

## THE FARMSTEADS OF THE EXMOOR RECLAMATION

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Camden in Elizabethan times called Exmoor "a filthy, barren ground." Defoe more than a century later echoed this verdict. So did John Billingsley in 1794 when he surveyed the Royal Forest of Exmoor, an upland desolation of 20,000 acres broken only by a single farm, treeless except for a few trees around the farmhouse and a few willows and thorns along the streams, and useful only for rough summer grazing for sheep, cattle and ponies.

It was, indeed, a landscape from primitive times, a relic of the ancient Waste whose conversion to ploughland and pasture had been a basic and continuing theme of agricultural history since the beginning of settled farming. But by Billingsley's time, this theme was nearing its end. For the Agricultural Revolution included among its achievements the final attack on these unproductive relics of the past. By the end of the eighteenth century only the wilder, less promising and more remote areas remained uncultivated and it was left to the earlier nineteenth century to complete this increasingly difficult task. The last age of the Winning of the Waste saw a number of spectacular reclamation schemes. Few were more spectacular or added so much to the national wealth as the reclamation of the Royal Forest of Exmoor.

### The Background

The scene was set by Billingsley, for he was more than an observant traveller. He was an official of the Board of Agriculture, one of the masterful servants of the Agricultural Revolution, and such men were accustomed to stand no nonsense from rural nature. "A very large proportion [of the Royal Forest]", he wrote, "needs but the spirit and the fortune of some one or more of our wealthy gentlemen of England whose attention, sanctioned by the royal proprietor, would render the Forest of Exmoor in a few years as fair a prospect as the surrounding countryside"(1) And so it proved. By 1820 the ancient Forest had been enclosed and "Mr John Knight of Wolverley Hall, Worcestershire, and 52 Portland Place, London" had bought 15,000 of the legally divided and allotted acres and started on the work of reclamation. So began one of the local epics of the making of the English landscape, one of the concluding episodes of a long, long story which began in Neolithic times.

The task Knight set himself was formidable, the conversion to farmland of a huge area of wilderness all lying over 1,000 feet above sea level, some of it over 1,300 feet, with an average annual rainfall of 70 inches. But the incentives were considerable, for the needs of the time were great. Knight was born in 1765 and had therefore spent his life in an age of inexorably growing population fed by a steadily expanding and developing farming system with bread riots and possible revolution if production failed to meet demand. To the men of his time and to the generation that followed them the process seemed likely to continue indefinitely. Pusey, it is true, had referred in 1837 to "the fear that it would soon be impossible to produce sufficient for the consumption of the country,"(2) but the context of his speech implied that he did not share it, while most of his contemporaries

took a firm and confident line with the future. Mechi in 1841 suggested that the continued fulfilment of agricultural promise might well recreate an export trade in corn and meat,(3) while Porter in 1847 estimated that the population at the end of the century might exceed forty million, twice the number at the time he was writing, but he never doubted that they would be fed on homegrown food.(4)

### **The first phase of the reclamation**

John Knight was the descendant of a line of successful ironmasters and had farmed in his native county and shared in local reclamation. He therefore combined industrial, commercial and agricultural wealth and experience. Indeed, he typified the enterprise and energy of the leaders of both the industrial and the Agricultural Revolution and his physical achievement was considerable. He created two farms, optimistically named Cornham and Honeymead, in the 1820s and by 1840 had brought 2,500 acres under the plough.(5) But his policy of creating huge demesne farm in the hills was flawed by his efforts to introduce to his uplands crop-rotations developed in the lowlands. These included wheat and barley which he strove to grow at 1,200 feet, well above their accepted maximum of 800 or at most 1,000 feet. He failed. His pioneer enthusiasm was magnificent, but it was not commercial farming.(6)

