

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY WORK AT LARKBARROW FARM

ELAINE JAMIESON

INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 2000/2001, English Heritage undertook an archaeological survey of Larkbarrow Farm at the request of and partly funded by the Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA). Larkbarrow, Somerset (SS 8210 4290), is situated approximately 5km to the north-west of Exford at an elevation of *c.* 420m above OD in an area characterised by undulating hills and steep combs (Fig. 1). The ENPA holding of Larkbarrow covers *c.* 1.8 km² and lies towards the centre of the main Exmoor massif, having an underlying geology of Middle Devonian Grits (Geological Survey of Great Britain 1969). This upland area is bounded to the north by Stowford Bottom and to the south by the Wellshead road, with Manor Allotment to the west and Porlock Allotment to the east. The ruins of the farm buildings, built *c.* 1846, nestle in a sheltered position on the south-facing slopes of Kittuck Hill, overlooking Long Combe Head. They are surrounded by the remnants of a mature beech plantation and lie at the centre of an area of contemporary enclosure fields (Fig. 2). Today, much of the farm comprises rough grassland and heather moor, with several natural springs which feed the many small streams that rise in the area.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL HISTORY

Little archaeological work has been carried out over the Larkbarrow survey area. Air photographic transcription at 1:10,000 scale was undertaken when the whole of the National Park was mapped in this way (McDonnell 1985a). The area was also considered as part of the Royal Commission on the Historic Monuments of England's (RCHME) lithics survey and archaeological survey of Exmoor (Quinnell and Dunn 1992; Riley and Wilson-North 2001). No known excavations have been carried out in the survey area.

SURVEY METHOD

Primary sources consulted included the National Monuments Record (NMR) and the Somerset SMR, as well as air photographs held in the NMR and by the ENPA. Information was also gathered from the air photographic transcription (McDonnell 1985a) and the RCHME's lithics survey (Quinnell and Dunn 1992).

Larkbarrow was surveyed at 1:2500 scale between the months of November 2000 and February 2001. All the features were surveyed using Leica single frequency differential GPS (Global Positioning System) equipment and the survey was located to the National Grid using



Fig. 1 Location plan

OS triangulation pillar co-ordinates. The survey data was processed using SKI survey software, then managed in an Autocad environment, for provision to the ENPA GIS. A written description of each monument was created for inclusion in the NMR and every record allocated a unique identifier number. These numbers are included in the text for the monuments discussed. As part of the work a survey report, *Larkbarrow Farm, Exmoor*, was produced which contains a detailed description of all the sites recorded during fieldwork and is available from the NMRC, Swindon.

LANDSCAPE HISTORY

In the prehistoric period the survey area of Larkbarrow would have looked very different from how it appears today. The open, rolling hills of heather and *Molinia caerulea* (purple moor grass) which now characterize this area of high moor are in stark contrast to the partly tree-covered landscape of the prehistoric period. Although no direct evidence comes from within the Larkbarrow survey area, palaeoenvironmental studies carried out on several sites across Exmoor have clearly shown that woodland existed on the moor before the development of blanket peat on the broad summits (Straker and Crabtree 1995). Pollen analysis has indicated that by the Late Neolithic period this tree cover was composed of oak, alder, hazel or bog myrtle, birch, pine, elm and lime. Direct evidence for these woodlands may come in the form of the roots of small trees which have been found preserved beneath the waterlogged organic soils north-east of Warren Farm, just west of the study area (McDonnell 1985b, 6). Pollen analysis suggests that tree cover started to decline as early as the Bronze Age in some areas, with an intensification of woodland clearance in the Iron Age, leading to a marked increase in areas of open grassland (Straker and Crabtree 1995).

Environmental research has shown that areas of peat were beginning to form within the Larkbarrow survey area by the early medieval period. Pollen analysis from Larkbarrow (SS 825 418) has demonstrated that location peat inception (and the pollen record) started in the 7th–8th

centuries AD. The heather-dominated vegetation that we see today originated from grass heath, but during the past millennium vegetation dominance has alternated between heather-dominated moorland (*Callenatum*) and grass moor containing some *Molinia* (Chambers *et al.*, 1999).

