

Exmoor National Park
Historic Environment Report Series No 23

ASHCOMBE 'GROTTO', SIMONSBATH

A DETAILED ASSESSMENT OF THE FABRIC AND DISCUSSION OF COMPARATOR SITES



Exmoor National Park
Historic Environment Report Series No 23

ASHCOMBE 'GROTTO', SIMONSBATH

A DETAILED ASSESSMENT OF THE FABRIC AND DISCUSSION OF COMPARATOR SITES

Exmoor National Park
Historic Environment Report Series

Authors: Dr Stuart Blaylock and Simon Bonvoisin
2016

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

Further hard copies of this report can be obtained from the
Exmoor National Park Historic Environment Record:
Exmoor House, Dulverton, Somerset. TA22 9HL
email her@exmoor-nationalpark.gov.uk,
01398 322273

FRONT COVER:
Ashcombe Grotto by Rob Wilson-North

©Exmoor National Park Authority

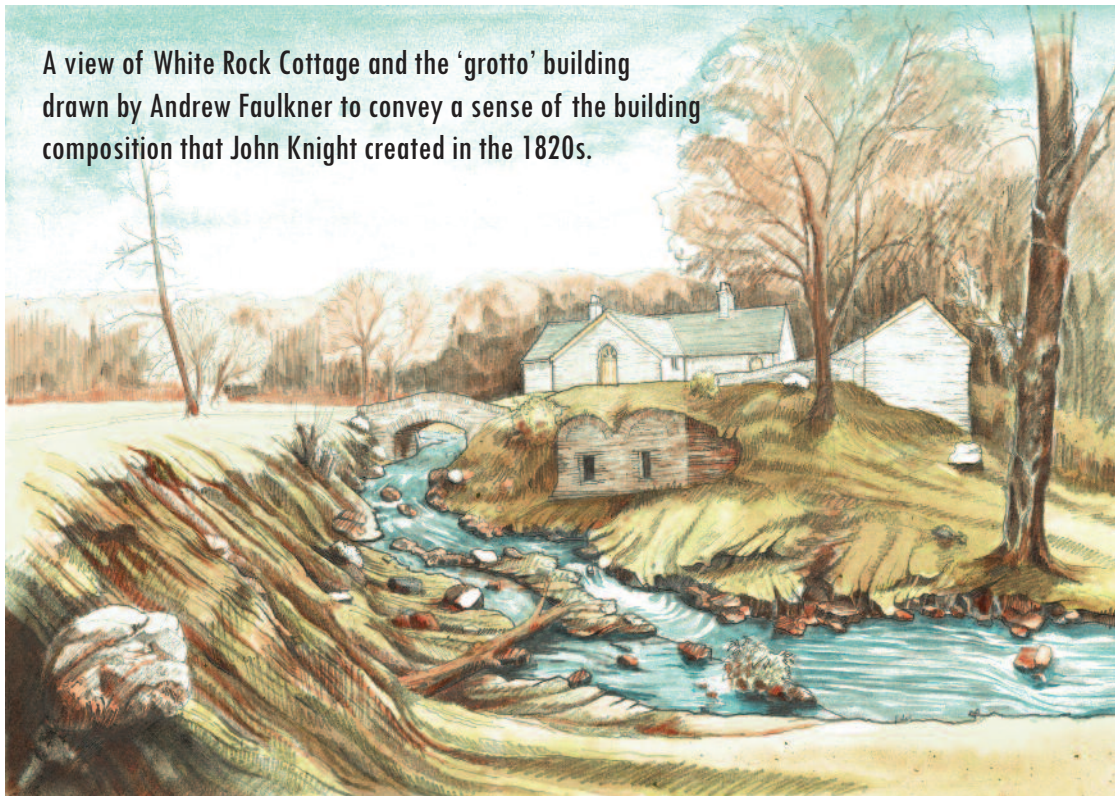
CONTENTS

	Page
Background and introduction	1
Ashcombe grotto, Simonsbath, Exmoor:	
Description and assessment of the fabric By Dr Stuart Blaylock	2
Introduction: Scope of work	2
General description	2
Description: Exterior	3
Description: Interior	5
Commentary/interpretation	7
Figures	9
Acknowledgements	12
Bibliography and sources	12
White Rock Cottage 'Grotto', Simonsbath.	
Contextual Review By Simon Bonvoisin	14
Contextual Interpretation	15
Landscape Grotto	15
Icehouse	19
Game Larder or Dairy?	19
Towards a Conservation Statement	21
Significance	21
Vulnerability	22
Policy	23