At first sight, therefore, the buildings of Cornham and Honeymead recorded an agricultural form of folie de gradeur. But this over-simplifies his error. At that time, under those circumstances, the experimental cultivation of cereals at such altitudes was justifiable, for only areas of physical extremity remained to be exploited and reclaimers were therefore farming new-won land with unknown productive capacities and limitations. Above Marske in Yorkshire, for instance, the massive ruins of Cordilleras Farm built by John Hutton at 1,100 feet in 1813 to serve 500 acres of ploughland won from uncultivated moorland where oats were grown successfully for more than twenty years, remind us that he was not alone in taking risks in upland reclamation.(7) But Knight took bigger risks than Hutton and continued what should have been an experimental policy of cereal-cultivation long after its failure should have been obvious and accepted. For this he can be justly criticised. More technically, he can also be criticised for a failure in farmstead equipment. Cordilleras Farm included a corn drying kiln. John Knight's farmsteads did not.

### **The second phase of the reclamation**

The second phase of the reclamation began in 1814, when John Knight retired and was succeeded by his son, Frederic. He was as energetic and purposeful as his father and his interests were wide. He was a Member of Parliament for many years and held minor office, he was also a director of a London financial house, and his support of the Volunteer Movement earned him a knighthood. But he spent much of his life on Exmoor, the estate was his continuing personal interest, and his style of management was more traditional and less adventurous than that of his father. The plan of creating a single vast farming enterprise was replaced by a policy of colonising the Moor by means of farms leased to tenants, the unsuccessful corn-growing system by the gradual development of suitable systems of livestock-production based on improved grassland and arable forage crops.

