Farms, Villages and Towns

Introduction
Agriculture has always been the mainstay of the Cornish economy. Towns only begin to appear in any numbers after the twelfth century. Before then the landscape was dotted with farming settlements; some were isolated farmsteads but most were small villages or hamlets. We have mapped numerous ancient farms from aerial photos, the oldest of which were built around four thousand years ago.

The first farming villages that we have mapped date from the Middle Bronze Age (about 1800 BC). They are known as open settlements; groups of round houses set amid fields. The early farmers who lived in these settlements grew crops and kept cattle, sheep and goats.

Round houses were made of stone or wood and had roofs of turf or thatch. They were the standard form of dwelling in the Bronze Age, throughout the Iron Age and into the Roman period; a time span of two thousand years or more. Open settlements were built throughout this time but around 400 BC they were joined in the landscape by a new type of settlement.

These new settlements are known as rounds and consist of a small number of round houses enclosed by a substantial bank and ditch. There is debate among archaeologists about why these settlements were enclosed; for protection? To signify status? Whatever the reason rounds were essentially farming settlements whose inhabitants grew crops, kept livestock and practised small scale metalworking.

An enclosed settlement or ‘round’ at Roskymer, Mawgan-in-Meneage. Rounds date from the late Iron Age and Romano-British periods. They were farming hamlets or villages, typically containing several houses and ancillary buildings within the enclosure. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service
Prehistoric farms and villages were accompanied by extensive field systems. Other parts of the countryside were left as open downland or moorland for use as grazing land. Reorganisation of the fields was carried out on more than one occasion, and widespread organisation of farming land indicates the existence of a level of power or authority beyond that of each individual village.

During the Iron Age this authority would have been based in the hillforts and cliff castles which are distributed throughout the county. Hillforts are large areas high on hill slopes or hill tops which were enclosed by massive lines of bank and ditch; cliff castles were coastal headlands enclosed in a similar way. We are uncertain whether the authority symbolised by these impressive landmarks belonged to powerful families or to the community as a whole represented by a council of elders.

The hillfort at Prideaux Rings, St Blazey. The outline of the bank defining the site is marked by a ring of trees. Two outer banks are partially picked out by trees. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Hillforts had fallen out of use by the Romano-British period, but rounds continued to be built. In fact during the Roman period the settlement pattern changed little from that of the Iron Age. One development was the appearance of courtyard house settlements in West Penwith and the Isles of Scilly. These were open settlements containing large stone built oval houses with several rooms arranged around a central courtyard.

Between the fifth century and the Norman Conquest of 1066 rounds fell out of use. By 1066 the typical medieval hamlet, consisting of rectangular farmhouses arranged around a shared farmyard, had developed. Few settlements from the period of transition have been excavated and we know little about how this development took place. Analysis of the medieval names of many Cornish farms implies that some
medieval hamlets were built on the site of former rounds; in other cases a round would be abandoned and a new hamlet established close by.

Medieval farms were surrounded by extensive fields which were divided into long narrow strips. Over much of Cornwall many farms have remained in use and the farmhouses we see today are on the site of medieval hamlets. At a later date the characteristic strip fields were enclosed by hedges but their imprint can still be seen in today’s field pattern.

![A strip field system Boscastle, known as Forrabury Stitches, which is still in operation today. The landscape of much of medieval Cornwall would have looked similar to this. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service](image)

As the population and the economy grew so larger settlements developed and by the fourteenth century Cornwall was served by a network of small towns. Some grew up around early Christian centres, some developed as coastal or riverside trading ports, and others were established along major roads or at the crossing points of rivers.

**The First Farms**

Traditionally the Neolithic period, from six to four thousand years ago, is seen as the time when woodland clearance, increased domestication of animals and the beginnings of crop cultivation gradually led to the adoption of agriculture and the development of permanent settlements. In Cornwall, however, tombs and other ceremonial monuments are the principal archaeological features surviving from this period; there is very little evidence for farms or fields during this time.

From around 1500 BC onwards, during the Middle Bronze Age, farming settlements, rather than tombs, become the predominant features in the landscape. These early settlements consist of groups of houses and other structures usually set amid fields enclosed by earth or stone banks. Archaeologists call these sorts of sites ‘open’ or ‘unenclosed’ settlements, distinguishing them from ‘enclosed’ settlements bounded
by a substantial bank and ditch. Open settlements were being built and occupied from the Bronze Age, right through the Iron Age (800 BC – AD 43) and into the Romano-British period.

**Round Houses**

Much of the evidence for Cornwall's earliest farms comes from the upland landscape; Bodmin Moor, the Lizard Peninsula and West Penwith. In lowland Cornwall traces of prehistoric settlement have been ploughed down and are no longer visible on the ground. But in places on the Cornish moors the abandoned settlements are still there, ravaged only by time.

The ancient farmhouses are circular, built with a stone wall which would have supported a conical timber and thatched roof. In some houses the entrances are simple gaps in the wall; others had tall upright stones for doorways; some entrances were protected from the Cornish weather by a short porch. Round houses, as they are known, remained the standard type of dwelling from the Middle Bronze Age, through the Iron Age and into the Romano-British period; from roughly 1500 BC until AD 400. The houses were grouped in clusters (usually fewer than twenty houses) forming small rural hamlets or villages.

*A reconstruction of a prehistoric round house near Chacewater. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

Round houses were substantial structures, averaging between five and ten metres in diameter, which gives an internal area of between 20 and 80 square metres. Their walls are generally a metre or more wide and often faced on the inside by large upright stones. Archaeologists used to refer to these houses as 'hut circles' but the building of replicas, based on excavation evidence, has led to a truer appreciation of their scale and sophistication.

Round houses usually contained one or more hearths. We do not know whether there were smoke-holes in the roof; some experimental reconstructions show that these can create drafts posing a fire risk to the thatch. Excavations of round houses have revealed information about the way the internal space was organised, such as wooden stakes to make partitions, and wooden supports for benches and beds around the walls.
Round houses in lowland Cornwall were made mainly with wood rather than stone, but the essential design was similar to those in the moorland. This would require the felling of young and mature trees to provide roof supports, and the roof itself would call for large quantities of rushes or turf.

**Bronze Age Settlement on Bodmin Moor**

In the granite uplands the use of stone in building and remoteness from modern intensive agricultural practice has resulted in the remarkable survival of the early farming landscape. This is especially the case on Bodmin Moor where the remains of roughly 200 Bronze Age settlements have been found. Most appear to have been abandoned around three thousand years ago due to deterioration in the climate at that time.