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Exmoor National Park Authority owns a small subterranean building which is set into the riverbank below White Rock Cottage in Ashcombe, Simonsbath. The structure has been variously described as an ice house (Burton 1994), a grotto (South West Archaeology 2015) or cold store. In recent years there has been a focus on attempting to understand the designed landscape which John Knight began in Ashcombe in the 1820s and the part that White Rock Cottage played in that design. Inevitably the question has been raised as to whether the subterranean building formed part of such a scheme. In order to resolve this, the stonework of the structure was cleaned in autumn 2016 and a detailed assessment of the fabric carried out by Dr Stuart Blaylock. To put the building in context, Simon Bonvoisin (Nicholas Pearson Associates) was asked to examine the building in terms of other comparator sites. The results of these two pieces of work are presented together, below.

In conclusion it is felt that the subterranean building was built as a cold store, but that it almost certainly formed part of a coherent composition of practical buildings (along with White Rock Cottage, a gardeners' store and a bridge) that formed a backdrop to one aspect of John Knight's picturesque gardens in Ashcombe. The building – in its original form – would have appeared as a plain stone elevation with two arches visible, and two simple small rectangular windows below. Much of the elevation has been rebuilt, possibly as recently as 1952 following the flood disaster on Exmoor.



ASHCOMBE GROTTO, SIMONSBATH, EXMOOR: DESCRIPTION AND ASSESSMENT OF THE FABRIC BY DR STUART BLAYLOCK

Introduction: Scope of work

The 'grotto' lies within the curtilage of White Rock Cottage on the east bank of the Ashcombe Water stream, a tributary of the River Barle. The structure is dug into the rocky bank of the stream itself (at approx. NGR SS 7734 3942). The site lies on Upper Devonian Kentisbury slates, part of the Ilfracombe slate formation (BGS 1982). A quarry is marked nearby on the 1:2500 Ordnance Survey maps (OS 1889; idem 1903), some 75m north-east of the building on the west bank of the river, and this may be the source of the slate stone employed for rubble facework in the buildings; but there are several more quarries mapped further afield in the vicinity of the village.

An assessment of the fabric of the grotto was commissioned by Rob Wilson-North of Exmoor National Park Authority to provide a view of its structural history and development, prior to conservation of the structure and to further research into the building. This involved several site visits, photographic recording, inspection and analysis of the fabric, but no new drawing work at this stage. A plan of the building, made at an earlier date, was available (SWA 2015, fig. 17).

Site visits were made on 7.ix.16 to view the building before it was cleared of vegetation (Fig. 1); on this day I was able to form a view of the fabric in general and of the nature and phasing of the interior. Vegetation was removed in the week of 12–16.ix.16; I made a second visit to view the stripped external elevations from scaffolding on 28.ix.16 (Figs 3–4), and a further visit once the scaffolding had been removed on 9.x.16 to take photographs of the main elevation for annotation (Fig. 2). This text is based on field notes and subsequent study of the photographic records, plus the phased plan made previously by South-West Archaeology (see also commentary, below).

General description

Orientation: The building actually faces north-west onto the river, but for ease of description this elevation is taken to be the west elevation, the upstream side of the building, really facing north east with the flight of steps entering, is taken to

be the north; the uphill side is to the east and downstream side is to the south.

The basic building material of the visible exterior elevations is of newly-won/quarried slate stone with a variable admixture of quartz boulders and other water-worn stones; these form as much as 25% of the fabric in places, elsewhere (such as the south end of the west elevation; Fig. 5) they are entirely absent. It emerges that these boulders are most characteristic of the repairs (could it be that they were collected from the river along with collapsed material from the front wall?), and while not being wholly failsafe, form one strong indicator of rebuilt fabric. In common with the surrounding landscape setting, occasional use is made of large white quartz boulders, notably two either side of the 'entry' to the shallow approach steps at right angles to, and to the north-east of, the main flight of steps. This is presumed to be an intentional part of the design. Bedrock is visible between the two flights of steps, and at the south end of the west elevation (Fig. 5).

