

Chapter 1

Introduction

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This publication presents the results of excavation, in 2008, of an early medieval iron production site and later medieval pottery, at Churchills Farm, Hemyock, a medieval village in the northern part of the Blackdown Hills in Devon. The stratigraphic account is presented in chronological order, though archaeological features and deposits are subsequently discussed by type, and this is followed by the specialist analysis of iron working remains and ceramic technology, as well as associated environmental evidence. A concluding chapter will review the broader landscape setting of these medieval industries, reviewing them each in a local, regional and national context. First, however, an introductory section will familiarise the reader with the location of the site, circumstances of the excavation, and the archaeological and historical background.

Situation and Topography

The village of Hemyock is located in the northwest of the Blackdown Hills in Devon, close to the border with Somerset. The medieval village was founded on the southern side of the River Culm, above a crossing of it, roughly halfway between Dunkeswell (Devon) and Wellington (Somerset). It is one of a network of known medieval settlements that follow the course of the Culm Valley northeast of Cullompton. The larger market towns of Tiverton and Taunton lay 20 km west and 14 km northeast, respectively. The excavation presented here took place on the grounds of Churchills Farm, which lay on the southern edge of Hemyock, adjacent to the High Street, and is now occupied by the modern housing development known as Churchills Rise (Figure 1). The site (SX 1364 1312) is positioned 130 m south of the parish church St Mary's, and 150 m south-southeast of Hemyock Castle which, as the manorial centre, was granted a licence to crenellate with walls of stone and flint in AD 1380.

The site occupies a gentle north-facing slope which extends from 145 m in the north to 150 m above Ordnance Survey datum in the south. Fields of pasture lay to the south and west, the latter delimited by a minor tributary of the River Culm, 160 m west of the site. The area is underlain by Triassic Mercia Mudstone (formerly known as Keuper Marl) and the resultant soils derived from this geology are of the Whimble 3 association, which are described as 'slowly permeable seasonally waterlogged fine loamy and fine silty over clayey soils' (Soil Survey of England and Wales 1983). Based on the inclement weather and resultant site conditions experienced in March and April 2008 this soil description seems quite accurate. In a broader setting,

this geological and pedological sequence is part of the wider landscape of Upper Greensand plateaux within which nodular iron ore occurs.

Discovery and Investigation

A staged programme of archaeological investigation and recording was undertaken by the now defunct Exeter Archaeology in 2008 on behalf of Somerfield Homes Ltd, in advance of the construction of 23 houses, with associated access road, parking and garages, at Churchills Farm. The development took place adjacent to the extant farmhouse on ground formerly occupied by farm buildings and concrete yard surfaces. The work was required by Mid Devon District Council, following the advice of Devon County Council Historic Environment Service, as a condition of the grant of planning permission for the development. The planning reference for change of use and construction of Churchills Rise is 07/01005/MFUL.

An initial evaluation exercise was begun in February 2008, comprising the machine excavation of seven 1.8 m-wide trenches, representing five percent of the proposed development area (Figure 2). Whilst most trenches revealed a sequence of little interest – resulting from modern building terraces infilled with recent levelling deposits – two revealed archaeological features, including pits yielding late medieval pottery wasters and concentrations of iron slag. Accordingly, a new mitigation strategy was implemented and a programme of 'strip, map and sample' commenced immediately. The methodology allowed for the monitoring of all groundworks across the development area, but attention was focussed on those parts where heavy truncation was not already evident.

What follows describes the extent of industrial remains eventually recorded at Churchills Farm – and such was the size of the post-excavation task that analysis and the preparation of this publication was funded by Historic England (then English Heritage), to whom the authors are very grateful.

Historical Background

The earliest record for Hemyock is found in Domesday, which indicates that it was perhaps a long-held Crown lordship. Prior to 1066 it was held by Edward the Confessor and remained as part of the Royal estates after 1086. From the tenth century onwards, the importance of the royal manor is indicated by it being the centre for the