By the medieval period Larkbarrow formed the north-east corner of the Royal Forest of Exmoor. The term 'forest' in its old and legal meaning did not mean an area of woodland or even trees, but simply a district in which deer and certain other wild animals were reserved to the King and protected by forest law (MacDermot 1973, 3). During the reign of Henry VII the King's forestal rights were let on lease to a warden or lessee and these rights included a licence



Fig. 2 The ruins of Larkbarrow farmhouse (foreground) surrounded by Second World War shell holes viewed from the east. The remains of an extensive field gutter system are visible running along the slopes of Long Combe with the main carriage gutters stretching into the distance; photo NMR 15631.13
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to hunt deer in the forest. This practice remained in force until the last lease expired at the beginning of the 19th century. In 1810, when the lease on the Royal Forest was due for renewal, it was decided by the Commissioners of His Majesty's Woods, Forests and Land Revenues to survey the property with a view to determining its suitability for growing timber for the Navy (MacDermot 1973, 407). The survey concluded that the forest was unsuitable for this purpose, and so the land was put up for sale to the highest bidder. The Royal Forest was subsequently sold to John Knight for the sum of £50,000. The Forest had remained largely unenclosed up to this period and it was only after the acquisition of the Royal Forest by the Knight family that large areas of it began to be enclosed and improved.

John Knight purchased *c.* 20,000 acres of the former Royal Forest with a view to exploiting the property himself, and turning the uncultivated Forest into a productive and prosperous agricultural region (Orwin 1929, 47). He believed that large portions of the estate could be utilized for the growing of crops, specifically corn, and began ploughing the land with the intention of bringing it into rotation farming. Under John Knight's plan the remaining uncultivated land was to be turned into summer grazing areas for sheep and cattle, a purpose for which the Forest had been used for many centuries. The former objective was never achieved, however, partly due to the unsuitability of the upland landscape and partly to the nature of the Exmoor climate. In 1841 John passed sole control of managing the Forest to his eldest son Frederic Knight, at which point there was a marked change in estate policy. Frederic had the idea of colonizing the Forest with tenant farmers as a means of generating resources for the reclamation of the remainder of the estate. Knight policy relating to the new hill farms was to first agree acreage then to construct boundary fences and the farmhouse in readiness for the arrival of the tenant. On taking possession the tenant was then required to begin the reclamation of the land and to erect the remaining boundary fences and farm buildings.

Larkbarrow Farm was one such hill farm and was constructed in the mid 19th century. The property was initially let to Farmer Hayes from Exford in 1846, however, he did not take up permanent residence and only two cottages were built on the land in the period up to 1849 (Thomas 1981). James Meadows from Leicestershire took over the farm in 1850, though his tenancy was also shortlived as he was reported to have left by 1852. Larkbarrow was never re-let as a tenant farm (Orwin 1929, 71).

Ranch-farming with hill breeds of sheep was introduced in the mid-1860s, with hardy black-faced sheep from Scotland brought down and placed on the land. Larkbarrow became a double herding, with two shepherds employed to manage the flocks, and was run jointly from Larkbarrow and Tom's Hill, the shepherds and their families taking up residence in the vacant farm buildings. The farmhouse at Larkbarrow remained as a shepherds residence until 1898, when the shepherd, Thomas Davidson, was moved to Cornham. The farmhouse then became vacant and was subsequently let as a 'hunting and shooting box', a use in which it remained until the 1940s (Burton 1989, 125). Larkbarrow continued to be run as a herding until 1943 at which time the area was requisitioned by the army and used as a training ground and artillery range.