The interior of the building is constructed of slate rubble throughout, with occasional instances of red brick visible (such as in the springing of the arched door head at the foot of the steps). The original floors are of flagstones, but do not survive throughout (i.e. have been raised in places). A good deal of original lime plaster survives on interior wall surfaces, some of it concealed/overlain by calcified deposits resulting from water penetration. Brick and cast concrete appear in repairs; some repaired wall faces are also plastered, in this case with pinkish-brown cement material.

The original fabric of the building appears to be bonded with off-white lime mortar with moderate to fine grit inclusions; the retaining wall to the south has very little bonding material, and may have been dry-built. Much use is made in repairs of a pinkish cement material, which appears in bonding of rebuilt rubble masonry; in capping of existing walling; as well as in rendering (above).

Description: Exterior

The west elevation and its associated structures (west wall of the stair to the north; flanking boundary/retaining wall to the south) is the main representative of the exterior fabric (Figs 1–2; 5). Other than this wall, little of the remainder of the structure has any external expression above ground, since the whole structure is essentially dug into the slope to the east. Once the vegetation had been cleared (Fig. 2) it was clear that the key feature of the west elevation is the two arches formed by the ends of the north and south barrel vaults extruding onto the elevation (the southern arch had not been visible before clearance: Fig. 1). The northern arch survives in line with the front elevation, although it has

probably been repaired (the extrados is pointed in pink cement at its outer/west end, although white lime mortar can be seen deeper into the joints). The front of the southern arch has fallen away, so that its voussoirs survive some 300–350mm short of the wall face. There is a little repair/rebuilding at the top, but this is largely intact with original lime mortar bonding visible in situ; it is presumed also to have extruded onto the wall face originally. A large slate block in the main wall face probably represents the springing of the south side of the arch (Fig. 5).

Other features of the elevation include a rectangular window to the southern cell, an open semi-circular tympanum within the arch of the vault of the northern cell. A straight seam in the rubble masonry is visible in the centre, more-or-less on the centre line of the two vaults (2.22m south of the north-west corner). This is clearly of some significance in assessing the development of the fabric, but it does not wholly convince as a straight join, as several blocks within the facework run across the line of the joint. There is a second straight join at the south-west corner, representing the junction of the main fabric with a probably-later retaining wall. This is wholly of newly-won slate stone, in a similar style to that of the adjacent wall, but was constructed without lime mortar, i.e. either as a dry-stone wall, or using only earth bonding materials (a brownish clay in places was the only 'bonding' material I was able to observe). This wall is built onto bedrock at a higher level than the main west elevation (Fig. 5), and fails quite to align with the main west elevation. A vertical cut is visible in the bedrock, marking the south-west corner of the main building; presumably a construction cut. No bedrock was observed beneath the main build of the elevation, but further clearance/excavation could presumably establish the level at which it was constructed. A crude offset projecting course of masonry visible in the northern half of the elevation, forms a plinth; further south this is buried.

Over the crown of each vault there appears to be c.3–400mm of clay and rubble, some of it displaced, and then 3–400mm more of soil capping over the structure (Fig. 5). Removal of this would be desirable eventually, and might contribute to the better understanding of the fabric.

The straight join in the centre of the west elevation stops slightly above ground level; the fabric includes numerous water-worn boulders (as does that of the work to the south, between the straight join and the window of the southern cell). Similar boulders also appear in the upper stage of the stair wall to the north. All of the fabric containing such stone is also pointed (at the least; probably also bonded, although this is rarely visible) in the pinkish cement noted above as characteristic of repairs. From these observations I conclude

that all of the sections just mentioned: the facework to the north of the window; much of the wall blocking the northern arch; the upper sections of the north wall and the adjacent stair flanking wall, represent repairs/consolidation of the building rather than a constructional phase as such.

The soffit of the vault of the northern cell shows a slight scar c.400mm in from the wall face, showing that the west wall was formerly built up to the soffit of the vault within the 'tympanum'. There is parallel evidence in the plastering of the vault, which begins approximately 450mm in from the wall face. These observations also support the hypothesis that the outer wall is a rebuild.