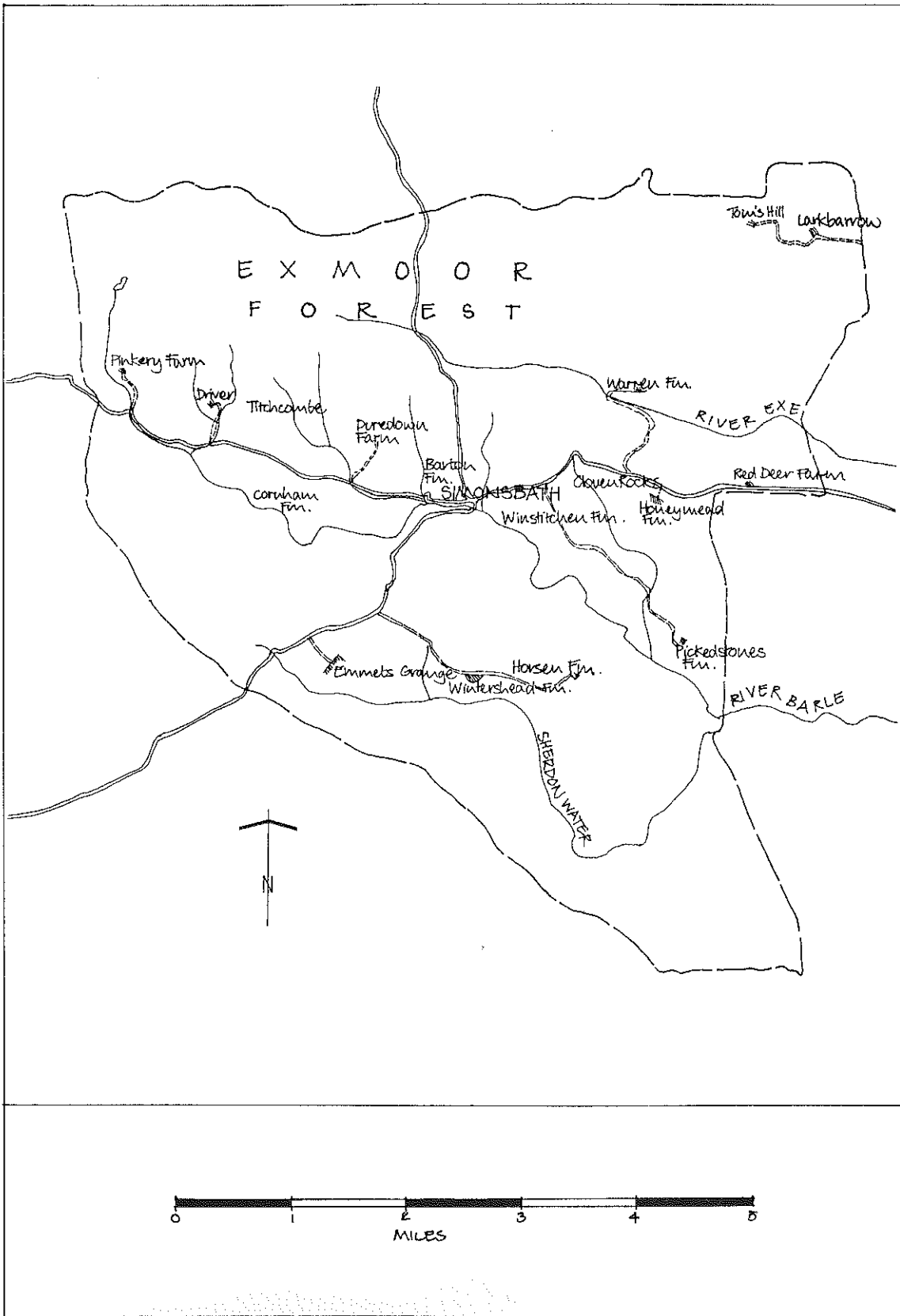


Fig. 1. Map of the Knight farmsteads, Exmoor, Somerset.

## The farmsteads of Frederic Knight

The new farms required new buildings and by 1850 fifteen new farmsteads had been constructed. This made a total of seventeen farmsteads built on bare land at heights between 1150 and 1350 feet since the beginning of the reclamation to serve farms between 200 and 900 acres, a total of 8,500 acres. One farm, Barton Farm at Simonsbath, was kept in hand, the others were leased to tenants unless suitable tenants were not available, when they, too, were taken in hand.

Eleven of these farmsteads still stand in recognisable form. They and the history of those which have not survived tell us a great deal about the origins and changes of the agricultural microcosm of which they form part and, through this microcosm, of more general trends and developments.

Like most farm buildings of the period, they were the product of the landlord-and-tenant system and, like most other landlords, Frederic Knight employed land agents. He chose them wisely, but he never relinquished personal control. In particular, he remained his own architect and it is probable that the siting, design and construction of the new steadings were in large measure the result of his personal decisions.(8)

The farmsteads show evidence of careful siting below summits and in other positions which give protection against the bitter winds of the area - the observant use of topography may reflect Knight's love of sport, for he was a devoted huntsman and knew his estate well from the saddle - and further protection was added where suitable by belts of beech on the north side. They were built by labour recruited from local villages with stone from local quarries, some of which are still visible, and roofed with slates shipped from Wales via Lynmouth harbour. Timbers for rafters and purlins were imported, possibly after unhappy experiences, as a note at the bottom of one of Knight's specifications reads "No English fir for me".(9) On some farms, however, homegrown timber was used for trusses, the crudity of the homegrown work contrasting interestingly with the sawn fir. The oak is still lasting well, but some of the beech is now weakening.

Systematic information is lacking, but the available evidence strongly suggests that the steadings, in their original form were designed to meet the needs of a stage in the agricultural changes he introduced which proved to be transitional. For it took landlord and tenant alike some time to end old systems and develop new ones. For instance, the tenant at Larkbarrow, one of the highest and bleakest of all the farms on the estate, apparently grew wheat as late as the early 1850s and it was not until the 1870s that Exmoor settled down to a successful sheep system based on hill breeds pastured on improved grassland and rape-pasture. Knight's buildings were, in fact, simple and practical examples, using the standard U-pattern or square round a central yard, of the type of steading that served the mixed farming system so typical of the period and was found with a wide variety of permutations and combinations of component parts over most of the country. The point is illustrated by the number of types of building in the farmstead, possibly Tom's Hill Farm, costed in Table 1 below.