Archaeological survey of the relict Bronze Age landscape on Bodmin Moor illustrates how early farming was organised. The first fields were small and curvilinear and the field patterns developed piecemeal, with new fields added to existing ones as the settlement expanded. Archaeologists use the term 'accreted' to describe this kind of field system.

The field boundaries consist of low banks of stones and boulders; these fields were designed to be stock-proof. Some fields contain heaps of loose stones which have been cleared from the soil, and at the lower end of some are banks of earth known as 'lynchets' formed by the slippage downhill of soil loosened during cultivation. All of this tells us that crops were cultivated in these fields.

Lanes lead from between the fields to the open moor beyond, which was used as grazing land for livestock. So these early farmers lived in loosely defined hamlets, cultivating the land and growing crops in small irregular-shaped fields, maintaining herds and flocks and sharing communal grazing land with neighbouring settlements.

*The Bronze Age settlement at Leskernick, Altarnum, is one of the best-preserved examples of an upland farming hamlet with an accreted field system. The settlement developed over a long period of time, with new houses and fields added as the hamlet grew. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*
Reorganising the landscape

On Bodmin Moor settlements with cultivated fields are found mainly around the upland edge whilst the open moorland beyond was used for grazing. Studies of vegetation history suggest that by the Middle Bronze Age much of the heart of the moor was an open landscape – just like today. Maintaining this treeless vegetation cover would have required a very large number of grazing animals.

The need to define and control the use of grazing land led to large-scale reorganisation of the landscape around 1500 BC. Long parallel field boundaries were laid out, ending in boundary banks dividing up the pasture into large blocks. These are known as 'coaxial' field systems. New settlements consisted of groups of round houses scattered throughout the fields, and all of the higher ground beyond the fields was used as common grazing land.

Archaeologists see the establishing of these major land divisions as a response to increased pressure on available resources. Clearly similar pressures were arising throughout Cornwall as traces of coaxial field systems have been recognised in the Lizard Peninsula, West Penwith and elsewhere.

Round houses set amid rectilinear fields at Clitters, North Moor. The long parallel field banks visible below the settlement are part of a Middle Bronze Age coaxial field system. This type of field layout has been recognised in other parts of Cornwall and may have been widespread. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Herds and Flocks

Round house settlements in the open parts of Bodmin Moor – the common grazing land - differ from those around its edges. They have no associated fields or just small enclosures. Given their location and lack of fields, these settlements must have had a specialist pastoral function, linked with maintenance of the herds. Some contain substantial well-built houses and were probably permanently occupied, maybe having a co-dependent relationship with the moorland edge communities. Others have small roughly built houses and were probably temporary or summer accommodation for people from the moorland edge taking their cattle and sheep onto the grazing land. These seasonal ‘camps’ are known as transhumance settlements.
**Brockabarrow Common, Bodmin Moor.** The round house settlement with a few associated small enclosures rather than a field system is one of a number of settlements in the heart of Bodmin Moor thought to be based on the herding and maintaining of livestock. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

**Other upland areas**
The remains of stone-built round houses and associated fields also survive in West Penwith, on the Lizard Peninsula and on the Isles of Scilly. Whilst the general design of the houses is similar to those on Bodmin Moor, excavations of round house settlements in west Cornwall show a wider date range, extending from the Middle Bronze Age to the Romano-British period.

In West Penwith and the Lizard traces of coaxial field systems testify to the importance here of the division between areas of enclosed cultivated fields and areas of open pasture. Coaxial fields proved an effective system of land division until shortly after 1000 BC when further reorganisation took place.

The land was divided into dense patterns of small, rectangular fields which were intensively cultivated (most have substantial lynchets along their lower sides). These rectangular fields can be clearly seen in West Penwith where controlled access to communal grazing land continued to be an important aspect in the organisation of the farming landscape. Cattle, sheep and goats would have been removed to the nearby upland rough ground or to the cliff tops for summer grazing.
Rectangular fields at Praa Sands, Breage. This type of field pattern (the boundaries are visible as low earthworks in the centre of this photo) is typical of those found in West Penwith and elsewhere dating from the Iron Age and Romano-British periods. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

The settlements associated with these fields developed as nucleated hamlets rather than widely scattered clusters of houses. Unlike Bodmin Moor most of the prehistoric settlements in West Penwith are part of a landscape which continued to develop through time rather than being abandoned as a relict landscape. For this reason far fewer remains of round house settlements survive here and those that do are less visible in the landscape. A considerable number were modified in the later Iron Age or Romano-British periods, being enclosed by banks or by being incorporated into courtyard house settlements.

Round houses incorporated into a later courtyard house settlement at Bosullow Trehyllys, West Penwith. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service
Lowland Cornwall
In lowland Cornwall centuries of ploughing have obliterated above-ground traces of prehistoric open settlements. There is no doubt, however, that they were widespread throughout much of the county from the Middle Bronze Age onwards. A small number have been excavated; these cover a range of dates, from Early Bronze Age to Romano-British. These settlements were discovered by chance during building work or other forms of ground-disturbance.

Despite the small number of lowland open settlements currently known, a number of observations can be made about them. Lowland round houses are similar in size to their upland counterparts, although larger examples have been found, and in the Middle Bronze Age are often built within terraced hollows cut into the bedrock.

They are primarily wooden structures built with single or double rings of posts supporting a circle of horizontal beams (ring beams) to which the rafters of the roof would have been tied. The lower end of the rafters would rest on an outer encircling wall. This could be made of stone or wooden hurdles plastered with daub (clay mixed with earth and animal hair or other organic material to form a draught-proof covering). Entrances were frequently facing southeast; some houses had a central post and in the Iron Age some were surrounded by a circular rain gully to keep the interior floor dry.

An excavated round house from the late Iron Age settlement at Higher Besore, Truro. The main feature is a circular gully surrounding the house which was designed to drain rain water from the roof away from the interior of the house. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service
The Middle Bronze Age settlement at Trethellan Farm, Newquay, which was excavated in the 1980s, is a nucleated settlement with a distinctive planned layout. It is built on a terrace levelled into the hillside. The settlement consisted of seven timber built round houses, some with single rings of supporting posts, others with double rings. The remains of associated fields were found above and below the settlement terrace.

The excavations at Trethellan Farm and elsewhere provide a glimpse of life in Cornwall’s Bronze Age. Barley and oats were the main cereal crops grown, with smaller amounts of wheat and Celtic bean. Hedge mustard and flax were grown probably for their oil, and wild plants such as hazel nuts and sloes added to the diet. Cattle, sheep, goats and pigs were farmed and the meat diet was supplemented by red deer. In coastal locations, such as on the Isles of Scilly, marine resources were fully exploited; these include shellfish, seals and sea birds as well as fish.

