on Exmoor's reclamation itself and the people who achieved it, whilst at the same time showing how much more there is to understand. They are a rich seam that will repay detailed study in the coming years.

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