Fig. 2. WARREN FARM. The farmstead in 1978, looking west. Farmhouse and stables on left, barn in centre, facing the camera. Dutch barn on right is modern. (photo: Nigel Harvey)

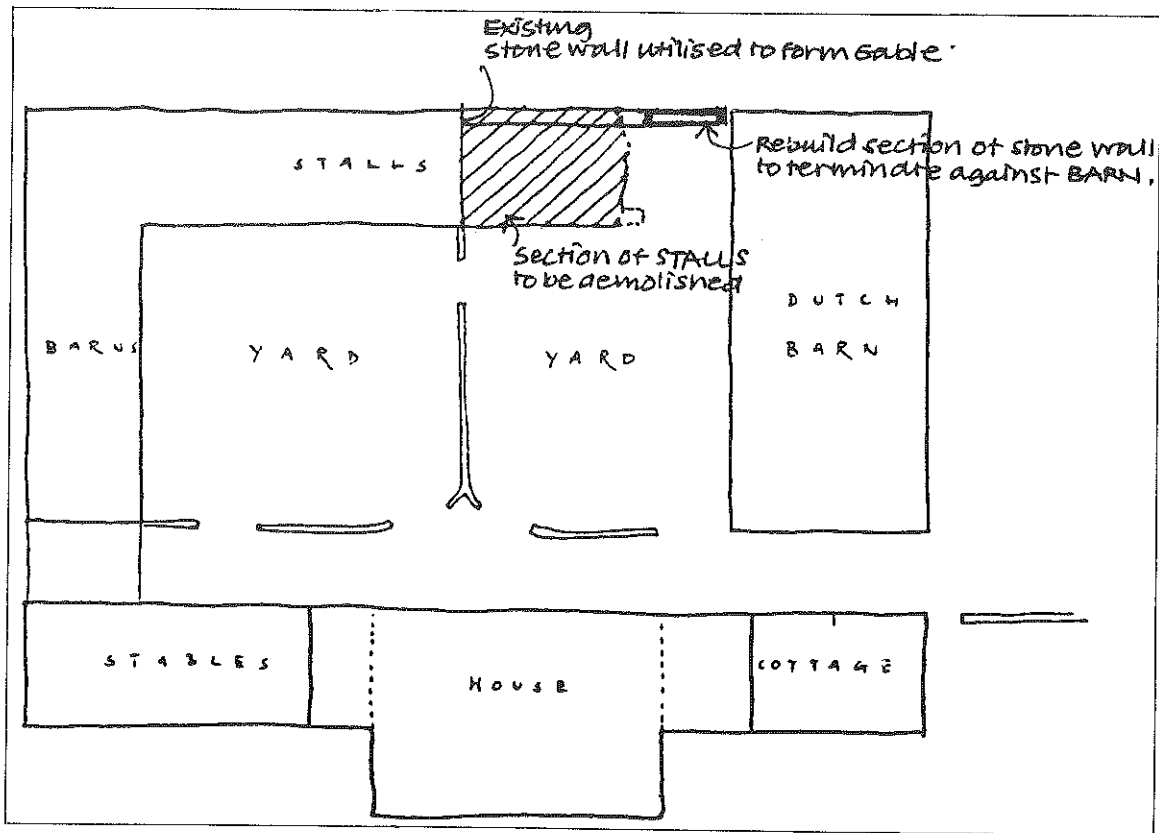


Fig. 3. WARREN FARM. Sketch plan of farmstead in 1984. Except for Dutch barn, all buildings shown were built by Frederick Knight, though stables have been converted to loose boxes. (supplied by Mr. R. Croft, Planning Dept., Somerset C.C.)