Aerial Photos and Round House Settlements

The below-ground remains of timber round houses in plough-levelled locations consist of post holes (holes in the ground left by the roof-support posts), circular ditches which served as drip gullies, and the shallow cuttings where terraces were dug to form house platforms. Where these features have been cut into bedrock they become pockets of deep, moisture-retaining soil which in periods of dry weather can be visible from the air as cropmarks.

However post holes, which are generally less than a metre in diameter, and drip gullies, which tend to be narrow and shallow, are ephemeral features. They produce recognisable cropmarks only in optimum conditions on well-drained soils. Cropmarks produced by house terraces are vague and ill-defined and are frequently overlooked or mistaken for natural hollows in the bedrock.

For these reasons it is difficult to identify open round house settlements from aerial photos. Nonetheless a number of open settlements were identified during Cornwall’s National Mapping Programme. A good example is the coastal settlement at Lellizzick near Padstow, where initial mapping from aerial photos was followed by a programme of geophysical survey which revealed the full extent of the settlement.
Lellizzick, Padstow. Faint cropmarks of round houses are visible in the upper part of this cliff top field. There are further possible round houses spreading down towards the lower left of the photo. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Lellizzick, Padstow. Geophysical survey of the same settlement. The outlines (probably the drip gullies) of numerous round houses are identified in this survey. Many of the houses contain internal pits and other features. The fact that some houses clearly overlie others indicates that occupation of the site was long-lived with many phases of abandonment and relocation within the settlement area. Linear ditches are also visible; these are remains of field boundaries laid out on a different alignment to the present-day field pattern. There is more than one phase of field construction and some ditches may be contemporary with the settlement. Data courtesy of English Heritage (Payne 1998)
Power and Authority

Hillforts
Hillforts are large enclosures defined by one or more lines of substantial banks and ditches set high on hills, often at their summits. They are widespread throughout Western Europe and generally date from the Iron Age (800 BC – AD 43) although some are now known from the late Bronze Age.

Hillforts are among the best known prehistoric sites in Britain owing to their massive scale and their imposing position in prominent locations. The most famous is Maiden Castle in Dorset which encloses nineteen and a half hectares and was attacked by the Roman armies in AD 45. Cornish hillforts are much smaller in scale but, nonetheless, are still striking features in today's countryside.

In Cornwall, as elsewhere, the period which saw the introduction of iron is marked by the appearance of hillforts in the landscape. Cornish hillforts on the whole are relatively small-scale in comparison with those of central southern England, although there is considerable variation in their size and form. Some have a single bank and are irregular in shape, others have two or more concentric lines of banks and are near enough circular, a few have 'outworks' – banks set some distance from the main enclosure – separating the hillfort from the surrounding landscape.

The idea of enclosing hilltops was not new. A number of hilltops were defended in the Neolithic period by tor enclosures, such as Carn Brea and Helman Tor, and a few hilltop enclosures were built during the late Neolithic or early Bronze Age. In fact some hillforts re-used these earlier sites; at Carn Brea the earlier tor enclosure was absorbed and extended to form a large, irregular bank enclosing much of the hill's upper slopes.

Iron Age hillfort at Cadson Bury, St Ive. Cadson Bury's single rampart closely follows the hilltop contours and this is probably one of Cornwall's earlier hillforts. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service
There has been very little excavation of Cornish hillforts but it is generally presumed that sites which are irregular in plan and with a single bank hugging the contours of a hill date from the earlier Iron Age. Hillforts with concentric banks were built in the late Iron Age from around 400 BC onwards; a time of great cultural change in Cornwall. The construction of these later hillforts, sometimes called multiple enclosure hillforts, coincided with the introduction of new pottery styles and the appearance in the landscape of settlements known as rounds, enclosed by a bank and ditch.

Whereas the earlier hillforts are few in number and often enclosed large areas, the multiple enclosure hillforts are more numerous, more closely spaced in the landscape, and generally smaller. Cornish hillforts do not appear to have been in use in the Romano-British period although this may not have been entirely a result of Roman influence; most had been abandoned by the end of the Iron Age.

How Were Hillforts Used?
The term hillfort is an oversimplification and has become a catch-all label frequently applied to any prehistoric enclosure on a hill top or similar location. 'Hillfort' immediately assumes a defended place. It reflects the traditional interpretation of these sites as the defended centres of local chieftains who were in conflict with each other.

Modern thinking questions this militaristic view. Hillforts may well have been used as defensive sites when the need arose, but this should not necessarily be seen as their principal function. Excavations in Cornwall have produced evidence of permanent settlement in some hillforts, such as Gear, St Martin in Meneage; but others may only have seen occasional use. There is considerable variation in their size and in the scale and nature of their enclosing banks and ditches, and some are on hill slopes.
rather then hill tops. It is far more likely that a range of activities took place in hillforts, and we should not assume they were all used in the same way.

Tregeare Rounds, St Kew. A multiple enclosure hillfort sited on a hill slope. It is often presumed that the wide spaces between the ramparts in this type of multiple enclosure were designed for the corralling of livestock. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Archaeologists believe the construction of Iron Age hillforts represents a change in the organisation of society. One theory is that technological developments - the gradual change from bronze to iron - set this change in motion. The establishing of new trade networks to the exclusion of the old ‘bronze’ system was manifested in the new hillforts. It is also generally accepted that the population was steadily growing during this period. This coupled with a deterioration in climate around three thousand years ago, which would have affected crop production, will have led to increasing pressure on available resources.

Perhaps a response to these pressures can be seen in the way land division was reorganised in parts of Cornwall during the Iron Age, with the appearance of small rectangular fields laid out around the settlements of those who cultivated them. These major changes in field layout can only have been organised at a regional level of authority. The traditional view of the Iron Age sees the countryside divided into territories within which hillforts housed the elite who exercised authority over the lower levels of society occupying the farming settlements.

Recent thinking on Cornish hillforts suggests an alternative model. Authority need not have been held by an elite or aristocracy. Rather it was formed by representatives of the farming community itself who controlled their own territories or regions. This model sees hillforts as formal meeting places for local farmers who understood the
issues affecting the economy of their region and in whose interests it was to keep the farming system sustainable.

Hillforts, then, have much in common with the tor enclosures and hill top enclosures of the Neolithic and early Bronze Age. The ramparts can be seen as symbols not of power vested in an elite, but of the status and permanence of the community. Activities at hillforts may have included the resolution of disputes, the exchange of ideas, produce and materials, and the enjoyment of ceremonial or ritual festivals.

