

Great Expectations: Approaches to Exmoor Country Houses

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The landscape of Exmoor National Park is dramatic, sublime and secretive. Those who built great houses there, especially during the nineteenth century, made imaginative use of the topography and other features in designing the routes - the drives - which led to them.

Approaches to great houses have usually played a central role in how buildings and their designed landscapes are perceived. They also often form an integral part of the designed landscape itself, especially when the house sits within ornamental parkland. The visitor experiences the first glimpse of a house and its setting from horseback or through a carriage window - views are contrived to create an initial effect, sometimes using water, or often using careful plantings to frame the view. Similarly, the way a house and its setting are shown off can reveal how the owner wished his possessions to be viewed. For me this aspect of designed landscapes can be very personal and insightful. It provides a very intimate perspective on the intentions of their creators.

I would like to whet your appetites for looking anew at the approaches to houses by taking you to three places on Exmoor where the experience of the original visitor can still be felt today: Tarr Steps, Glenthorne (Countisbury) and Simonsbath. Coincidentally, all of the houses date from between 1820 and 1840 and their approaches are assumed to be contemporary with the houses (although one is currently not absolutely dated). They reveal a number of factors including the aspirations of their creators, views of the past and a heightened sense of the picturesque, as well as impressive engineering solutions to specific topographic problems. One of the most compelling aspects is that two of the three are not now obviously part of any designed landscape and would not even be easily recognised as part of an elaborate approach.

In 1818 the Royal Forest of Exmoor was enclosed by Act of Parliament and purchased by John Knight (1765-1850) who set about the 'improvement' of the moorland for farming. At the centre of his great new estate he planned a mansion. The history of this house and its setting has recently been researched by Caroline Garrett (report at Exmoor National Park Authority). The house which stood in Simonsbath was built in the gothic style, but was never completed, and has now almost entirely vanished. It occupied a shelf above the sweeping valley of the River Barle and there is some evidence that the valley sides were to be clothed with plantations. John Knight had been brought up with the picturesque in a family which included Richard Payne Knight (1750-1824), a central figure in the Picturesque Movement. Simonsbath lies in the middle of the moor and was approached from Lynton to the north where a tower stands beside the road, formerly perhaps part of a more elaborate mock ruin marking the entrance to the estate. To the south, the old packhorse route from South Molton approached the river crossing at Simonsbath over generally level, wild, open moorland. John Knight did away with this, and instead

built a metalled road which clung to the precipitous slopes of the valley side winding in and out of the combes on a spectacular descent to the river at Simonsbath. This road is one of the most scenic on Exmoor and affords a majestic view along the valley of the River Barle. It was clearly Knight's intent to create in his visitors a sense of awe in nature before they even arrived at his great house...a sense still palpable to us today.

Tarr Steps is one of the most visited sites on Exmoor. The 'ancient' clapper bridge straddles the beautiful River Barle set in a valley of ancient broadleaf woodlands (now a National Nature Reserve). On one side of the bridge is a former farmhouse whilst on the other, set a way back from the river is the former rectory of Hawkridge parish. The rectory seems to have been built by George Jekyll, rector from 1834 to 1843, and has recently been studied by Mary Siraut (Somerset V.C.H. County Editor) for the new book, *Exmoor: the Making of an English Upland*.¹ The rectory is surrounded by formal gardens. In the wooded valley of the Barle is a leat or water-carrying channel which can be traced for over a kilometre back along the valley side until it reaches a tributary stream of the Barle. The leat was recorded by Richard McDonnell whilst carrying out an archaeological survey in the woodlands in 2002; but he also noticed that when the leat reaches outcrops of rock close to Tarr Steps it spills over the outcrops in two cascades. It is clear that these elaborate water features were designed to enhance the setting of Tarr Steps, and it seems most likely that this was done as part of an impressive approach to the rectory from the east; but the date of the water features and the identity of their creator remain a mystery.



The clapper bridge at Tarr Steps (Rob Wilson-North)



Close-up of the clapper bridge (Rob Wilson-North)

Along Exmoor's coastline are a series of mainly nineteenth century estates. By far the most complete of them is Glenthorne on the county boundary between Devon and Somerset and a little to the east of Lynmouth; the inspiration of Walter Stevenson Halliday. The house was completed in 1831, but the estate took much longer to accumulate and required the cajoling of local landowners to part with their farms, until finally all the parish of Countisbury belonged to Glenthorne. At its heart is a mansion perched remarkably and romantically on a ledge just above the Bristol Channel. It is described by Ursula Halliday in

her book *Glenthorne: a Most Romantic Place* in terms of a much loved relative some of whose well-known attributes continue to niggle despite their familiarity:

*Built of pinkish-grey local stone, its complicated mass of ridges and ornamental chimneys seem to rise in all directions, making it look far larger than it is. It backs up against the high hill so that, if you crane your neck and look up through the back windows, you see the roots of trees on a level with the roofs, but the big front windows and the terrace look straight over thirteen miles of sea to the cliffs and mountains of Wales. On both sides of the house, the trees slide down the hills to reddish cliffs and, on clear nights, the Nash Light [Nash Point lighthouse on the South Wales coast] shines on the walls and the moon shines over the sea through the branches of an old pine. It has inspired countless poems, some of them very bad, but in winter the sun never rises high enough to shine over the hills and down to the house and, although undeniably grand and very beautiful, it can then be extremely gloomy.*²

The house is surrounded by appurtenances such as a walled garden, ice house, arboretum and bath house (which no longer survives) and of course the well planted hillsides all around. Sitting at the foot of a massive thousand feet high cliff, its approach is a remarkable engineering feat bringing the visitor from high heather moorland to near sea level in almost three breath-taking miles. Even Pevsner remarked on the house's setting '...in a wonderfully sheltered cove far below the Lynton-Porlock road and reached on a private road with serpentines as daring as the Alps'.³



The entrance gate-piers at Glenthorne (Rob Wilson-North)

Although one of the least visited National Parks, modern visitors to Exmoor experience its more well-known country houses and designed landscapes every day, such as Dunster Castle, Arlington Court, Nettlecombe Court and Combe Sydenham. The examples I have given you here are perhaps more compelling: they are both secretive and subtle. It is perhaps not a coincidence that from one of them is seen one of the most famous 'picture-postcard views' of the moor - looking along the Barle valley at Simonsbath, whilst the other, Tarr Steps is one of Exmoor's most visited locations. So it would be true to say that these 'drives' - nearly two hundred years on - continue to contribute to the special landscape of the National Park.

References

1. Mary Siraut, *Exmoor: the Making of an English Upland*, Stroud, 2009.
2. Ursula Halliday, *Glenthorne: a Most Romantic Place*, Dulverton, 1995, p. 23.
3. Bridget Cherry and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Devon*, London, revised 1989, p. 292.