How is the straight join in the middle to be explained? It could indicate that the facework between the straight join and the window is an earlier rebuild than that blocking the northern cell, but I think it probably represents a stage in the repair: perhaps because the work to the south was re-facing on surviving core, whereas that to the north consisted of a full rebuilding (i.e. to the full width of the wall).

In the south-east angle of the stair and the north wall, the west flanking wall of the stair appears to run behind the north wall of the main structure; this relationship alone ought to debar the stairs from being interpreted as a later addition. The upper section of the west wall of the stair and the adjacent part of the north wall of the main build have been rebuilt, employing river boulders as well as slate, and in one place a shuttered cement repair. This repair includes the few blocks returning over the top of the vault. Comparison of the fabric visible on the inside faces of the stair, shows that all of the east wall (Fig. 7) and the lower part of the west wall (Fig. 6) are of undisturbed well-coursed slate rubble of similar character to the primary build of the west elevation (Fig. 5). Above the west wall is rebuilt in semi-coursed slate rubble and water-worn boulders bonded in pink cement (Figs 5–6), matching the sequence observed on the outside elevation. The stair is roofed with broad slate slabs spanning the width of the stair (800–850mm); the uppermost surviving slab may have been propped or reset when the west wall was rebuilt, otherwise most of the slabs appear to be in situ.

The steps were originally of rubble masonry, but are now capped with cement slabs/made-up treads some 40mm thick, 310–20mm deep (Fig. 8).

Description: Interior

The interior consists of two rectangular cells approached by the steps descending from the north; both are roofed with east-west orientated barrel vaults of semi-circular section springing from projecting cornices, which are

crudely chamfered on their lower edges. The northern cell measures 3.03m E–W by 1.75m N–S, and has a maximum height of approximately 2.61m from current floor level to the crown of the vault; the springing of the vault is c.1.94–2.01m above floor level. The southern cell measures 3.12m E–W by 1.69m N–S, with a maximum height of c.2.59m; the springing of the vault is c.1.78–83m above floor level. The cells are divided by a spine wall 0.45m wide, and access between the two is provided by a doorway with a semicircular-arched head, c.1.50m high. The northern cell has a large semi-circular-headed aperture in the tympanum formed by the west wall and the arch of the vault (which turns out to be the product of repair: see above); the southern cell has a smaller rectangular window set low down in the west elevation. It is likely that the northern cell also originally had such a window (a point that would be easily resolved, were a photograph or drawing antedating the repairs were ever to turn up).

The northern cell has three features in its north wall (Fig. 8): the central doorway at the foot of the steps, a niche to the east and traces of a blocked niche to the west. The doorway (0.92m wide originally had an arched head, and the right-hand (east) side of the arch survives (Fig. 8); to the west the head has been disrupted by repair, and now consists of a crude lintel construction. The east and west reveals of the doorway are rebated, as if to receive a door, although no traces of hanging of or furniture from a door were noted. The niche to the east has a semicircular head, and measures 610mm wide at the wall face; 730mm high; and is 600mm deep. The wall face is obscured by plaster, but is assumed to possess a relieving arch on comparison with the western arch (below). Traces of the eastern jamb and eastern side of the relieving arch of a second such niche appear to the west of the doorway (Fig. 8), but this has been blocked and much of the area is rendered over in pinkish cement continuous with the rendering of the west wall, meaning that the masonry fabric is not visible at this point.

Both cells have rubble masonry piers that formerly supported slate shelving; typically these are 300mm or a little more wide; 600mm or a little more deep and 590–600mm high; their upper surfaces align with horizontal grooves in the wall plaster indicating the position of the shelves (Fig. 9). The vertical surfaces of the piers are usually mortared, but occasionally show surviving slate cladding, and it is possible that they were originally treated like this throughout and the mortar represents the remains of the medium used to adhere the slates to the masonry. In the northern cell the shelves or benches are positioned along the east and west walls; in the southern cell, the piers indicate shelving along the east and south walls, in an L-shaped continuous bench. The south-east pier is

correspondingly larger to support the corner. There is no immediate indication that the shelving and its supporting piers are not part of the primary structure, despite abutting the wall faces: this relationship would be expected if the shelving was constructed as part of the fitting out of the building; the mortar layers can be seen to be continuous with the plastering of the walls in several places, confirming that this is really a matter of constructional sequence rather than an origin in separate phases.

