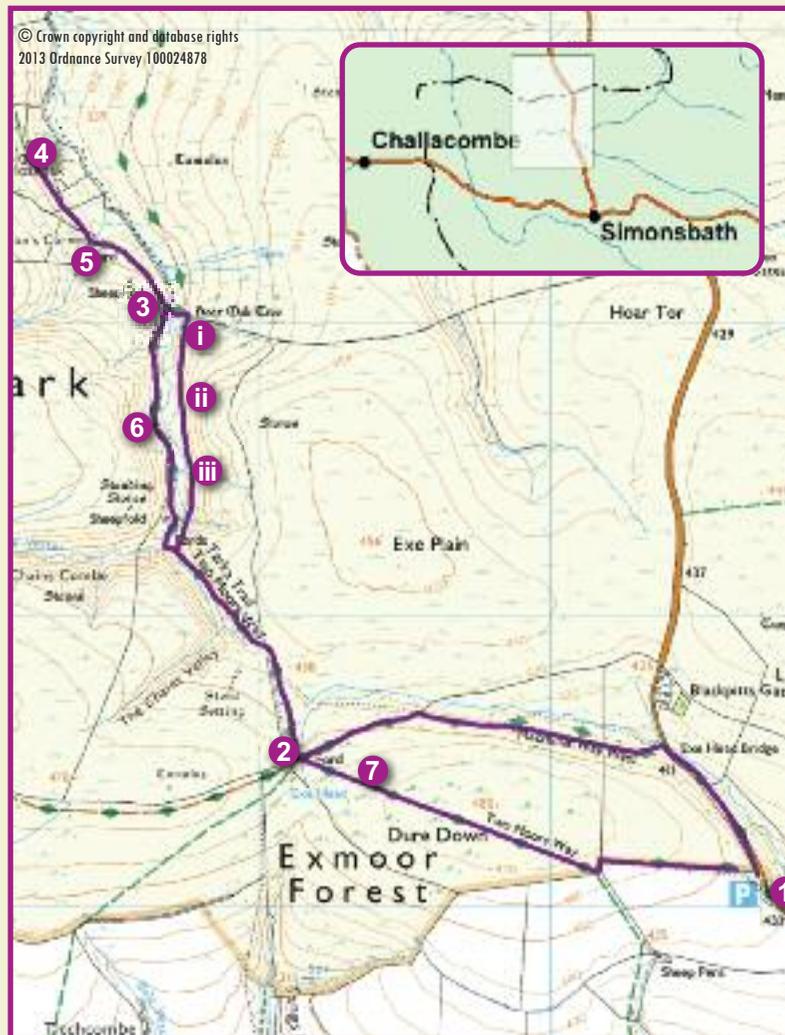


# Directions

- 1 From Prayway Head walk down the road to Exe Head Bridge and take the footpath on left (Macmillan Way West) to Exe Head. Follow the path uphill, and then level for approximately 700m. This path is thought to be along the line of a railway that was never completed. Follow the finger posts for 'Exe Head'.
- 2 At Exe Head, the source of the river Exe, (marked with a sign post) turn right through the gate to take the Two Moors Way/Tarka Trail down into Hoar Oak Valley (signposted 'Hoar Oak' and 'N Furzehill').  
About ½ mile along this path you will cross a stream at the point where the valley you are in meets another steep sided valley on the left (Long Chains Combe). Carry on along this main path and almost immediately on top of a small hill in front of you to the left of the path is a ruined 'D' shaped enclosure. To visit this site, take the rough path up to your left soon after crossing the stream; return to the main path.  
A short distance along this path, on the opposite side of the valley, there is a scatter of large stones in a broad band from the top to the bottom of the hill side. This is a **gatepost factory** and the remains of gateposts quarried from rock outcrops are still visible. Further on across the valley on your right, surrounded by a wooden fence, is the **Hoar Oak Tree**.
- 3 A little further on, the path meets a boundary bank (the boundary of the former Royal Forest of Exmoor) with two gates through. Do not follow the main path through the gate in the Forest boundary, but go through the left hand gate and continue straight ahead. In about 100m you will reach a circular earthwork, approximately 50m uphill from the bank. This is a **19th century sheepfold** or 'stell'.
- 4 Further down the valley, **Hoar Oak Cottage** is now visible.