Of particular interest is the fact that some hillforts are carefully located at the site of earlier ceremonial and ritual centres. Some, such as Trencom and Carn Brea, reused existing tor enclosures; others were centred on former hill top enclosures, as at Caer Bran and Castle an Dinas in West Penwith.

The multiple enclosure hillfort at Caer Bran, West Penwith built on the site of a late Neolithic or early Bronze Age hill top enclosure, faint traces of the circular bank of this earlier ceremonial enclosure can be seen within the more substantial Iron Age banks. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Cliff Castles
Cliff castles are among the most spectacular ancient monuments found in Britain. They were created by constructing one or more substantial banks and ditches across the neck of a narrow headland. In most cases the enclosed headland is bounded by steep cliffs, preventing access from the sea and many cliff castles incorporate dramatic coastal scenery.

Cliff castles date from the Iron Age; they are broadly contemporary with hillforts although finds of later material in some suggest that their use continued into the Romano-British period. Cliff castles are distributed around the northwest seaboard of Europe; they are found in Ireland, Wales, Scotland, Brittany and Normandy as well as on the coasts of Cornwall and Devon; two have been identified on the Isles of Scilly.
The cliff castle at Lankidden, St Keverne. More than a hectare of the headland is enclosed by a single bank and ditch. This cliff castle occupies a typically spectacular location. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

As with hillforts there is considerable variation in the scale of the enclosing earthworks at cliff castles. Some have only a single stone wall, some a single bank and ditch, whilst others have multiple banks and ditches. Excavations at cliff castles have shown, however, that there are frequently several phases of earthwork construction and that where there are multiple banks and ditches we should not assume that these all worked together to form complex ‘defences’.

Cliff castle at Winecove Point, St Merryn. A complex site consisting of multiple banks and ditches. The earthworks occur on each of three promontories. It is not known whether it developed as one composite site based on the three promontories or whether it originated as one cliff castle which has subsequently become severely eroded. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service
What Were Cliff Castles For?
Although round houses have been found inside some cliff castles, the steep rocky slopes enclosed by many, and their exposed position, makes it unlikely that they were permanent settlements. Current thinking is that Cornish cliff castles were the focus for seasonal or occasional activities.

Traditionally cliff castles have been seen as safe refuges in time of stress. Although defence may have been one of their functions it is now thought that their fortified appearance may have been primarily for prestige and display. They may have served a similar role to hillforts as meeting places and as administrative or trading centres. Some, close to beach landing places, would certainly have made impressive places at which to receive coastal traders.

Many of the headlands where cliff castles are found had long been identified as special places in the landscape. Barrows and cairns had been built on them or overlooking them during the early Bronze Age. There was a strong ceremonial and religious focus among prehistoric communities on natural places, including sites associated with water, and one obvious role of cliff castles might have been to provide the Iron Age population with dramatic settings for communal ceremonies of either spiritual or secular nature.

Cliff castle at Trevelgue Head, Newquay. This large and complex cliff castle was a centre of activity over a long period of time. The headland was already the site of two Bronze Age barrows before being enclosed, probably in the early Iron Age. There are several phases of earthwork-building, the latest of which belongs to the Roman period. The outer headland contained numerous house platforms and a terraced field system. One of the most interesting aspects of the site is evidence of metalworking from the late Iron Age. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service
Enclosed settlements

During the late Iron Age, from about 400 BC, a new form of settlement appeared in the landscape. They consisted of groups of round houses and ancillary buildings forming farmsteads or hamlets which were enclosed by a bank and ditch (sometimes with two or more lines of bank and ditch). These enclosures are generally quite small – less than a hectare – with a simple entranceway formed by a gap in the circuit of the bank and ditch. Many are roughly circular or oval in shape but rectilinear enclosures are also common. Enclosed settlements are frequently sited on hillslopes with their entrance facing downhill.

Although archaeologists traditionally think of enclosed farmsteads as synonymous with the Iron Age, peak usage of this form of settlement in Cornwall was in the second and third centuries AD (AD100-300) during the Romano-British period. Settlements housed in enclosures were in use right to the end of the Romano-British period, some as late as the sixth century AD.

More than 2,500 enclosures are known in Cornwall. Many are ploughed down but their ditches can be recognised as cropmarks from aerial photos. In many places the enclosed settlements are sited within extensive field systems and the farmers living in these hamlets practised mixed agriculture, cultivating crops and keeping a range of livestock.

Cornish Rounds

Enclosed settlements of the Iron Age and Romano-British period in Cornwall have traditionally been called ‘rounds’. It is easy to see why. The enclosing banks of many survived after their abandonment either as isolated features in the landscape or as distinctive small round fields incorporated into later field patterns.

A good example of a Cornish round at Gweek, on the banks of the Helford. The outline of this settlement enclosure has been incorporated into the later field pattern. Such preservation of enclosures in the present day landscape is not uncommon and has probably led to the coining of the term ‘round’. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service
The reason for the good survival of rounds is the substantial nature of their banks which often incorporated large amounts of stonework, including some rounds whose banks were revetted or faced with blocks of stone. Given the small and irregular form of the later fields we should not be surprised that it was considered less bother to lay out the fields around the enclosure than to raze it. Of course in some cases the present day field hedges may well be following the lines of prehistoric hedges associated with the round.

A round at Carlidenack, Mawnan. The enclosing bank has been incorporated into the surrounding field system which is medieval in origin. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

How Did Rounds Work?
Our knowledge of Cornish rounds, their dating and how they worked comes from the few examples which have been excavated. The only one fully excavated is Trethurgy near St Austell; this has a number of features which are seen as representative of Cornish rounds.

The round at Trethurgy enclosed less than a third of a hectare and was occupied from the middle of the second century AD until the sixth century. It was enclosed by a single ditch and a bank, both faces of which were revetted by stone. There was a paved entrance in the downhill side which was closed by a double-leaved gate. The enclosure contained five stone houses built around its internal periphery. There were also a range of ancillary buildings, including a byre and a granary. Throughout the life of the settlement its basic plan was maintained; the houses were rebuilt on the same spot, and the same areas were used for storage and for stock pens.

Wheat, barley and some oats were cultivated and livestock were farmed. Small-scale copper alloy production and the smithing of iron took place. A tin ingot from the fourth century was found suggesting that tin was being mined and smelted in the area, perhaps by the occupants of the round.
Plan of the excavated Roman-British round at Trethurgy, St Austell, showing the stone-revetted enclosing bank, lengths of the outer ditch, the entrance (towards the bottom of the plan), and the layout of the oval houses and other stone built structures.