All in all, the only certainly secondary features visible on the interior of the building are the repairs to the west of the stair doorway, the blocking of the western niche and the rebuilding of the west wall within the arch of the vault (the inner faces of both these being rendered in cement).

Commentary/interpretation

The basic conclusion of this study is that the grotto is of one phase of construction, with its basic form surviving as it was built, namely a two-cell structure entered by a staircase from the north, and with provision for storage in the form of slate-shelving. All of the visible insertions and alterations can be attributed to repairs, and once this is accepted, there is no evidence to support the two-phase interpretation of the building advanced previously. This evidence favours an interpretation for the building's function as a cold store from the start, perhaps as a game larder or dairy? It is not equipped to function as an ice house, the design of which would be different in a number of crucial ways: wholly, rather than partly, subterranean; without fenestration of any sort; usually with an entrance passage sealed with two or more doorways; etc. (compare Buxbaum 2014). Of course there is nothing to exclude the interpretation that the building functioned as a cold store, but was externally dressed up as a grotto; i.e. that the external appearance of the structure had a decorative or ornamental function within the designed landscape. But the basic utilitarian function of the structure seems unavoidable.

The obvious context for the repairs would be the aftermath of the disastrous floods of August 1952, when the Ashcombe Water was in spate to record-breaking heights, bridges were swept away, and nearly all of the buildings in Simonsbath suffered catastrophic flooding (Burton 1994, 111–13).

Documentary or pictorial research has been beyond the scope of the work carried out here, but even in a cursory investigation the paucity of historic photographs and documentation of the grotto is striking, and it is clear that the absence of pictorial evidence is one of the frustrating aspects of the study of this building. Given the picturesque qualities of the building and its setting, it is far

from impossible that photographs or drawings will one day surface; but, for the present, it has to be concluded that nothing survives. With the above suggestion on the dating of repairs in mind, it might be worth checking the school management minutes for the early 1950s, since if the suggestion that the repairs are making good damage done in the 1952 flood is correct, then some mention of the damage, or of the subsequent repairs, might be preserved in these documents. Various documents of this nature are listed in the catalogue of the Somerset Heritage Centre (listed below), and might offer a documentary straw to clutch at for further details and confirmation (or otherwise) of the suggested dating.

The available plan of the grotto is wrong in certain key respects and needs re-survey. Most critically the dimensions and wall thicknesses at the north-west corner are in error (this is shown as very thin, but is likely to be of similar thickness to the section of north wall east of the stair, since it originally accommodated a similar niche). There are other major discrepancies in the planning of the stair. In general the plan is inadequate as a record of the building and many measurements that I checked I found to be in error.



Fig. 1 The west elevation before stripping of vegetation, 7.ix.16 (photo ref: SRB 9539).



Fig. 2 The west elevation after stripping, 9.x.16 (photo ref: SRB 0037).



Fig. 3 The west elevation with scaffolding in place, 28.ix.16 (photo ref: SRB 9691).



Fig. 4 The building from the north-west, with scaffolding in place, 28.ix.16 (photo ref: SRB 9696).



Fig. 6 West wall of stair, looking south-west, showing original masonry below, repair above (photo ref: SRB 9742).



Fig. 7 East wall of stair, looking east, showing original rubble masonry throughout (photo ref: SRB 9745).



Fig. 8 Interior north wall, showing stair and doorway, extant niche (right) and remains of blocked niche (left); (photo ref: SRB 9745).



Fig. 9 Interior looking south, showing door in party wall and remains of benches in foreground and rear centre (photo ref: SRB 9563).



Fig. 5 West elevation annotated with the lines of masonry breaks and other details (photo ref: SRB 0037, cropped).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Rob Wilson-North for commissioning the work and for useful discussion; to Matt Harley for assistance with access. Simon Bonvoisin and Shirley Blaylock helped with discussion and references; Lawrence Blaylock assisted with the photography.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SOURCES

Somerset Heritage Centre

A\BAZ/4/16/4 Photographs and negatives of Simonsbath, Exmoor [1897]–1971, comes up on a search s.n 'Simonsbath', and is said to include photographs of White Rock Cottage.

A\DHR/1 managers' minutes of Exmoor School, Simonsbath 1925–45.

C/E/4/303 Exmoor (Simonsbath) School (closed 1970), n.d.