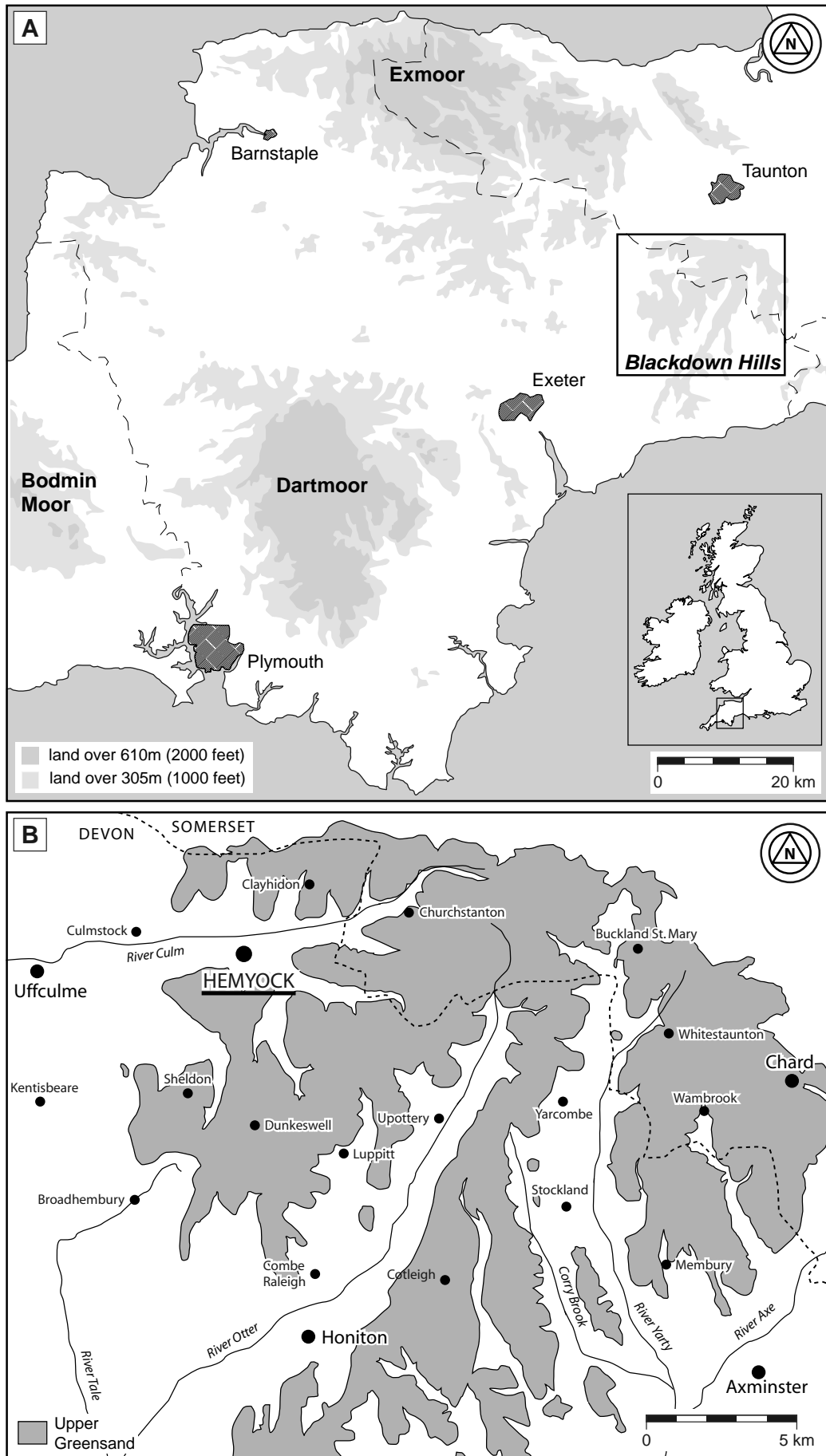


Figure 1. A: General location of the Blackdown Hills in South West England, and B: Location of Hemyock in relation to the settlement, rivers and greensand ridges and plateaux of the Blackdown Hills.



Figure 2. View northeast of the Churchills Farm site following demolition of the agricultural buildings and the machine excavation of archaeological evaluation trenches in 2008.

hundred of Hemyock. Despite earlier Anglo-Saxon land charters for this region being known (Finberg 1953; Hooke 1994), none make reference to Hemyock itself. Nearby, and within the hundred of Hemyock, charters record royal land grants in the adjacent manors of Culmstock and Culm Davy from King Cynewulf in the eighth century, King Egbert in the ninth century, and King Athelstan in the tenth century. Though a too literal reading of this distribution and chronology is unwise, there are perhaps indications that land within Hemyock was deliberately retained within the royal demesne.