**Cropmark Rounds**

Inevitably many rounds have been levelled by centuries of ploughing. Because the enclosing ditches and banks of rounds were substantial features – the ditches are two metres deep on average, sometimes more – they often form very clear cropmarks and numerous rounds have been identified from aerial photos.

The enclosing ditch of a plough-levelled round is visible as a cropmark showing as a green mark against a background of ripened cereal at Trenithan Bennett, Probus.
This enclosure has a number of features typical of Cornish rounds. There is an entrance formed by a simple gap in the ditch on its downhill (left-hand) side; there is a trackway leading up to and through the entrance (showing as a strong green band); and a number of internal features, some of them possibly houses, are visible. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Other enclosures

Many thousands of enclosed settlements from the Iron Age and Romano-British periods are known throughout the British Isles. Cornish rounds are sometimes compared with enclosures of apparently similar size and construction found in South Wales (where they are called ‘raths’ or ‘ringworks’) and from Ireland (‘raths’ or ‘ring forts’). However there are differences in the date range of the three types of enclosure and a more recent view is that it is misleading to link the Welsh and Irish sites with those of Cornwall.

On the other hand the term ‘round’ as a class of monument has become a handy label to refer to any enclosure in Cornwall thought to be a prehistoric settlement. Within the county there is an enormous variation in the size and form of enclosures. This is especially the case with those which have been ploughed down and have been identified from cropmarks on aerial photos. Many are not round, and there is little or nothing to distinguish them in appearance from enclosed settlements found in many other parts of the country.

An enclosed settlement at Carnevas, St Merryn. The enclosure ditch is visible as a cropmark where the crop over the ditch has grown taller than that in the surrounding field. There is an entrance towards the left of the photo and the faint cropmark of a round house in the interior of the enclosure. Carnevas is one of the smallest enclosed settlements known in Cornwall, measuring a tenth of a hectare. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service
An unusual hexagon-shaped enclosure at Tregaverne, Port Isaac. This is one of the largest enclosures recorded during Cornwall's National Mapping Programme, covering well over a hectare in extent. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

A double-ditched square enclosure at St Mawgan, Restormel. Enclosures of this type are known from several parts of the county, particularly in east Cornwall. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service
Chronology
Enclosed settlements first appeared in the Cornish landscape around the fourth century BC in the later Iron Age. At roughly the same time Cornish hillforts developed from being large irregular enclosures with a single rampart and ditch into smaller, more regular-shaped structures with one or more concentric ramparts. These changes in monument style are contemporary with the adoption of a new type of pottery, South Western Decorated ware.

A minority of the enclosed settlements dated by excavation were occupied in the Iron Age. Some were in use from the later Iron Age into the early part of the Romano-British period; a few were inhabited beyond the Roman period up to the sixth century. But the peak period for the use of enclosed settlements was the second and third centuries AD, followed by a gradual decline during the fourth century.

Some enclosures saw two phases of use; the original settlement expanded, its enclosing ditch was filled in and a new ditch, enclosing a much larger area, was dug. Other settlements began life as clusters of round houses which would be enclosed in the future. At a number of locations enclosed settlements are sited in very close proximity to each other: whilst this may be a sign of local population increase, in some cases it is probably the result of one enclosure being abandoned and a new one being built close by.

Enclosures at Great Lizzen, Lansallos. Towards the top right is a large enclosure with two wide-spaced ditches. Adjacent to it is a smaller more rectangular enclosure. Overlying this enclosure is a double-ditched feature, most probably a trackway, which appears to be leading to the larger enclosure. In the top left of the photo is the faint cropmark of a third enclosure which is much more rectangular in shape. This enclosure may be the remains of a field. Other faint cropmarks hint at a landscape of great complexity and time depth. Note how along the right hand side of the present day field, the hedge kinks around the enclosures; this tells us the enclosures were still standing as earthworks when the hedge was constructed. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service
The Meaning of Enclosures

Some archaeologists see the enclosure of settlements as a response to social instability; substantial banks and ditches thrown up around Iron Age farming hamlets for protection or defence. But the opposite view is proposed by others; the fact that enclosures are the predominant form of settlement for such a long period (up to a thousand years) is a symptom of stability in the countryside rather than stress.

If the banks and ditches around enclosed settlements are not ‘defences’ then what are they for? Why did these ancient farming communities go to all the trouble of building such substantial boundaries around their homes? An enclosure as a barrier may have had symbolic meaning that we in the twenty first century can only guess at.

What is likely, though, is that the defining of a settlement by an enclosure was a mark of prestige and a measure of the status of its inhabitants. Open settlements similar to those in use in the Bronze Age were a feature of the Iron Age and Roman countryside and are found side by side with rounds and other enclosed settlements. To use a modern urban analogy, the prehistoric open settlement might be seen as the equivalent of a row of terraced houses, whilst the enclosed settlement corresponds to an avenue of detached houses with large gardens.

The outline of a round or enclosed settlement visible as a cropmark at White Cross, St Columb. To the left of the enclosure two round houses are also visible. Open round house settlements shared the Iron Age and Romano-British landscape with rounds and at some excavated rounds contemporary round houses have been found nearby. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

If the two forms of settlement represent a differentiation in status between co-operative groups of farmers living in open settlements and those in enclosures, how and by whom was this status conferred?

The answer lies with the hillforts with which these two forms of settlement shared the landscape. Recent theories about Cornish hillforts see them as the regional centres where farming communities held counsel on issues relating to local society and economy. According to this model they were the communal centres for populations who controlled their own territories and resources, rather than housing an aristocracy who ruled over the local population, as has traditionally been presumed.
The development of multiple enclosure hillforts took place around the same time as the first enclosed settlements appeared in the Cornish landscape. These changes are likely to be linked; they suggest that licence to build enclosures was granted (presumably in return for a tribute) at the community level of society centred on the hillforts. Thus the role of the community level authority, formerly a committee of local farmers, had become extended and was being remodelled as a more fixed body of individuals with local power. This extension of authority was marked by the new form of hillforts.

Tregonning Hill, Breage. Castle Pencaire, a multiple enclosure hillfort, sits on the summit. On the lower slopes are two rounds, one of which in the foreground has been partially ploughed down. Rounds situated in the immediate vicinity of hillforts are not uncommon in Cornwall, but we do not fully understand the significance of this pattern of distribution. The corrugated effect on the hill slope is made by cultivation ridges known as ‘ridge and furrow’. Generally ridge and furrow is a feature found in fields cultivated in the medieval period but some archaeologists believe that the ridges on Tregonning Hill are Iron Age, made by the inhabitants of these two rounds. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

**Aerial Photography and Enclosed Settlements**

The ditches and banks which surround enclosed settlements are frequently substantial features; enclosure ditches are typically up to two metres deep. Ditches of this size readily produce clear cropmarks in favourable conditions and many enclosures have been identified from aerial photos. In a number of cases internal structures such as round houses and additional features like outer ditches also appear on the photos.

