

## Deserted Farmsteads



Figure A In 1910 Higher Prescott cottage was in fair condition with a slate roof. It comprised a kitchen, pantry, larder and two bedrooms, with a dilapidated wood house, a colt shed with loft above, and a pigsty. Later in the 20th century it was abandoned.



Figure B Surveying the remains of Higher Prescott. It was a barton and 33 acres in 1839 but a small house must have been built shortly afterwards. In 1851 it was a dairy and by 1871 it was a labourer's cottage with only three habitable rooms.

One of the characteristic features of Exmoor's landscape are deserted farmsteads, which survive into the 21st century as ruined buildings, tumbledown walls and earthworks, although some can now only be traced using historic maps. There are many reasons why farmsteads become abandoned. In southern Exmoor, as elsewhere, the pressure for larger farms led to the amalgamation of farmsteads in the 19th century. Other farms found themselves cut off from the common moorland, on which they depended by enclosure and land improvement. Sometimes, following amalgamation, one house would continue to be used to house labourers and its farm buildings might be used for a while as a secondary farmyard.

Most desertions took place in the later 19th and 20th centuries, but some were earlier. Innercombe in Exford had a decayed house by 1827. Yellowcombe farm in Winsford, recorded in 1786, was cottages shared between two neighbouring farms in 1839 and four cottages in 1871. A pair of cottages was later converted into a single dwelling, but the rest of the site is derelict.

A small unnamed farm on Holmoor at Exford was abandoned c. 1840 as were Castle Farm in Hawkrigde and Road Farm at Winsford. Other small farms became agricultural labourers' cottages about the same date,

including Slade in Hawkrigde. Riscombe in Winsford was two farms in 1839, but shortly afterwards became two labourers' cottage. The same fate befell Mousehanger in Winsford, occupied by the 13th century. By 1786 it was without a house, but a farmstead was built before 1839. By 1841 it had been divided into two cottages. The labourers probably worked at neighbouring Lower Leigh farm, which may have utilised the farm buildings. Mousehanger became a smallholding in the 20th century and was finally abandoned when the occupants died in the 1950s, surviving in a ruinous state as recently as 1985.

Amalgamation of neighbouring farms also began in the 1840s. At Staddon in Winsford there were three farms with different owners in 1839, Little, Middle and Higher. The first may have been known as West Staddon in 1689 when it had a new barn, formerly a bakehouse. By the mid-19th century they were amalgamated as Higher, later Great Staddon (about two hundred acres), but the buildings at Little Staddon remained in use for the rest of the century. Such amalgamations gathered pace in the late 19th century, making several farmsteads redundant. The practice of having labourers living in the farm probably reduced the need for cottages, so many farmhouses were demolished for their materials or allowed to fall into ruin.