- 5 Drop back to the boundary you were following and carry on towards Hoar Oak Cottage.
- 6 Cross the stream and go through the gate. The path takes you through the former fields which were farmed from Hoar Oak, eventually reaching the cottage itself.
- 7 Retrace your steps to return to the beginning of the walk, following the route you have just taken. To do this return up Hoar Oak Valley until you reach Exe Head. (Alternatively follow the detour below to visit Hoar Oak Tree and the gatepost factory).
- 8 At Exe Head go through the gate and turn left, following the Two Moors Way over Dure Down (signposted Prayway Head). Continue in the same direction until you see a gate down to the right ahead of you. Go through this and another gate to return to the start of the walk.

### Detour:

- This is an optional route to visit the Hoar Oak Tree and gatepost factory before returning to the Two Moors Way. It should only be attempted if it is safe to cross the stream.
- i From Hoar Oak Cottage, return to 3 (the gates through the boundary of the Royal Forest of Exmoor). Pass through the gates and bear left downhill, beside the boundary. Cross the stream and head uphill to the Hoar Oak Tree.
  - ii From the tree, follow the indistinct path along the contour up the valley side. These pony tracks come and go but as a general guide keep the stream 30-50m on your right, but don't climb the valley side.
  - iii At the gatepost factory you will see slabs of surface stone, some with drilled holes for gate hangers. At the bottom of the slope there is also a small circular stone shelter or bothy and a long rectangular hollow – these were presumably used by people working on the site. Head downhill and cross the stream at a convenient point back onto the Two Moors Way. Continue along this route to Exe Head then from 7.

## Further Reading:

The following contain further information on the historic landscape of Hoar Oak.

Roger A. Burton, *The Heritage of Exmoor*, 1989, Maslands Ltd. Tiverton

Hazel Eardley-Wilmot, *Yesterday's Exmoor*, 1990, Exmoor Books

Edward T. MacDermot, *The History of the Forest of Exmoor*, 1973, Redwood Press Ltd

Hazel Riley & Rob Wilson-North, *The Field Archaeology of Exmoor*, 2001, English Heritage

Mary Siraut, *Exmoor: The Making of an English Upland*, 2009, Phillimore & Co Ltd

Hazel Riley, *Hoar Oak valley, Exmoor Forest, Somerset: an early 19th-century labourers' cottage on John Knight's Exmoor Forest Estate*, 2012. Unpublished Survey Report. Publically accessible in Exmoor National Park Historic Environment Record. See [www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk/environment/history/historic-environment-record](http://www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk/environment/history/historic-environment-record) for information on how to access this resource.

[www.hoarokcottage.org](http://www.hoarokcottage.org)



**Toilets & refreshments:** None on route. Nearest at Simonsbath or Lynmouth.

**Dogs:** Dogs should be kept under control at all times and, between 1 March - 31 July, should be kept on a short lead to minimise disturbance to livestock and ground nesting birds.

**Access land:** This walk is on access land which means that you can visit any part of it on foot, unless otherwise informed.

[www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk](http://www.exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk)  
[www.heartofexmoor.org.uk](http://www.heartofexmoor.org.uk)



## Exmoor Moorland Archaeology Walks Series No.3: Hoar Oak Valley



Start point: Layby (at Prayway Head) on B3223, approx. ½ mile south of Blackpitts Gate

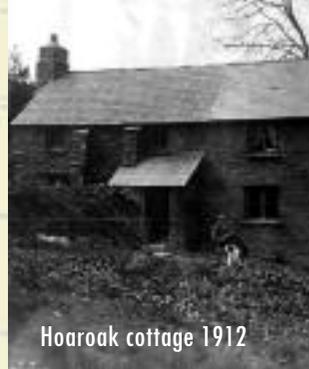
Start Grid Reference: SS 7674 4103

Distance: 5.5 miles (9 kilometres)

Level of difficulty: Moderate to strenuous. Some parts of the walk are across open moorland, so sturdy walking boots should be worn and this walk should not be attempted in poor weather.

Map: Ordnance Survey Explorer Map OL9 must be used in conjunction with this leaflet.

Exmoor's historic landscapes are a very rare survival, both within England and also across the British Isles. They contain many archaeological sites, ranging in date from early prehistory (some 8,000 years ago) to the 20th century. Together they offer a unique insight into our human past.