The mapping of enclosed settlements is one of the most important aspects of Cornwall’s National Mapping Programme. More than one thousand new enclosures were identified and this outcome has led to a reappraisal of the density of rural settlement in Iron Age and Roman Cornwall.
Map showing the distribution of rounds and enclosed settlements in Cornwall. Enclosures discovered during Cornwall's National Mapping Programme are shown in red.

The enclosures that we know about are, of course, not the only ones. An unknown number await discovery. Already new sites are being spotted on recent photography taken since Cornwall's National Mapping Programme was completed. The formation of cropmarks is not a consistent process and depends on a number of factors. Our experience of aerial archaeology tells us that cropmarks may appear one year but not the next, so the discovery of archaeological sites relies in part on luck as well as knowledge and skill. It's a case of being in the right place at the right time.

An Iron Age or Romano-British enclosure at Paul in West Penwith, visible as a cropmark. We mapped this part of Cornwall in 2000: this enclosure first appeared on digital photography taken in 2005. By continuing to carry out more flights we will doubtless make more discoveries of this sort. Cornwall County Council Licence 2007. © Geosense 2005.
Continuity and Change

Roman Cornwall
The transition from Iron Age to Roman periods in Cornwall is marked by a continuity of lifestyle and tradition. Rounds and enclosed settlements as well as unenclosed round house hamlets continued as the predominant forms of settlement, and there are few signs of Romanisation with only two forts and a single villa.

![The Roman fort at Restormel surviving as a rectangular earthwork. Evidence of Romanisation and Roman military presence is notably lacking in Cornwall. Only one other fort is known – that at Nanstallon near Bodmin - and only one villa, at Magor near Camborne. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service](image)

There were some changes: hillforts fell out of use, houses became oval instead of circular, and in West Penwith and the Isles of Scilly courtyard house settlements developed. These were a variant of round house settlements. They were unenclosed and contained a number of houses; each house consisting of a group of stone-built rooms arranged around a courtyard. They were in use from the second to the fourth centuries AD.

Everyday life in Cornwall changed little under Roman rule; the archaeological record shows a remarkable degree of continuity from the later Iron Age. Enclosed farms or hamlets continued to be the predominant type of settlement in the countryside. Their number increased during this period, with an apparent spate of enclosure building taking place in the second century AD. It is possible that rectangular-shaped enclosures are a sign of Roman influence but this is not necessarily so and round enclosures were certainly built during the Romano-British period.

Courtyard Houses
During the Romano-British period in West Penwith and on the Isles of Scilly a new type of settlement unique to these two areas developed; the courtyard house. Courtyard house settlements were in use from the second to fourth centuries AD. Each settlement generally contains a group of courtyard houses, sometimes with round houses as well.

The houses are oval or irregular in shape and are enclosed by a massive stone-faced earth bank two to three metres thick. Within this enclosure are several rooms
joined together and arranged around a paved courtyard. The usual arrangement consists of a round or oval room opposite the courtyard entrance with a long room to its right. Excavation has shown that the round or oval rooms served as domestic areas, and the long rooms housed animals or were used for storage. Archaeologists are uncertain whether the courtyards were roofed or not.

![Courtyard house settlement at Chysauster, Madron. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service](image1)

Most courtyard house settlements are unenclosed although some are found within rounds. Many developed directly from later Iron Age round house settlements; the round houses were incorporated into courtyard houses as rooms. Courtyard house settlements are farming hamlets like the rounds and unenclosed settlements with which they are contemporary.

![The field system associated with Chysauster courtyard house settlement. Most courtyard houses are situated within extensive field systems arranged like the neat rectangular fields in this photo. These particular fields were badly damaged during agricultural improvement in the 1980s. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service](image2)
From Romans to Normans
The end of the fourth century AD was a time of repeated upheaval in Britain. The Roman Empire came under ever increasing threat and shortly after AD 400 the armies were withdrawn for the defence of Italy. It is likely that around this time the government of the British province collapsed. From the 440s onwards large areas of Britain were lost to Saxon invaders. In the west, however, there remained a strong sub-Roman enclave whose power against the Saxons is symbolised by the legendary King Arthur.

Illustration Tintagel. Tintagel Island. Legend has it that Tintagel was the birth-place of King Arthur. Tintagel was originally thought to be a monastic site but is now generally accepted as the seat of power of the Dark Age kings who ruled Cornwall between the fifth and seventh centuries. There are numerous rectangular buildings from this period on the island and its special status is illustrated by the enormous quantities of imported pottery found there. ©English Heritage. NMR 18251/12

The fifth to seventh centuries, a period referred to by archaeologists as ‘post-Roman’, was a time of changes. The most significant of these was the adoption of Christianity, which was introduced from the Mediterranean and France and, particularly, from Wales. The early Christian foundations in Cornwall were, like those in Wales, not simply isolated churches, but actual settlements. They were called lanns and consisted of an enclosure which defined the consecrated area. Within the enclosure were probably houses, a cemetery and a chapel.
The medieval parish church at St Buryan is on the site of a post-Roman lann, whose enclosure is fossilised in the present-day churchyard. The lann enclosure re-used the line of the enclosing bank and ditch of an Iron Age or Romano-British enclosed settlement. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Post-Roman and early medieval settlements have proved difficult to locate in Cornwall and evidence for everyday rural life is sparse. There was continued occupation in some Cornish rounds; at Trethurgy oval houses were in use into the sixth century after which the round fell into disrepair.

At Tintagel the buildings dating from the post-Roman period are rectangular, but this was a site of special status and may not have been typical of everyday settlements. Buildings at Gwithian dating from the sixth to eighth centuries are small and sub-circular, but these may be workshops rather than houses.

What is certain is that by the tenth century the typical Cornish medieval settlement – a hamlet consisting of unenclosed groups of rectangular houses – had developed. Archaeologists do not fully understand the development from the oval houses of the Romano-British rounds to the rectangular houses of the medieval period, why enclosed settlements were abandoned, or what led to these changes. The abandonment of rounds marked the end of a settlement tradition which had lasted for nearly a thousand years. At the same time pottery styles changed, and there was a change in trading contacts from the Mediterranean to France. Maritime contact with Wales, Ireland and Brittany intensified and a local British kingdom emerged, providing a degree of political stability.