At the time of Domesday, Hemyock is recorded as *Hamihoc*, with the next known iteration being *Hamioc* in 1204. The place-name is suggested to be the name of a stream derived from the British *Samiāco*, given to a brook which flowed all year (*samo-*, ‘summer’, never-dry) (Gover *et al.* 1932, 616).

The earliest available cartographic source for Hemyock is the tithe map of 1843, which shows Churchills Farm and three irregular-shaped fields between the High Street and stream (Figure 3). The First Edition Ordnance Survey map dated 1889 shows little change, though the southern end of the Churchills Farm building range has been extended with an east-west range. A small enclosure was created immediately southwest of these buildings. In the next fifteen years, the Second Edition map dated 1904-5 shows that the Churchills Farm building range was extended further, and a boundary created to divide it from fields to the south. This new boundary linked with the small enclosure and abutted the High Street. Both maps show that the fields immediately south of the farmhouse, covering the area excavated in 2008, were planted as orchard. By the 1960s, when the National Grid First Edition map was published, detached buildings had been built in the farmyard, opposite the farmhouse, and

part of the adjacent field annexed for an agricultural building. This, and subsequent developments in the latter part of the twentieth century saw land to the south and southwest of the farmhouse being either built on, terraced, or turned over to hardstanding, and the truncation that occurred was evident during the evaluation phase of the fieldwork, where only two of eight trenches revealed *in situ* remains.

Archaeological Background

Exeter Archaeology’s excavations at Churchills Farm in 2008 were not the first in the village, but the discoveries made there have prompted a surge in development-led investigations (Figure 4). The remains of iron production have long been recognised across the Blackdown Hills, since at least the nineteenth century, with an interim summary of the Blackdown Hills Ironworking Project (a Devon County Council/ Exeter Archaeology initiative begun in the 1990s and whose activity tailed off in the same decade) remaining the best summary of the evidence which shall not be repeated at length (Griffith and Weddell 1996). Finds of slag have been made across the region, often by local farmers, with some very significant slag mounds known – one such mound in Hemyock parish was apparently huge – 30 m long, 12 m wide and up to 3 m high – but was levelled in the twentieth century. This mound alone might have contained up to 1000 tonnes of slag, and demonstrates the truly industrial scale of production in the vicinity of the village (Crew 1993). Stuart Blaylock identified slag within the walls of the fourteenth-century Hemyock Castle, which hinted at a date for production of iron here (Blaylock 1989; Griffith and Weddell 1996, 31) but, with the benefit of the work at Churchills Farm, we know that there were pre-Conquest furnaces operating nearby and that it is possible that the slag used in the castle was already of significant antiquity. The present authors