Larkbarrow remained in Knight family control until 1886, at which time the whole of the Exmoor and Brenden estates, totalling some 21,893 acres, were sold to Earl Fortescue and his son Viscount Ebrington (Orwin *et al.*, 1997, 141). Larkbarrow was purchased from the Fortescue Estate by the Department of the Environment in 1981 and subsequently transferred to the ENPA (Orwin *et al.*, 1997, 197).

PREHISTORIC ARCHAEOLOGY

Larkbarrow lies within an area containing one of the highest concentrations of prehistoric monuments on Exmoor. This survival is partly due to the area's former use as a Royal Hunting

Forest and partly to its elevated position, with much of the land over 350m OD. Both these factors prevented the widespread development of medieval and later agriculture, in contrast to other parts of Exmoor such as the Brendon Hills and some of the commons. Forest Law meant that there were constraints upon any form of land use that interfered with the maintenance of the hunting reserve, resulting in very few settlements within the Forest bounds. These factors have been instrumental in the survival of the fragile prehistoric monuments at Larkbarrow (Fig. 3).

EARLY PREHISTORIC ACTIVITY

The earliest evidence for human activity within the Larkbarrow survey area dates from the Mesolithic/Neolithic period and takes the form of flint core-trimmings (SS 84 SW 2) found east of Larkbarrow farmhouse. Flint assemblages form the most common evidence for human activity on Exmoor in the Late Mesolithic and Early Neolithic periods and have been found mainly on the north-eastern side of the moor. The distribution pattern of such finds may be misleading however, having more to do with the work of individual collectors than a true pattern of early prehistoric activity across the moor (Riley and Wilson-North, 2001).

LATE NEOLITHIC AND BRONZE AGE MONUMENTS

Stone settings form one of Exmoor's earliest and most fragile field monuments and are found almost entirely on the western side of the moor. These ritual monuments probably date from the Late Neolithic period and may be unique to Exmoor. There is no field evidence for human settlement in this period but the presence of stone settings clearly indicates that the moor was being utilized by man at this time.

Larkbarrow has one recorded stone setting within the survey area, sitting amongst rough grassland on the eastern slopes of Kittuck Hill, at about 395m above OD (SS 84 SW 47; Quinnell and Dunn 1992, 47). The setting comprises a linear grouping of eight stones, containing four uprights and four fallen, running north-east–south-west. The stones would appear to be aligned on a cairn (SS 84 SW 128), though it is unclear whether the cairn is contemporary with the setting or of later date. The upright stones stand between 0.05m–0.5m in height, with the smallest thought to represent a packing stone. Recent survey work has identified two previously unrecorded erosion hollows which may denote the former position of stones now missing from the group. The stone setting survives in a relatively poor condition; this may be due to wartime activity when the area was used as an artillery range, shell holes from which lie in close proximity to the monument.

During survey work on Larkbarrow two previously unrecorded standing stones were located and accurately surveyed for the first time (Fig. 4). Both these stones survive in rough grassland and heather moor on rising ground above Hoscombe, at about 390m above OD. The largest of these, SS 84 SW 156, is of local stone and is firmly set in a slight hollow, standing 0.63m high. The second stone, SS 84 SW 157, is considerably smaller with a pronounced lean to the north, and is located less than 50m to the north of the former. This stone stands 0.2m high, although it appears that the top section may have been broken off at some point. There is also a small erosion hollow to the south of this stone which may represent the former position of a stone, possibly indicating a paired stone setting. Alternatively, all three features may represent the remains of a linear stone setting though further investigation is required to ascertain the true nature of this monument.

Two small burial cairns were also identified for the first time during the recent fieldwork, one on Kittuck Hill (SS 84 SW 70) and the other near Larkbarrow Corner (SS 84 SW 8). Both cairns take the form of sub-circular turf-covered stony mounds, standing between 0.4m–0.6m in height, and 4.7m–6.5m in diameter.