Another factor which may have acted as a catalyst for change is the occurrence of a widespread natural disaster around AD 540. Although the nature of this event is uncertain it is linked to outbreaks of plague in the Mediterranean and resulted in restricted growth in trees for several years. We can guess that it also caused crop failures and, if it was accompanied by plague, may have led to a drop in population and the abandonment of settlements.

Against a changing political background, affected by contact with different people, influenced by a new religion, it is perhaps not surprising that the post-Roman population gradually moved away from the old system which had been in place in
one form or another since the later Iron Age. Crop failure and plague may have accelerated the degeneration of that old system. Enclosure, once a symbol of status and certainty, was now a symbol of the past.

**The Pre-Norman landscape**

Very few post-Roman settlements have been excavated in Cornwall and we cannot say for sure what the typical form of settlement might have been. We do know, however, where many of them were. This knowledge comes from analysis of place-names and their meaning. Settlements regarded as medieval in origin are those that were first recorded in documents or on maps before 1540; in Cornwall there are roughly 7,500 of these.

The majority have Cornish rather than English names (for instance ‘Trebartha’ is a Cornish name, ‘Fernacre’ is English). The Cornish names which contain the elements *tre* meaning ‘farm, estate, or hamlet’, and *bos*, meaning ‘dwelling’, are known to be of early origin; farms with names like Tregiffian or Bosfranken may date from anywhere between the fifth and eleventh centuries but are most likely of post-Roman origin.

Map showing the distribution of early medieval settlements in Cornwall based on place-names containing the elements *tre* and *bos*. There are gaps in the settlement pattern on the poor soils in areas of rough ground and moorland such as Bodmin Moor. This map does not show the full extent of early medieval settlement in northeast Cornwall where 90% of place-names are English rather than Cornish.
Cropmark of an enclosed settlement near Bosfranken farm, St Buryan. Of great interest is the fact that many rounds and enclosed settlements are situated close to farms with early medieval names. The inference is that enclosures such as this were abandoned and that the communities they once housed established new settlements nearby which have been in use ever since. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Another place-name element relevant to the changes in settlement in the post-Roman period is ker, meaning ‘fort’. Ker often appears as ‘caer’, ‘car’ or ‘cra’ in today’s place-names. Settlements with ker in their name may date from the fifth to seventh centuries. This name element is generally taken to mean the site of a round or enclosed settlement and this is borne out by field and aerial survey.

An abandoned round at Crasken, near Helston, whose enclosing bank is incorporated into the present-day field pattern. The name Crasken contains the early medieval element Ker. This suggests that occupation moved some time between the fifth and seventh centuries from the round to the site of today’s farm. It is very likely that today’s field hedges are built on the lines of the field pattern contemporary with the round. In the lower part of the field to the left of the round are the faint cropmark remains of a rectangular enclosure, which may also have been a settlement. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service
Not all farms with early medieval place-names have abandoned enclosures nearby. The most plausible explanation for this is that settlement here continued beyond the Roman period on the same site. In other words some medieval farms sit on top of prehistoric or Roman enclosed settlements and many of these settlements have been perpetuated up to today.

Comparison of the settlement pattern of enclosed settlements with the pattern of farms with early medieval names supports this idea, with the enclosures appearing to complement and fill gaps the early medieval pattern.

Map comparing the distribution of early medieval settlements (with place-names containing the elements tre and bos) and Romano-British enclosures around Summercourt. Early medieval settlements are shown in green; Romano-British enclosures in red.

Of course we do not know to what extent occupation was continuous at each site. Some new settlements may have been established long after a nearby enclosure had been abandoned. Elsewhere enclosures may have been deliberately abandoned in favour of setting up a new settlement nearby.
Medieval settlement

Medieval longhouses
The longhouse is a standard house type in Cornwall and the South West and is part of a wider tradition throughout Britain. The houses are stone built and most in Cornwall date from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, although some are earlier than this.

The main characteristic of the medieval longhouse is that it provided under one roof both the living quarters for the household and a byre for the wintering of cattle. A cross-passage running across the house provided access to both rooms. The byres or ‘shippons’ had mangers of wood or stone slabs built against the walls and a drain running down the centre of the floor. The living room acted as kitchen, dining room and bedroom. It was open to the rafters and contained a central hearth and fittings for benches and beds against the walls. Narrow slits served as windows.

Longhouse hamlets were the characteristic settlement type throughout medieval Cornwall. How these hamlets were organised can best be seen on Bodmin Moor where they survive in their entirety. As the population expanded between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries so the pressure on available land increased. Settlements were established in parts of the moor which had been uninhabited since the Bronze Age. More than thirty of these settlements are now deserted; the process of desertion began in the fourteenth century as a result of outbreaks of plague – the Black Death. With the drastic reduction in population, holdings on better farming land in the nearby lowlands became available at the expense of these moorland settlements.
The longhouse settlement at Brown Willy. This is one of a number of well-preserved deserted medieval settlements on Bodmin Moor. The outline of the longhouses is marked by ruined walls and they are accompanied by small enclosures which served as gardens, animal pens and mowhays (yards for hay ricks). Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Some settlements are just single farmsteads but most are hamlets containing from two to six farmsteads, clustered together around a small open area or ‘townplace’ – a shared farmyard. Each farmstead comprises a main farmhouse and one or two smaller outbuildings serving as barns and animal houses. The buildings are usually laid out with their long axis running downslope to help drainage.

Survey of the deserted settlements on Bodmin Moor, made from aerial photographs and in the field, provides much information not only about the layout of the individual hamlets but also how they fitted into the landscape.
The medieval hamlet of Carwether, St Breward. This hamlet covers about one hectare and consists of three longhouses, several ancillary buildings and some paddocks or garden plots. The buildings are arranged randomly along the valley side. Traces of ridge and furrow cultivation can be seen in the foreground and the settlement is surrounded by an extensive strip field system. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

**Medieval Fields**

Medieval farms and hamlets had fields associated with them which included large areas under crop. Cultivation ridges, known as ridge and furrow, can be seen in many of the fields. The ridges, which are usually sinuous and irregular, provided raised seed beds in the thin soil and enhanced drainage. They were probably made by spade digging in rocky ground and by cattle-drawn plough in better soil.