**Table 1**

Building costs on the Knight estate  
for a 300-acre farm in 1850(10)

	£	s	d
Farmhouse	177	9	2
Calves' houses and piggeries	46	13	4
Barn, stable, cartshed	160	15	3
Open cattlesheds, turnip-house	50	8	4
Cowsheds, stable, corn, gig and coal houe	58	15	0
Stone wall, gates etc.	18	13	4
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Total	512	14	5

The stables and cartshed were found on farms of all types - incidentally, one stable would have housed the farmer's working horses, the other his "nag", as it was called in some areas, for his personal use, riding and pulling his gig. But the barn and granary assumed a certain amount of corn production, probably oats for livestock feed; the cowhouse assumed a dairy herd whose milk would have left the farm via the dairy where it was processed into cheese; the open cattlesheds and an implied yard assumed the winter housing of cattle with manure as a by-product; and the piggeries assumed pigs which fattened on the waste products of the barn, the dairy and the household. Significantly, in 1844 the diary of a prospective tenant who, with his father, a lowland farmer, discussed proposed buildings with Frederic Knight recorded proceedings in unconventional style and spelling but conventional mixed farming terms. "My Father said he did not like the Plan of some of the buildings he had seen in the Forrest. He should like the Barn to be Bult so as to Drive a Load of Corn or hay to unload and the Waggon House to be suffcent height to driven in and House severall loads of Hay or Corn. Mr Knight verey kindley replied He may have his own Plan."(11)

Little detailed information is available on the type of farming which the Exmoor steadings served in the period of change between the abandonment of John Knight's lowland sytem with its unsuccessful emphasis on the production of wheat and barley and the establishment of the pastoral system which successfully replaced it. But it apparently included a substantial milking and cheesmaking enterprise. There are various references to cowhouses and cheese-production on various farms, while the buildings of Emmett's Grange included cowhouses for thirty-five head, a large herd in that period, and at one time carried some 200 pigs which were presumably kept mainly on dairy wastes. But in a relatively few years, the sheep ousted the cow and the cheese presses which could still sometimes be seen in farmhouses in the 1920s were no more than historical relics of a vanished enterprise.(12)

Frederic Knight did his work well. The modern visitor hears no criticisms from present-day occupiers of his farms, some of whom comment favourably on such features as the slope of the Driver farmstead which drains the yard into a pond that formerly irrigated the field below it. A less conventional "sturcture" which illustrates his application to the matter in hand is the

solitary circle of untended trees in the wilderness of dereliction north of the ruins of Larkbarrow farmstead. This was once an organic stiel planted to provide shelter for sheep on one of the most exposed areas of one of his most exposed farms.

All this was the result of sound planning with accepted principles of assessment and judgement which, for instance, regarded as reasonable the expenditure of £2 an acre, say four years rent, on equipping a bare land farm with buildings, including the farmhouse, an acceptable figure by the standards of the time.(13) This was supported by sound administration. "Nothing," Orwin wrote, "was undertaken without the preparation of estimates of cost, both of labour and materials, including an analysis of the latter to show materials in stock and materials required."(14) Orwin was an experienced land agent who had once managed a 25,000 acre estate and an agricultural economist with an international reputation as well as one of the founding fathers of agricultural history as we now know it, and his praise was high praise.(15)

Incidentally, the estate records include references to an early example of "the conversion of farm buildings to non-agricultural uses." In the 1850s some of the livestock buildings at Picked Stones and Winstichin were converted to cottages for miners employed on Knight's mineral operations. They were, however, converted back to their original purposes when the enterprise was abandoned.(16)

#### **Waterpower**

Exmoor abounds in potential sources of waterpower and Robert Smith, Knight's agent from 1848 to 1866, was an authority on irrigation and a firm believer in the value of waterpower for farmstead work. There is, however, only one readily identifiable example on the estate of such an installation. This was a waterwheel which drove barn machinery on Warren Farm. The wheel and its gear are long gone and their only memorial is the rebuilt barn wall and the earthen traces of the waterchannels leading to it.(17)

#### **The last hundred years**

Frederic Knight died in 1897 and the estate passed to new owners. But the type of farming system he had established and the farmsteads he and his father had built continued with little change until the present generation.

The long agricultural depression which began in the 1880s fell less heavily on the pastoral than on the arable areas and its effects on the Exmoor combination of extensive livestock farming the family farms whose occupiers were prepared in hard times to draw little more than their keep from their farms were limited. For a lifetime, therefore, there was small need for change, and the buildings of the Knights, which required little adaptation to the simplified farming system they now served, needed no more than maintenance and repair.