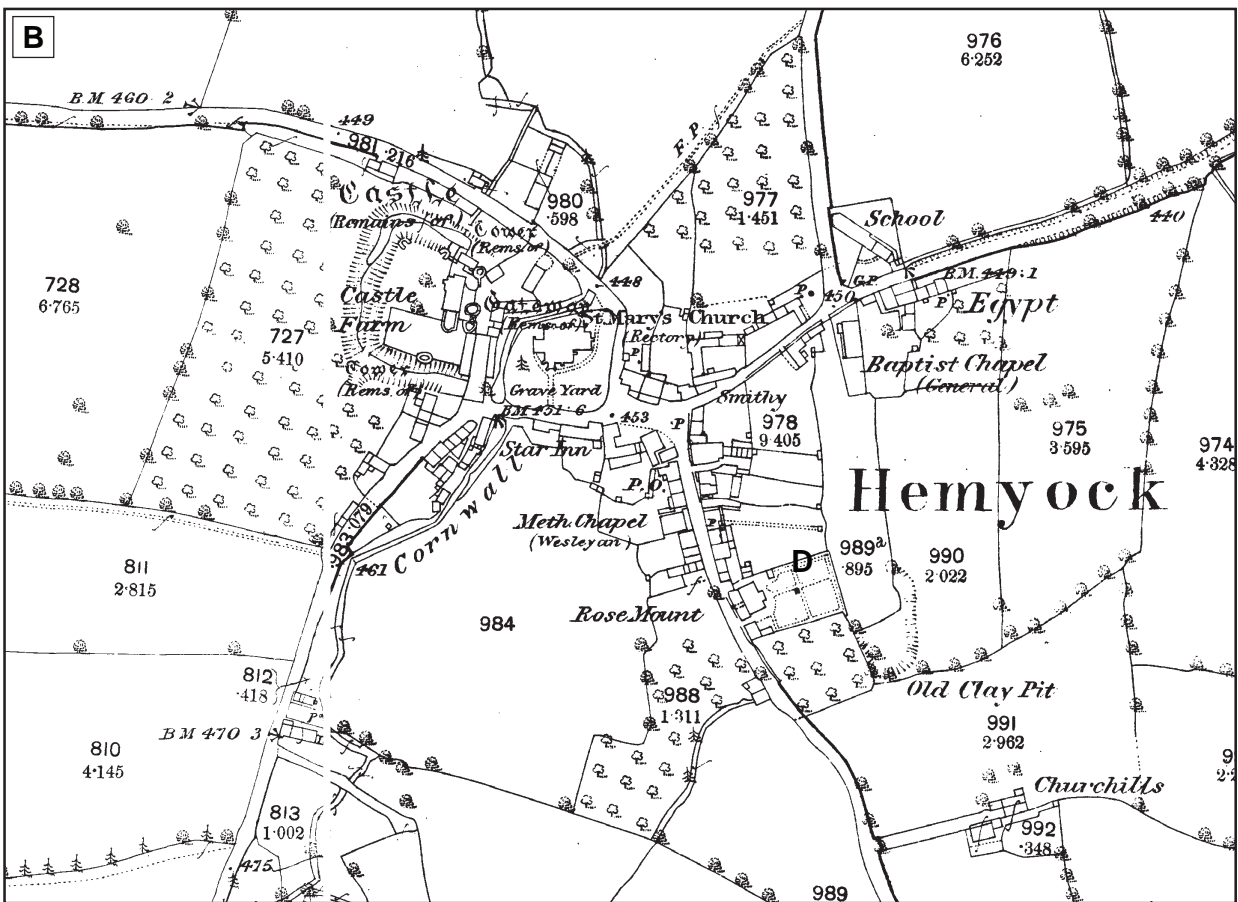


Figure 3 [left]. Historic map sequence of Hemyock village. A: 1843 tithe map; B: 1889 OS First Edition 25 inches to 1 mile (© Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2016). All rights reserved. (1889)).