The fields belonging to a medieval farm would often be enclosed by one or more long curving boundaries. Part of the enclosed area was cultivated and part used as pasture. Much of the arable land was subdivided into ‘strip fields’ with each strip defined by a low stony bank. Each farmstead within a hamlet had its own share of strips scattered through the fields.
Well-preserved strip fields at Garrow, St Breward. These fields are of a characteristically sinuous shape and contain prominent ridge and furrow. The strips would be divided between each farmstead forming a hamlet and are often fairly regular in width, measured in multiples of Cornish rods (each rod being eighteen feet or five and a half metres). Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Systems of crop rotation – ley husbandry - were employed, involving two to three years of arable cultivation (mainly of oats and rye), followed by four to nine years of grass. The turf which developed over this phase of the rotation would be sliced off by hand, then dried and burnt. The ashes would be mixed with manure and other dressings before being dug back in to replenish the soil. This technique is known as ‘beat burning’.

**Upland fields**
The medieval settlements on the fringes of Bodmin Moor were not abandoned and their field systems have remained in use. The form of the boundaries may have changed through time, with some added or removed, but today’s hedges very often fossilise the layout of the former strip fields.
The present-day fields at Fernacre, St Breward are clearly fossilising the pattern of former strip fields by the continued use of some of the strip boundaries. In the distance towards the top left of the photo are the fragmentary remains of some original strips. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Strip fields are found not just on Bodmin Moor, but throughout all upland areas of Cornwall. Where the strips survive they are thought to result from outfield cultivation. Outfield cultivation was practised in parts of Britain with large areas of poor land. It involved the temporary cultivation of land normally used as pasture. Documents show that in Cornwall outfield areas were only occasionally cultivated – maybe only every fifty years or so, when demand for produce was high or perhaps when prices were particularly favourable.
Lowland fields
Few deserted longhouse settlements survive in lowland areas; here most have been superseded by later buildings. On the other hand the extent of the lowland farming landscape in the medieval period is shown by the widespread occurrence of former strip fields which were enclosed at a later date in a similar way to those at Fernacre.

The field pattern around Tregoss, Roche, has its origins in strip fields surrounding the medieval settlements of Tregoss and, in the distance, Pendine. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

The greater part of the farmed landscape of Cornwall appears to have been divided into strip-fields during the medieval period. Documents show that strip-fields began to be enclosed from the thirteenth century onwards. The enclosure of these strips often leaves distinctive ‘markers’ behind in surviving field boundaries and field patterns, such as so-called ‘reversed-s’ or ‘reversed-j’ curves, and ‘dog-legs’.

The field pattern at Trenerth, Gwinear, a settlement first recorded in 1201, is formed by the enclosure of bundles of strips. Some of the present-day fields are characterised by sinuous boundaries and some of the field hedges have notable kinks or ‘dog-legs’. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service
The countryside around Metherell, Calstock, where the fabric of the medieval landscape underpins that of the present day. Many of today’s farms and villages were first established in medieval times. The majority of lanes, roads and field boundaries are also medieval in origin. In this way the pattern of medieval settlement can be seen to form the basis for much of today’s landscape. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

**Medieval towns**

Historical documents and records allow us a glimpse of social life in medieval Cornwall. Beyond their own family circle medieval farmers would come into daily contact with neighbours from their own hamlet, and frequent contact with families from nearby hamlets. Church every Sunday would be a chance to meet people from the wider parish. Trips to the nearest market towns would provide contact with farming families from a wider area, as well as traders and craftsmen and people from other walks of life.

Like the rest of Britain medieval Cornwall was overwhelmingly rural in character, but by the fourteenth century was well served by a network of towns and markets. Towns in Cornwall were small but there were many of them. A number of factors define medieval settlements as towns or boroughs; their relatively large population, the ordered arrangement of houses along one or more streets, the craft specialisation of their inhabitants, and by the granting of the right to hold markets. Charters confirming borough status are common from the end of the twelfth century. Many of the towns retained rural characteristics, such as the strip fields that surrounded them.
Camelford in North Cornwall. The medieval core of the town is in the right centre of this photo. The surrounding countryside is characterised by field patterns which clearly are based on former strip fields. In common with a number of medieval towns Camelford developed along the line of a major road (now the A39). As the name of the town suggests it was sited at a crossing point of the river Camel, the route of which can be seen in the photo as a wooded valley. It was an important market town serving the local farming hamlets as far afield as the north western part of Bodmin Moor. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

The origin of towns
Five markets are recorded in the Domesday Book; Launceston, Liskeard, Bodmin, St Germans and Marazion. Helston can also be regarded as a borough at this time. All except Liskeard were important religious centres and it is likely that religious communities were a focus for early medieval settlement. This is because the major religious sites served an administrative function and there was a need to support the non-agricultural religious communities with food and materials. Other centres, such as the early medieval lann sites at St Buryan, Probus, Crantock and elsewhere, may also have acted as markets in an unofficial capacity but were not recorded in the Domesday Book.

By the time of the Domesday Book in 1086, the market at Launceston had been moved to the castle from its former site at St Stephen by Launceston, where it had been owned by the church. Similarly the Norman lord, Count Robert, established a new market at Trematon castle, thereby undermining the church-owned market at St Germans. This was all part of the Norman lords’ drive to secure the valuable revenues which were generated by the towns.
Launceston was the only Cornish town to have been provided with a defensive wall, which was built by the thirteenth century. Little of this now survives but its position is marked by the curving line of the street at the right hand side of this photo. The town grew up around the castle where, from the end of the eleventh century a market was based. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

The Development of Towns
From the twelfth century onwards an increasing number of markets and towns are recorded in documents. All of the new towns which had developed by the end of the twelfth century were coastal or inland ports, and trade was an obvious factor in their location. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries many new towns were established as fishing ports. Cornish trade included the export of tin, fish, slate and cloth, and the import from Brittany, Ireland, France and Spain of salt, linen, canvas, wine and fruit.
The port of Fowey in south east Cornwall. The town has undergone extensive development over the centuries but was founded as a medieval trading port by about 1200. The importance of the port is reflected in coastal defences including blockhouses and a sea-facing wall. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

After the twelfth century the increase in number of towns was a result of economic growth and population expansion. As well as trading and fishing ports, towns were developed inland; these grew up along major roads and the crossing points of rivers. Some towns also had important administrative functions; for instance the County Jail was at Launceston, and Helston, Truro, Liskeard and Lostwithiel were Stannary towns. Each Stannary town contained a Coinagehall for the twice yearly assaying (testing for purity and taxation) of tin. At Lostwithiel the Coinagehall formed part of the ‘Duchy Palace’, a large administration complex which at the end of the thirteenth century was the centre from which the Duchy estates were managed and contained the county court.

The town of Helston in 1946. The medieval layout and street plan can clearly be seen. There is a single main street (running from left to right in the photo), with two side roads. The streets are flanked by burgage plots, long narrow plots of land running at right angles from the street frontage. RAF 106G/UK/1663/3263. CCC RAF photography