In the last age, however, times have changed and farm buildings with them. Indeed, the farmsteads now provide a running commentary on some of the history of this period. Two farmsteads have been demolished and their fields transferred to other farms and one modernised out of recognition.

Two others have met more violent fates, for their farms were requisitioned for a military training area in the Second World War and one was reduced to a ruin, the other to less than a ruin. But others have changed for more agreeable reasons. Here, as elsewhere in the West Country, tourists in the season share the accommodation of some of the farmhouses, while the horses they require for their recreation are housed in converted farm buildings or occasionally in new stables added to old farmsteads. One, equally agreeably but unfortunately at the cost of the demolition of the farm buildings, has become an education centre for country study-holidays. And some, with or without a tourist enterprise, continue as working farms.(18) Details are given in the following table.

**Table 2**

The Knight farmsteads in 1985

<u>Name of Farm</u>	<u>The farmstead in 1985</u>
Barton	Farm
Cloven Rocks	Demolished
Cornham	Farm
Driver	Farm
Duredon	Horse Farm
Emmett's Grange	Holiday accommodation, including horse accommodation
Gallon (formerly Red Deer)	Farm, with horses for holidaymakers
Honeymead	Comprehensively modernised
Horsen	Farm
Larkbarrow	Ruin (Military training area)
Picked Stones	Farm with holiday accommodation
Pinkery	Farm buildings demolished. House used as Somerset County Council Education Committee Exploration Centre
(Red Deer)	See Gallon
Titchcombe	Demolished. Small parts of walls survive
Tom's Hill	Demolished (military training area)
Warren	Farm
Wintershead	Farm
Winstitchen	Horse farm, considerably altered

### **The lessons of this legacy**

Historically, the farmsteads of the Knights illustrate the power and resources of the landowners of the earlier nineteenth century; the scope that their position offered; the contribution that non-agricultural wealth and enterprise made through them to the making and equipment of the farming landscape; and the high degree of self-sufficiency of the estates they owned and managed either personally or through agents. More generally, they are also salutary reminders of the sheer mass of physical labour required by such reclamations. Every field was formed and cultivated, every hedge





Fig. 4. WARREN FARM. Viewed from south (see also Fig. 3). Note use of tree-planting to provide shelter. (photo: sale particulars of Warren Farm, issued by direction of Exmoor Nat. Park Comm. by Philip, Sanders & Stubbs, now Gribble Booth & Taylor, Minehead in 1983)



Fig. 5. DUREDON FARM. West range of U-pattern farmyard. Note tree shelter-belt behind. Now converted to stables. (photo: Nigel Harvey)

built or planted, every stone quarried, every slate transported by the muscles of men and animals, for it was only after the "heroic period" of the reclamation that the steamploUGH reached Exmoor. Few nowadays can appreciate except in imagination the burden of work in pre-mechanical times. But men of an ageing generation who in the desperate early 1940s revived the tradition of the Knights as they used the massed resources of mechanised agriculture to reclaim derelict upland will marvel at the achievement of their ancestors. Agricultural historians should never forget that engineers reckon the power of a man as one-eighth of a mechanical horsepower.

Contemporarily, the Knight farmsteads illustrate some of the varied changes of our own age. But behind all this are the memories of an older story. From certain positions and in certain lights some of these steadings look like small, isolated strongholds guarding the huge rectangular fields which were won and secured from the Waste with such effort and labour. In Principle, of course, this is a function of all farm buildings, for they house the forces that protect the farm from the return of the Waste. But few show this with such impressive clarity as these historical monuments of the last age of the Moving Agricultural Frontier.

#### Sources and Acknowledgements

The obvious and comprehensive source is C. S. Orwin, The Reclamation of Exmoor Forest, 1929, and its revision under the same title by C. S. Orwin and R. J. Sellick, 1970. For convenience, these are cited as "Orwin" and "Orwin and Sellick" respectively. See also the unpublished B. A. Dissertation for the Department of Geography, University of Southampton, The development of settlement in an area of Eastern Somerset, 1967, pp.12-17, by Susanna Everett, now Dr Wade Martins, who is a Committee Member of the Historic Farm Buildings Group. The writer wishes to thank her for the loan of this thesis and permission to quote from it.