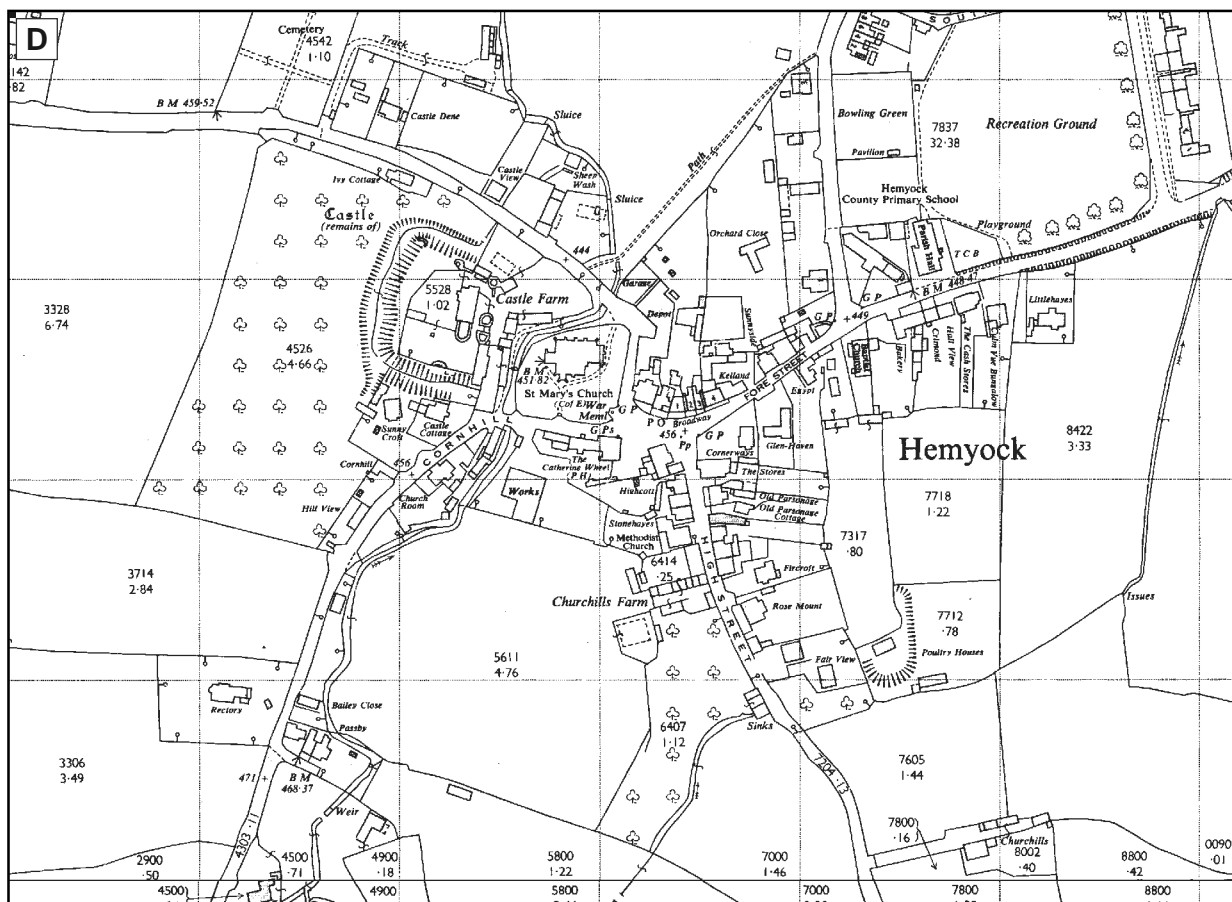
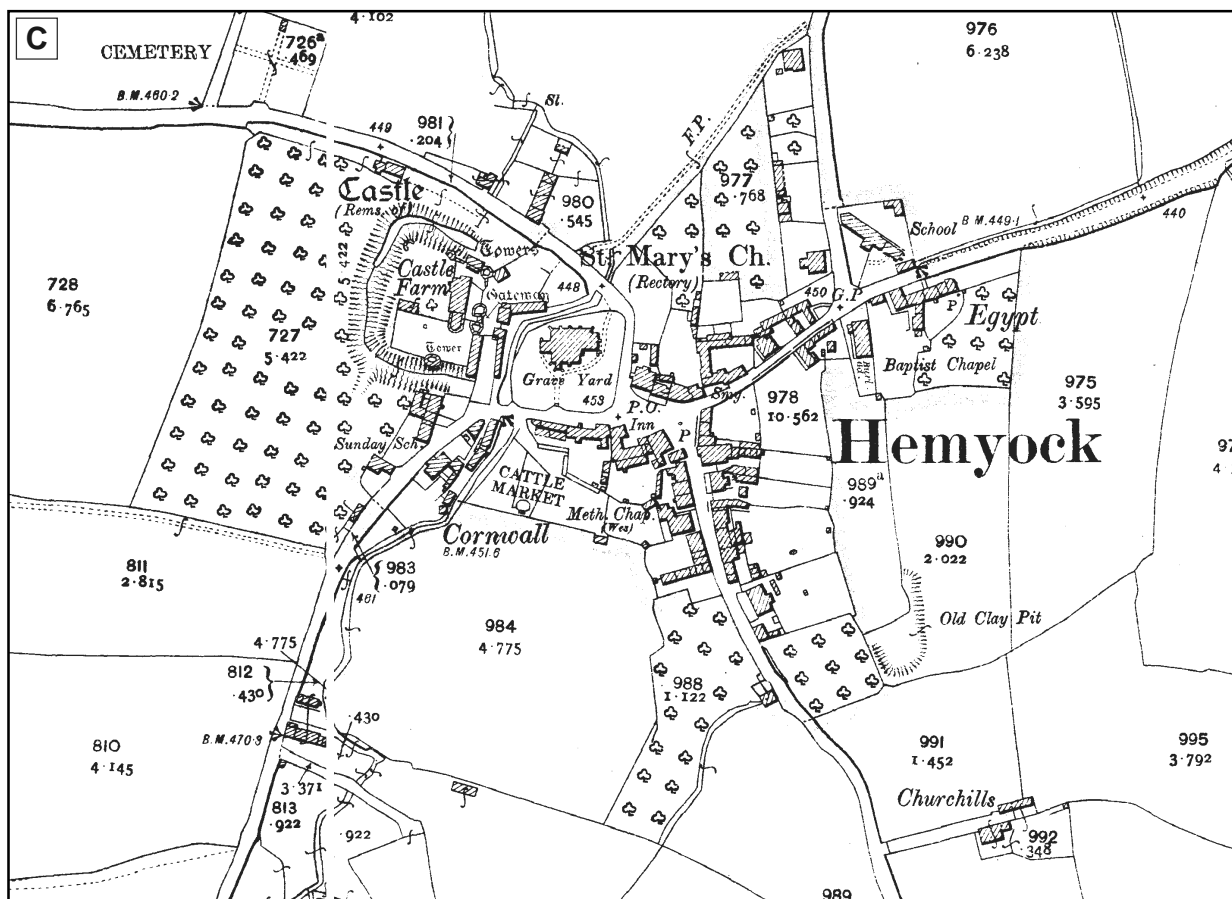