## Farming the Hoar Oak valley

On the remote slopes of the Hoar Oak valley is a farmstead now known as **Hoar Oak Cottage**. Around the ruins of the cottage are the fields which served it. Some of them may have first been carved out of the moorland in the medieval period. On the east side of the valley, now covered by heather and bracken but sometimes visible in low sunlight, are the remains of medieval fields and a newly discovered abandoned medieval farmstead.

Although it is usually identified with the 19th century farming activities of the Knight family, Hoar Oak Cottage may in fact have had earlier beginnings. The one storey western end with its big chimney stack possibly dates to the late 18th century. Later on it was extended down the slope and an upper floor added. In 1839 the building and land around it was owned by John Vellacott. It had a number of tenants in the 19th century, before Frederic Knight took on the lease sometime after 1867. He gave the herding to William Davidson and his wife, who were among a number of shepherds brought down from the Scottish lowlands as part of the Knight enterprise to graze their hardy black faced sheep on the lands of the former Forest. The **sheepfold** is likely to date from this time since it bears a considerable resemblance to those found in Scotland, known as 'stells'. A number of shepherds followed the Davidson's, and the fields around the cottage were farmed until 1959 when they were abandoned.

## Introduction

The Hoar Oak valley reveals evidence for human occupation over many thousands of years, beginning with the remarkable Bronze Age (2000-700 B.C.) barrows, cairns and standing stones all around the valley. The area also lies on the edge of the former Royal Forest of Exmoor, and reveals how the Forest and its neighbouring commons were managed. Despite this, much of the visible story of this landscape is written during the 19th century when the valley began to be farmed more intensively and mining, shepherding and estate industries took place here.

## The Royal Forest of Exmoor

After the Bronze Age settlers left the Hoar Oak valley, there appears to be little evidence of human activity until the creation of the Royal Forest of Exmoor, during the Anglo-Saxon period (410-1066 AD). Like other Royal Forests across England it was owned by the Crown and used for hunting, prohibiting development within its bounds. At its sale in 1818 there was just one farm within the Royal Forest, at Simonsbath.

Farmers could graze their sheep in the Forest, for a fee and telling houses were placed at strategic points where sheep could be counted on and off the moor to ensure farmers were charged accordingly. The enormous scale of this activity is shown by records of 1736 when over 30,000 sheep were pastured on the Forest. It has been suggested that the ruined **'D' shaped enclosure** and remains of an adjoining rectangular building could have been one of these telling houses, but recent work has cast doubt on this interpretation.

The boundary of the Forest was delineated by natural features such as rivers as well as man-made landmarks including Bronze Age barrows and standing stones. These were erected and maintained throughout the life of the Royal Forest so cannot easily be dated to one particular historical period. An annual 'perambulation' was held to ensure that the bounds of the Forest were well known to those who lived around Exmoor. It was not only stones which were used to mark the Forest boundary, the **Hoar Oak Tree** is only the most recent in a succession of oak trees marking the meeting of the Forest boundary and the boundary dividing the commons of Lynton and Brendon. The original oak tree is said to have died in 1658.

## Industrialisation of the Hoar Oak valley

In the 19th century the crown decided to sell some of its land holdings, including the Royal Forest of Exmoor. It was purchased in 1818 by John Knight, a Midlands industrialist who, with a vision of turning the moorland into productive farmland, began a process of 'reclamation'. He immediately began to enclose the entire area of the old Royal Forest with a wall of stone and earth, some 30 miles long, and some of this wall is still standing today. Knight developed the Forest Estate, building roads, creating a number of farms, draining the moors and building sheepfolds. Within the Hoar Oak valley is an area interpreted as a **gatepost factory**, the only known one on Exmoor. As one of the few outcrops of suitable stone, this was where workers obtained material for the gateposts needed to enclose the new estate. About a dozen large stone slabs, ready drilled to take iron gate-hangers, can still be seen today on the steep valley side, along with the remains of others which split during drilling and were therefore discarded in situ. There are also the remains of a small circular stone building, perhaps a shelter for those making the gateposts.

'D' shaped enclosure near Hoar Oak cottage



Fields around Hoar Oak Cottage