The writer also wishes to thank Mr J. S. Hynes and Mr G. Eamer of the Exmoor National Park Authority, Mr R. Croft of the Planning Department of Somerset County Council and Messers Gribbel, Booth and Taylor, Estate Agents, for advice, information and material.

The informal "fieldwork" for this article consisted of the agricultural equivalent of a recce patrol, a walking tour of the area in 1985 with visits to all the Knight farmsteads, a brief explanation of an interest in the Knight buildings and a request to be allowed to photograph them. The writer wishes to thank all those who received him so kindly, particularly those who took the time to show him around their buildings.

#### References

1. Billingsley, J. General view of the agriculture of Somerset, 3rd ed. (1798), pp.286-288.
2. Bull, L. History of the Smithfield Club (1926), p.11.

3. Mechi, J. J. A series of letters on agricultural improvement (1845), p.4.
4. Quoted in Ernle, Lord, English farming past and present, 5th ed. (1941), p.214.
5. Orwin and Sellick, p.61.
6. This was the opinion, implicit or explicit, of such informed near-contemporaries as Robert Smith, writing after several years experience as Frederic Knight's agent, and Samuel Sidney in his review of the whole enterprise (Smith, R. "Bringing moorland into cultivation", Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England, vol. 17, (1856), p.353; Sidney, S. "Exmoor reclamation", ibid., 2nd ser., vol.14, (1878), p.78). See also Watson, J. "On reclaiming heathland", ibid., vol.6, (1845), p.97. This verdict was confirmed by the failure of attempts to grow corn-crops on Exmoor during the First World War and during and shortly after the Second World War (Orwin and Sellick, pp.141, 154).

Nevertheless, it is worth noting as evidence of the historical flexibility of farming that corn has been grown successfully by contemporary standards on Knight land before and after their time. Remains of field boundaries and ridge-and-furrow near Picked Stones Farm show that corn was grown there in the Middle Ages (A walk from Simonsbath, published by the Exmoor National Park Authority, n.d. p.5). Presumably this was in the land-hungry period before the Black Death and yields were sufficient to justify the continuance of cultivation for a significant time. A modern farmer has successfully grown corn at 1,200 feet on another former area of the Knight estate, though, of course, he used modern varieties and a grain-drying installation (Farmers Weekly, 14 November 1988, p.2).

7. Chapman, Vera, "North Country farms of the moorland fringe won from the moor", Beamish One, the first report of the North of England Open Air Museum Joint Committee, Spring 1979, pp.45-52. The value of old farm buildings as sources of evidence on changes in the use of marginal land is obvious. Cf. the late 16th or early 17th century farmstead of Middle House Farm, now abandoned, on its lonely site on Malham Moor in Yorkshire just above the 1,350 foot contour includes a pigeonhouse, clear evidence of cereal cultivation in an area which was once and is now again entirely pastoral. Less dramatically, Marie Hartley and Jean Ingilby in Dales memories, (1986), p.65, express surprise at corn still being grown in the later eighteenth century on the Nappa Hall estate in Wensleydale where the altitude is over 700 feet, the evidence being a documentary reference to the repair of a thrashing floor in a barn.
8. Sidney, S. "Exmoor reclamation", Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England, 2 ser., vol.14, (1878), p.79; Orwin and Sellick, p.80.
9. For the "fitting of the farms into the landscape" and the use of local stone from local quarries, see Susanna Everett (Susanna Wade Martins), The development of settlement in an area of Eastern Exmoor, unpublished BA Dissertation, Department of Geography, University of Southampton,

(1967), pp.14-15. Quoted by kind permission of the author. For construction see Orwin and Sellick, p.80.