Figure 3 [right]. Historic map sequence of Hemyock village. C: 1904-5 OS First Revision 25 inches to 1 mile; D: 1964 OS First Edition National Grid 1:2500 (© Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2016). All rights reserved. (1904-5; 1964)).

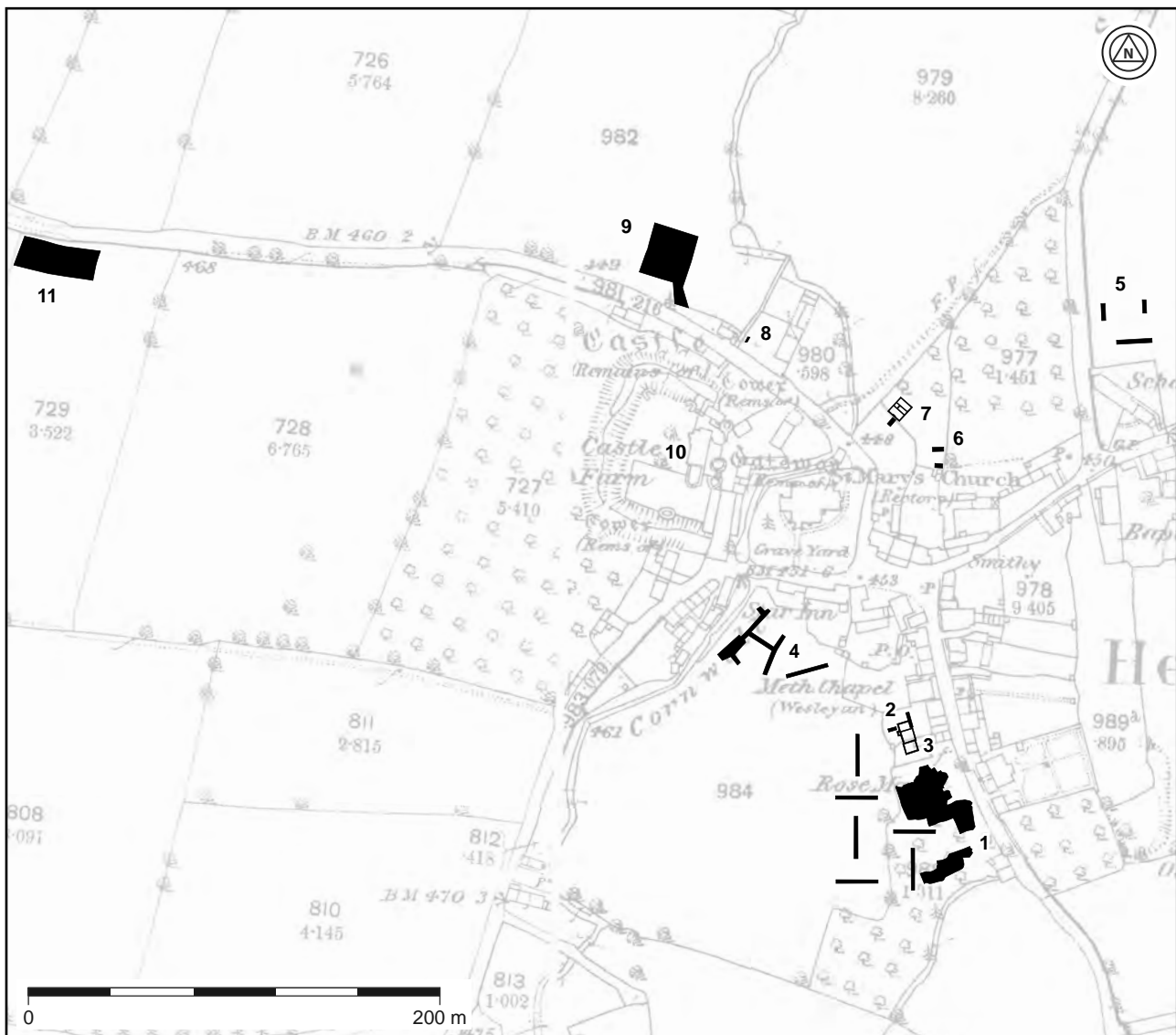


Figure 4. Location of all known archaeological interventions within Hemyock shown against a backdrop of the late nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey First Edition 25 inches to 1 mile mapping (© Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Limited (2016). All rights reserved. (1889)). 1: Churchills Farm 2008 (this volume); 2: Land to rear of Churchills Farm (Hughes 2009a); 3: 12a Churchills Rise (Clarke 2012); 4: Former Halls Engineering Works (Exeter Archaeology 2005); 5: Old Tennis Courts Site (Hughes 2011); 6: 3 Broadway (Hughes 2009b); 7: Hemyock Motors Workshop (Jones and Hughes 2013); 8: Castle View (Austin 2011); 9: Hemyock Castle (Blaylock 1989); 10: Culmstock Road (Rainbird and Young 2015).

have also noted similar slag within the Norman tower of St Mary's church.

In October 2004 an archaeological evaluation was undertaken on the site of the former Halls Engineering Works, on the south side of St Mary's and within 50 m of Churchills Farm. It revealed numerous small ditches, some of which contained fragmented iron slag, though dating evidence was scant. In trench 5, a significant spread of industrial waste contained within a shallow depression was cut by three such ditches, suggesting that any major production phase may have predated subsequent land division (Exeter Archaeology 2005). In 2007/8 a programme of archaeological work, culminating in an open area excavation, was undertaken on land east of Castle Dene, to the north of Hemyock Castle alongside Culmstock Road (Allum 2009; South West Archaeology