D\DC/w.som/24/460 Box 19 W1044 Alterations and additions to school buildings, Exmoor County School, Simonsbath, 1951–52.

D\R\dul/24/1/217 Extension and new drainage system at Exmoor School, Simonsbath (Somerset County Council), 1952.

DD\X\CND/2/2/6, 51; 2/3/1, 32 Photographs, c.1950s.

Published works

BGS 1982 1:50,000 Geological Map, sheet 293: Barnstaple, Southampton: Ordnance Survey/British Geological Survey.

Burton, R.A. 1994 Simonsbath: The Inside Story of an Exmoor Village, Barnstaple: The Author.

Buxbaum, T. 2014 Icehouses, Oxford: Shire Publications.

Ordnance Survey 1889 1:2500 map sheet Somerset 45.5, first edition surveyed 1888, published 1889.

Ordnance Survey 1903 1:2500 map sheet Somerset 45.5, second edition surveyed 1902, published 1903.

South West Archaeology 2015 White Rock Cottage, Simonsbath, Exmoor,

Somerset: Revised desk-Based Assessment & Historic Building recording (Report no. 151105) South Molton: South West Archaeology Ltd.

Stuart R. Blaylock B.A., Ph.D., F.S.A.

Independent Scholar and Archaeologist

1 Colebrooke Lane

Cullompton

Devon

EX15 1EB

Tel: 01884 33966

E-mail: stuart.blaylock@btinternet.com

21.xi.16.

EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

WHITE ROCK COTTAGE 'GROTTO', SIMONSBATH

CONTEXTUAL REVIEW BY SIMON BONVOISIN

1.0 This review, commissioned by the Exmoor National park Authority, seeks to identify the context and significance of the partly subterranean stone-built structure, termed 'grotto', immediately north of White Rock Cottage, Simonsbath, previously the village school and County Council Field Studies Centre.

1.1 The 2015 Simonsbath Conservation Statement and Masterplan identified policies for the complex of buildings at White Rock Cottage:

6.1iii *Redevelopment of White Rock Cottage should... seek to reveal as much as possible of the original structure... Evidence of John Knight's works is of national significance, and should therefore take priority.*

This review is intended to act as a supplement to the 2015 Conservation Statement.

1.2 Two significant steps forward in understanding the structure occurred in 2016.

1.3 Dr. Stuart Blaylock carried out an analysis of the structural fabric of the 'grotto', and came to a number of conclusions:

- the grotto is of one phase of construction, including slate shelving for storage;
- all the visible alterations can be attributable to repairs. The western opening of the vaults appear to be the result of not completing full repairs to the original west wall which consolidated the vaults;
- the only identified original openings were a small west-facing 'window', and a northern entrance door accessed via steps;
- the repairs may have followed flood damage in 1952 (at the time of the Lynmouth flood).

- 1.4 School archives which could provide some evidence of the repair phase were subsequently reviewed, but were not all accessible, and yielded no additional information.
- 1.5 Secondly, since the Conservation Statement noted that a key risk to the designed landscape is the shortage of primary documentary evidence, given the lack of John Knight's archives, Rob Wilson-North has tracked down the widow of the last of John Knight's descendants in England, who has agreed to deposit the Knight papers, from the 1740s to the 1940s, with the South West Heritage Trust. These fragile documents will take time to conserve and research, but already confirm the building of White Rock Cottage in 1820. These archives may yet confirm more information on the intended purpose and role of the 'grotto'.
- 1.6 The rôle of this review is, therefore, simplified somewhat by the results of the building archaeology, and the reappearance of the Knight family archives. Nevertheless, three possible interpretations of the 'grotto' have been assessed:
- an ornamental grotto in the designed landscape at Ashcombe;
 - an icehouse;
 - a game larder, dairy or other cold store.

These are discussed further below.