10. Orwin and Sellick, ibid., p.83. For an "advisory" drawing and plan of a farmstead suggested for a 300 acre "moorland farm", very similar in general type to those built by Frederic Knight see Robert Smith, "Bringing moorland into cultivation", Journal of the Royal Agricultural society of England, vol.17 (1856), pp.356-362. Smith had been agent for Knight since 1848 and was farming Emmett's Grange on the estate at the time he wrote this article. But he took office when the building programme was nearing its end so presumably his influence on it was limited. No doubt, however, he included his Exmoor experience in his proposed design. The cost of his scheme in 1850 was £600, though he noted that by 1856 costs had increased by 17%.
11. Orwin and Sellick, p.249.
12. Orwin, p.54; Orwin and Sellick, pp.74, 95, 96. Reference to surviving cheese presses, Orwin, p.66; Orwin and Sellick, p.95.
13. Orwin and Sellick, pp 83, 87. At that time, five years rent was a common rule-of-thumb for the capital investment required for new buildings of 150 to 400 acres (Beckett, J.Y. "Landownership and farm management" in The agrarian history of England and Wales, vol 6, 1750-1850, ed G.E.Mingay, (1989), pp 604-5.,) Such figures are inevitably generalisations, but they suggest that Frederic Knight built within accepted economic limits. His rents were lower than those in more fertile areas, but he kept his building costs low.
14. Orwin and Sellick, p.96.
15. For the biography of Orwin and his personal connection with Exmoor see Orwin and Sellick, pp.18-22. Incidentally, in his capacity as an estate-manager he made a useful contribution to the history of farm buildings by writing one of the first articles assessing the possibilities in their construction of a new form of building material, "An investigation into value of ferro or reinforced concrete for farm and estate purposes", Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England, vol.72, (1911), pp.122-39.
16. Orwin and Sellick, p. 198.
17. Personal visit to farm and information from Mr Hawkins, the occupier. Smith only became agent in the last years of the building programme so presumably his influence on it was limited. For his views on waterpower and its use for driving barn machinery for processing the corn-crop for cattle feed see T. D. Acland, "On the farming of Somerset", Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England, vol.11, (1850), p.691, and his own article on "Bringing moorland into cultivation" in the same Journal, vol.17, (1856), p.355. Smith wrote his article when he was farming Emmett's Grange which was built in 1844-5 (Orwin and Sellick, p.50) i.e. before he was appointed as Knight's agent. This farm included an irrigation scheme but no

waterwheel, pp. 356-7. His advisory plan of a hypothetical upland farm on p.359, however, includes a waterwheel to drive barn machinery.

18. There has been no systematic study of the Knight farmsteads. The best documented example is Warren Farm which is listed in the Somerset Sites and Monuments Record, reference 33067 Exmoor/3/014/072. It stands at just over 1300 feet and was built in 1844-45 at a cost of £331 and is described as "the most complete and unaltered example of a farm built by the Knight family". Details of the buildings and their modern uses are given in the 1983 Particulars of Sale of the farm, then 518 acres with grazing rights over an additional 1655 acres, which was issued by the Exmoor National Park Committee. The "traditional" buildings, i.e. the Knight buildings, consisted of a single car garage with tallet over, presumably a converted linhay; a cobbled stable converted into four loose boxes; a storage barn housing chickenhouse and doghouse, diesel tanks and generator; calving box; an open-fronted hay or implement shed; a four stall cowhouse; two calf boxes; and a store shed. The modern buildings comprised a haybarn, a lambing shed and cattle and sheephandling pens, with a lambing shed and lambing shelter in the fields. The Particulars of Sale document specifies that "the Purchaser will not be permitted to demolish or make repairs to those buildings (i.e. the Knight buildings) which materially alter their external appearance without the prior consent of the Exmoor National Park Committee" and the Knight buildings are marked on the site plan as "Subject to special provisions".

Incidentally, Warren Farm includes a number of pillow mounds, relics of the post-medieval rabbit enterprise from which it derives its name.

(Information kindly provided by Mr R. A. Croft of the Planning Department of Somerset County Council.)