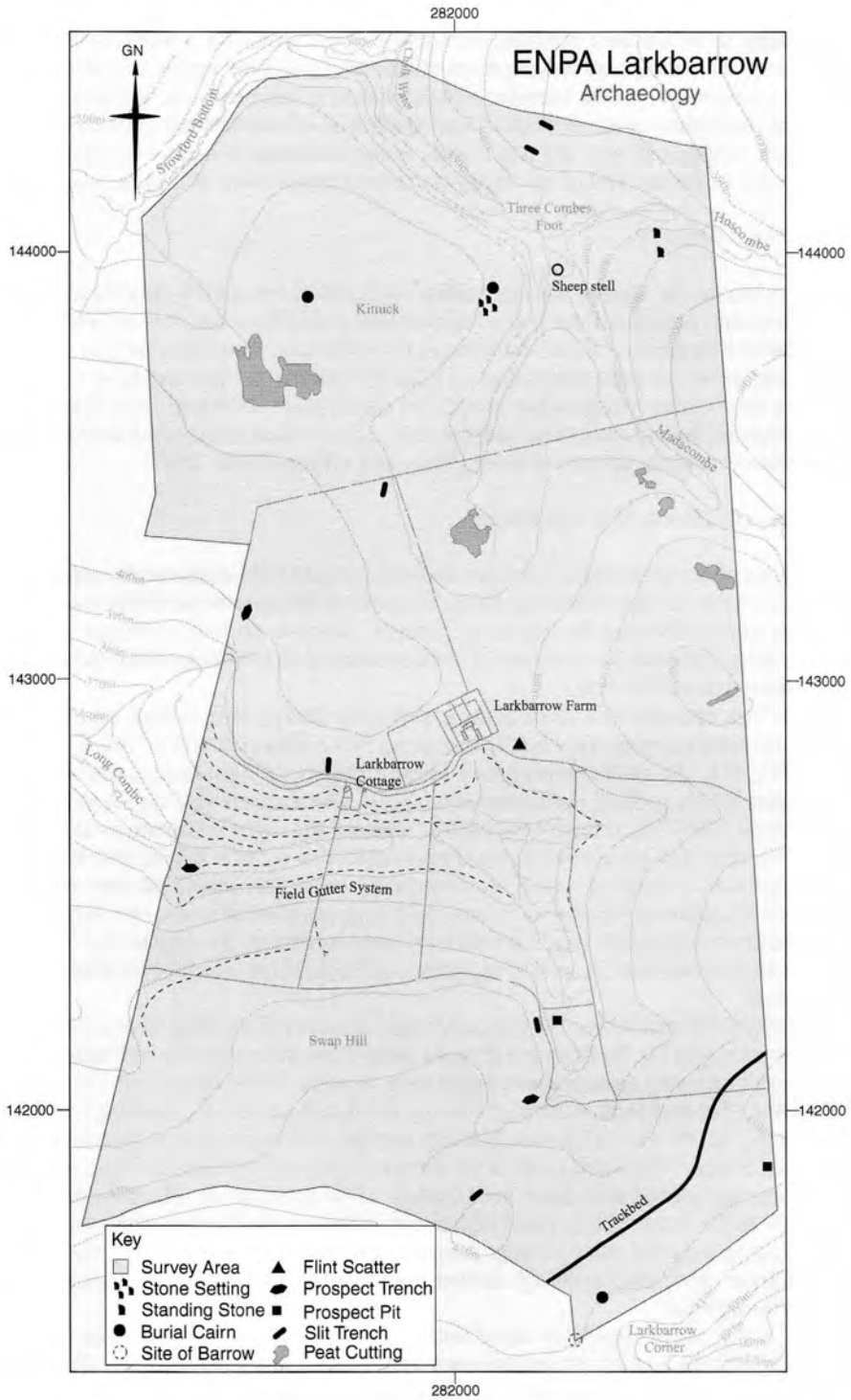


Fig. 3 Archaeological features

A Bronze Age barrow is thought to have stood near Larkbarrow corner (SS 84 SW 24). In the Survey of Exmoor undertaken in 1651 it was recorded as one of the principal landmarks used to define the Royal Forest, the forest boundary recorded as passing 'over Larke burrough ball'. This is the earliest known record of a feature named Lark Barrow as documents relating to 13th-century Forest perambulations record the boundary as running directly from 'Osemundebergh' (Alderman's Barrow) to 'Spracombesheved' (Spracombe). The pre-Inclosure survey of 1815 also defines Lark Barrow as a Forest boundary marker, stating that: 'from Owlamans Burrow the Boundary of the said Forest extends in a south westerly direction along several Boundary stones to a Mound or Burrow called Larks Burrow' (in MacDermot 1973, 138, 301, 422, 426). The earliest depiction of the monument dates from 1675 and takes the form of a crude map showing Larkbarrow as a large mound, a symbol used to depict all the barrows employed as boundary markers for the Royal Forest. The barrow also appears as a mound on the 1843 Exford Tithe Map, however it is not marked on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map of 1890. Little trace of this feature can be seen on the ground today and evidence suggests that it was most probably a casualty of the mid 19th-century enclosures, the barrow material possibly having been used in the construction of the boundary walls.

The stone settings, standing stones and cairns recorded at Larkbarrow Farm clearly indicate human activity on this part of the moor in the Early Bronze Age. The field evidence for settlement on Exmoor in the Bronze Age comes from a scattering of hut circles and field systems across the moor. None of these monuments survive within the Larkbarrow survey area, though a well preserved hut circle has been recorded in close proximity – on Almsworthy Common (SS 84 SW 51) – proving the existence of Bronze Age settlement close by. The lack of evidence for settlement is most probably due to the fragile nature of such sites on Exmoor. In contrast to Dartmoor, Exmoor has a lack of available stone for building therefore dwellings from this period may have been of turf or timber construction, materials which would leave little evidence today.



Fig. 4 Surveying a prehistoric standing stone above Hoscombe

MEDIEVAL AND POST-MEDIEVAL ARCHAEOLOGY

THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

As mentioned, the ENPA holding of Larkbarrow lay within the Royal Forest of Exmoor in the medieval period. The area was mainly used for stock grazing during this time, and with few exceptions, was largely uninhabited. This is highlighted in John Leland's account of his journey from Dunster to Barnstaple written in 1540. In this he describes a section of his route: 'From Exford to Simonsbath Bridge a 4 miles, al by Forest, Baren, and Morisch Ground, wher ys store and breeding of young Catelle, but litle or no Corne or Habitation' (in MacDermot 1973, 6). Activities such as stock grazing leave few, if any, lasting marks on the landscape and it is therefore not unexpected that no archaeological features relating to this were discovered during survey work. The southern extent of the area follows the line of the former Royal Forest boundary, and although the pre-Inclosure survey does mention the existence of several bound-stones along this route, none were found during fieldwork. The old Forest boundary is also recorded as running along the northern edge of the area, from Chalk Water towards Blackbarrow, but again no bound-stones could be discovered. As with the southern boundary, the creation of enclosure walls in the 19th century may have been responsible for the disappearance of any such markers.

POST-MEDIEVAL ARCHAEOLOGY

The post-medieval remains within the Larkbarrow survey area are extensive and are largely associated with 19th-century agricultural improvements and mineral extraction (Figs 2 and 3). The features recorded range from clearance cairns and farm buildings to quarries and prospecting pits. Within this diverse range of sites were the earthwork remains of a large field gutter system, sometimes known as a catchwater leat system. This feature can be seen in the improved fields to the south-west of Larkbarrow farmhouse and forms part of a much larger system which continues westward along the slopes of Long Combe (SS 84 SW 121; McDonnell 1985b, 66–7). The channels or 'leats' were culverted through the field banks and were apparently fed by two much larger carriage gutters that conveyed water from the natural springs in Long Combe Head. The warmer water from these springs was fed out onto the pastures in autumn and winter to encourage a flush of grass in the late winter months. Sheep could then be turned out onto these pastures in early spring when grass was in short supply (Francis 1984).