2.0 Contextual Interpretation

Landscape Grotto

- 2.1 Grottoes have a long history in garden design, conventionally regarded as originating in Renaissance Italy, and starting in Britain with de Caus's shell room in the basement of the Banqueting Hall in 1623-34, followed by revitalisation in the 1720s and 1730s by Pope (1725 onwards), the Countess of Suffolk at Marble Hill (1730s), Lady Seymour at Marlborough (c.1730), Thomas Goldney (1737-65), the Duchess of Richmond at Goodwood (1739) and later at Stourhead (1748), Painshill (1760) and elsewhere (B. Dix, *Lecture at Marlborough Mound*, 2016).
- 2.2 Hawkstone, with its follies, grottoes and ruins, was laid out by Sir Rowland and Sir Richard Hill, from 1727. By the 1780s, Hawkstone was a major visitor attraction with every form of striking scene and terrific grandeur (Johnson, 1774) but the *Grotto*, *Awful Precipice*, and *St. Francis's Cave* were core

features, excavated out of the natural red sandstone (www.hawkstoneparkfollies.co.uk).

- 2.3 Similar sandstone exposures at Kinver Edge and Wolverley (home of John Knight) were also quarried to form cottages, including a c.1770 artificial cave with a *round arched doorway* and stone-cut bench, adjacent Debdale Lock (LBII) (albeit more of a lock keeper's shelter than a picturesque feature) and Wolverley Pound (LBII) which, like White Rock Cottage grotto, features-headed round arched vaults, albeit as a crudely rock-cut animal pound adjacent to the main road.
- 2.4 Rockhall Cottage (Roaches) Staffordshire (LBII) is probably the most picturesque surviving rock-cut gamekeeper's cottage near Leek, Peak District National Park, albeit of late nineteenth century construction, significantly post-dating John Knight's Simonsbath.



- 2.5 More contemporary with White Rock Cottage, caves at Blaise Castle, Robber's Cave and Butcher's Cave, are simple, rough boulder-built or rock-cut recesses; notably, the cave proposed by Humphry Repton, a very simple, small rock-cut seat, has not survived.



- 2.6 Giant's Cave at Piercefield is a simple but substantial rock-cut cave dating from the 1770s, contrasting with the grotto, lined with quartz, slag and cinders. Both formed key viewpoints on the influential Windcliff walks of the Lower Wye.
- 2.7 John Knight's uncle, Richard Payne Knight, developed a picturesque landscape at Downton Castle from 1772. Again, The Cave is a very simple rock-cut shelter, whereas the approach to the also rock-cut Giant's Cave is concealed by a stone-built wall, as part of a designed circuit.
- 2.8 The Cave at Clovelly is an awesome rock-cut corridor to the sublime sea cliff face. Notably, it has a decorative pebble floor, remains of a bench, and a carefully-cut 'letterbox' viewing slot.
- 2.9 The dingle at Middleton Hall (now the National Botanic Garden of Wales), largely completed by 1815, includes an ornamental waterfall overlooking a small flower garden and footbridge. *The rustic arcade forms a pleasing walk and affords support to the various creepers which form themselves into graceful festoons*, as described by the contemporary text.



Horners Station 10, 1815, Middleton Hall. The footbridge and arcade are now wholly lost, partly due to a landslip on the steep bank, and later flood damage. Only a small patch of puddling clay remains in the bed of the stream as evidence of managing the water flow.



Same view, 2015

While the Middleton Hall landscape is frequently now described as 'Picturesque', it was, in fact, closer to the style of Humphry Repton than Richard Payne Knight, and in many senses, belongs to the later eighteenth century, rather than John Knight's subtle 'Picturesque Farming'.

2.10 By contrast with the above, the White Rock Cottage grotto has:

- no evidence of applied decoration
- no exposed, undressed natural rock
- no evidence that the west-facing vaults were intended to be left open
- no internal seat or bench

While it does have a view directly to the eponymous White Rock in Ashcombe, and the Ordnance Survey first edition shows a footbridge crossing the Ashcombe stream at this point, there is no current evidence that a path circuit came through, or used the 'grotto' as a viewpoint. It is therefore concluded that the White Rock Cottage 'grotto' was not an ornamental landscape cave or grotto.

Icehouse

2.11 Stuart Blaylock has reviewed the possible interpretation of the grotto as an icehouse, but concludes against this due to the 'window' openings and lack of a double door. In addition, no evidence is recorded of effective drainage, fundamental to the success of the traditional inverted cone icehouse, which functions by rapidly draining off at melt water (the resultant use of the latent heat of melting, cooling the remaining ice). The use of slate storage shelves would require periodic opening of the door, further reducing effectiveness as an ice house.

Game Larder or Dairy?