2005; Tabor 2010), which identified traces of a medieval building oriented parallel with Culmstock Road, with a trackway demarcated by flanking ditches to the rear. The pottery recovered, which is of chert-tempered type and of a broad tenth- to fourteenth-century date, was suggested to indicate occupation later in that chronological range, between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. The northern part of the site, including the building, was sealed by a dark humic deposit containing iron smelting slag and similar medieval pottery, sealed by a remnant clay bank, the latter of which was interpreted as a means by which Hemyock Castle further imposed itself on the landscape (Tabor 2010, 205). There was no evidence for *in situ* industrial processes.

No further investigations are known of until 2008, with the excavations at Churchills Farm revealing industrial-scale iron and pottery production. Whilst the archaeological

remains from this site are only now being published, the discoveries have prompted Devon County Council's Historic Environment Service to attach conditions to most planning applications within the village which, as a result, have provided further archaeological observations on the periphery of the former Churchills Farm (Hughes 2009a; Clarke 2012) and in the centre of the village (3 Broadway: Hughes 2009b; Station Road: Hughes 2011; Castle View, Culmstock Road: Austin 2011; Hemyock Motors: Jones and Hughes 2013), with those at 3 Broadway and Hemyock Motors yielding further finds of iron slag and early post-medieval 'Hemyock' pottery. The most recent work, at Culmstock Road (Rainbird and Young 2015), has provided interesting comparative information with regard to iron production in Hemyock and is discussed at greater length later in this volume. Excavation at the site, located 350 m west of St Mary's church, and so outside of the historic village core, revealed a large denuded slag mound sealing *in situ* remains of slag-pit furnaces and ore roasting pits, with two radiocarbon dates suggesting production in the late eighth century, some 100 years before smelting is known at Churchills Farm.