The conversion of Larkbarrow to sheep farming in the mid 19th century is clearly evident in the sheep stell that stands in Three Combes Foot (SS 84 SW 98). The sheep stell was built in order to give much needed shelter to the flock out on the open moor during the harsh Exmoor winters. The head shepherd, Robert Little from Dumfriesshire, recorded in his notebook that the construction of the stell was started shortly after March 1878, when severe snowstorms resulted in the loss of 40 sheep at Larkbarrow in a single night (Burton 1989, 119). The circular enclosure comprises a stone-faced bank, with an entrance in the sheltered south side, surmounted by beech trees.

Several prospecting pits and trenches were identified within the survey area and may be related to Frederic Knight's attempts at mineral extraction on Exmoor in the mid 1850s, an enterprise which resulted in little success. As part of this scheme Knight also proposed to run a narrow gauge railway from Simonsbath to Porlock Weir, intended as a means of transporting iron ore from the moor. He also saw the railway as a way of moving building materials, lime, and agricultural produce to and from his Exmoor Estate (Orwin 1929, 145). Construction of the trackbed began in the latter half of the 1850s, however, due to the failure of the Dowlais Iron Company, and Knight's eventual inability to raise the capital for the project, the railway was

never completed. Much of the trackbed survives as a linear earthwork and a well preserved section can be seen snaking through the southern section of the survey area (SS 84 SW 44).

SECOND WORLD WAR ARCHAEOLOGY

During the Second World War a large moorland area around Larkbarrow, Tom's Hill and Brendon Common was requisitioned by the military as a training ground and artillery range (Fig. 3). Big field guns were sited on North Molton Ridge and other strategic positions from where, guided by spotter planes, they fired shell after shell in the direction of the old farmsteads and shepherds cottages (Burton 1989, 223). This wartime activity was mainly undertaken by American troops stationed in the West Country who, by the mid 1940s, far outnumbered British military personnel in the area. Larkbarrow's use as a training ground has left a considerable impression on the moorland landscape. The entire area is pockmarked with shell holes, many of which would appear to cluster round the farm buildings and other distinctive features of the landscape (Fig. 2). The remains of a Second World War observation post (SS 84 SW 03; McDonnell 1985b, 70–1) survive set into the hillside on the north-facing slopes of Elsworthy, overlooking the impact area at Larkbarrow Farm. The farmstead and cottage were severely damaged during this period and remained as burnt-out shells for many years after as a photograph dating from 1954 clearly shows (Orwin *et al.*, 1997, 163). Six slit trenches were recorded during survey work, the largest being *c.* 45m in length (SS 84 SW 151). These trenches take the form of long rectangular hollows with earthen mounds running the length of their downslope side and were almost certainly constructed as practice trenches as part of military training exercises during the Second World War.

CONCLUSION

The archaeological evidence from Larkbarrow demonstrates human activity on this part of the moor dating back over 6000 years. The remote location and former use of the area as a Royal Hunting Forest has resulted in the survival of a range of field monuments dating from the Late Neolithic period and Early Bronze Age. The apparent disappearance of Lark Barrow during the second half of the 19th century is testament to the fragile nature of these field monuments and demonstrates how quickly changes in agricultural practices can alter the appearance of the landscape. The wide range of features recorded relating to the 19th-century improvements gives us greater insight into the developing farming methods employed on the moor in this period. The importance of water management to improvement agriculture has been clearly illustrated through the detailed survey of an extensive field gutter system on the slopes of Long Combe. For the first time the survey work has brought together a range of evidence, combining ground survey, aerial photography and documentary sources to produce a more comprehensive understanding of this upland landscape. The quality of new sites discovered during recent survey work has shown the value of such detailed archaeological investigation as well as demonstrating the potential number of sites yet to be discovered on Exmoor.

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