2.12 While no evidence has been recorded of iron hooks or rails needed to create a functioning game store, and Exmoor in 1820 would have yielded little game without sheltering trees, a gamekeeper and stocking with game birds, it could well have functioned as a cold store. The structure is west (or north-west) facing, was planted around with laurels, close to a cold water stream. The little 'window' could have held a zinc screen, gauze, or shutters. The slate shelves could have supported meat in brine, cheeses, butter or cream bowls. As well as being cool in summer, given the winter of 1820, the partially subterranean structure would have been needed to

protect the dairy produce, and any fermentation, from freezing. Slate shelving is not unusual in such cool stores, and is commonly used in West Country farmhouses of the period.

- 2.13 At Buckland Abbey, a spring house is fitted with a slate shelf, presumably to conserve or cool clotted cream, possibly planned by William Marshall, the agricultural improver while at Buckland in 1794. Notably and regrettably, Marshall regarded registering the *minutiae of the Dairy Management as a tedious and irksome task*, so we have no record of how it was used.



Spring House Cool Store at Buckland Abbey



Spring House Cool Store at Buckland Abbey

2.14 This is clearly a far cry from the ornamental Lady's dairy of the eighteenth century stately home, but does bear some comparison with the alfresco larder around the spring head grotto at Mill Wood, Halswell; somewhere safe and cool to store provisions and a picnic, managed and operated by staff, but close to the owner's polite landscape.



Mill Wood, Halswell

2.15 The details of the White Rock Cottage grotto - the round-headed arch, use of quarried local shillet, functional character, location and modest architecture - are all hallmarks of John Knight's Simonsbath venture.

2.16 It is recommended that an open-minded, conservative approach should continue to be adopted for the White Rock Cottage 'grotto'. Repairs and stabilisation can be informed by the building archaeology. Further documentary research in the Knight archives may assist in interpretation, supported by further contextual research into game larders, dairies and cold stores of the early nineteenth century, including Highland and Midland examples.

3.0 Towards a Conservation Statement

3.1 *Significance*

The White Rock Cottage Cold Store is considered to be an unusual and

striking survival from John Knight's Simonsbath, probably built around 1820 as a secure larder for the family and estate staff, visiting, living and working in what was then a remote location. It reflects the modest character and distinctive style of Knight's 'picturesque farming' at Simonsbath, carefully located and largely concealed to avoid intrusion into the picturesque landscape. Although heavily repaired after probable flood damage, it retains good archaeological evidence of much of its original, unaltered form, and there is scope for interpretative reuse, and integration of the west elevation with a restored Ashcombe 'circuit'.

3.2 *Vulnerability*

The exceptional flood of 1952 is likely to have caused the damage identified in the building archaeology analysis. There are some outstanding repairs to consolidate the vaulted roof.

The structure poses a potential risk to reckless trespassers; further repairs should reduce this risk by infilling the breached west wall.

The cold store is at low risk of vandalism or misuse if it is not managed, secured and used for interpretation or other appropriate use, such as a bat roost.

Reinstatement of the historic covering of the vaults may require reapplication of puddling clay, and management of evergreen planting over the vaults, to avoid excessive moisture or root penetration.

There remains some uncertainty about the potential ornamental role of the west elevation, facing onto Ashcombe. The vault arch masonry would have been visible, but three questions remain:

- while there is no evidence of a lower bridge-level entrance (slate shelves across each vault), it seems likely that each vault was served by a small window. Did these windows have small round arched heads?
- despite later flood damage, is there any fragmentary archaeological evidence west of the 'grotto' for a seat, abutment for a footbridge, built cascade in the stream, or other ornamentation, which may help to interpret the place of the external structure in the designed landscape?
- as a cold store, there should have been a flood level drain. Has this been concealed by later repairs?

These questions can only be answered by further documentary finds, or by

targeted, small scale archaeological investigations.

3.3 *Policy*

Seek funding to stabilise the cold store structure based on the building archaeology, and carry out further targeted site investigations and documentary research in the John Knight archives. Seek to interpret the cold store by careful detailing of evergreen planting, secure shutters and a door, a handrail to the steps, limewash to the interior, and 'dressing' to reflect the historic use. Re-use as a winter bat roost may also be feasible. Further investigations are needed to inform the detailing of the external treatment to the west elevation, possibly involving footbridge design and a seat.