

A Sense of Place

Tor Enclosures

Tor enclosures were built around six thousand years ago (4000 BC) in the early part of the Neolithic period. They are large enclosures defined by stony banks sited on hilltops and hillslopes. They are irregularly shaped and usually have several entrances. They are so called because their enclosing banks, built of weathered granite blocks, surround and link dramatic tors and smaller outcrops of granite.

The best known tor enclosure is that at Carn Brea, near Redruth. Here a stone bank, built with many granite slabs set up on end, incorporates the eastern tors and encloses a large space on the hilltop in which several levelled platforms were built. Further stone banks link the eastern tor with the central one. Excavations here in the 1970s produced a remarkable array of rich Neolithic material including whole greenstone axes (many from stone quarried in Cornwall), pots made out of clay from the Lizard Peninsula, and scores of leaf-shaped arrowheads.



The Neolithic tor enclosure at Carn Brea, near Redruth. Remnants of the enclosure's stony banks can be seen linking the granite outcrops or tors on the summit of this famous hill. Excavation in the 1970s confirmed that whilst the site was re-used during the Iron Age, the earliest features here date from between five and six thousand years ago. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

A second tor enclosure has been excavated at Helman Tor, south of Bodmin. A third probable site is the enclosure at Tren crom in West Penwith, where large amounts of Neolithic material including leaf-shaped arrowheads were found during excavations in the 1920s.

A particular feature of tor enclosures is that they were built on the most spectacular and distinctive hill in an area. We can imagine how the jagged and immediately recognisable profile of the enclosure, placed as it was on the most prominent local landmark, must have been a key part of the monument. With this in mind, another eight hilltop enclosures across the county are thought likely to have been tor enclosures. At some of these sites, for example Rough Tor and Stowe's Hill on

Bodmin Moor, the enclosing banks are similar in appearance and structure to those at Carn Brea and Helman Tor.



Stowe's Pound, Bodmin Moor. Although re-used during the Iron Age and again later as a medieval stock pound, the enclosure on Stowe's Hill is almost certainly of Neolithic origin. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

How Were Tor Enclosures Used?

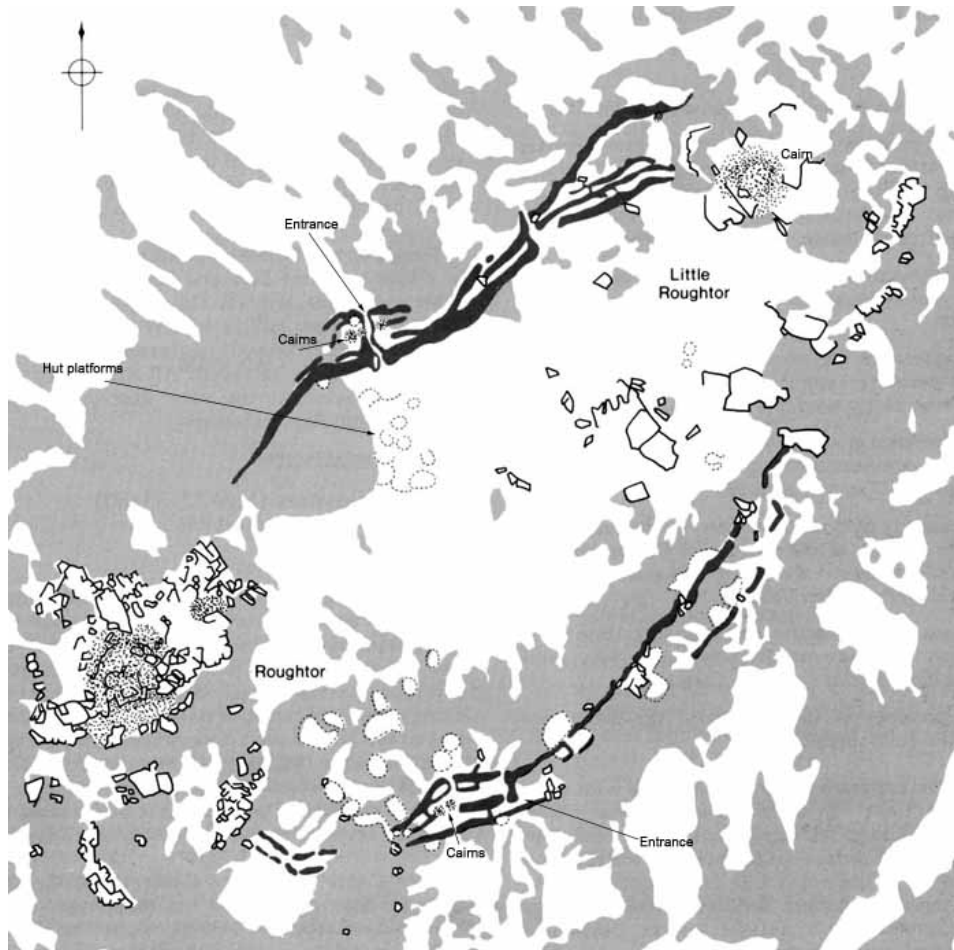
Tor enclosures, like many other Neolithic monuments, are something of a mystery to us today with our twenty first century perceptions of society. We will never know for sure how tor enclosures were used, but a good starting point would be to assume that such large and prominent monuments will most probably have served a wide range of functions.

Tor enclosures are confined to the South West but are contemporary with, and generally considered similar to Neolithic causewayed enclosures found elsewhere in Britain. At Carn Brea there were signs of violent struggle; for instance evidence of burning, and many arrowheads found in the vicinity of the walls and entrances indicating that they may have been lost in an attack on the site.

This violent attack took place at the end of the sequence of occupation at Carn Brea and probably led to the abandonment of the site. At two causewayed enclosures, Crickley Hill in Gloucestershire and Hambledon Hill in Dorset, there is similar evidence of warfare leading to their abandonment at roughly the same time, suggesting a phase of widespread political or social upheaval.

So tor enclosures are likely to have been important defended centres from which relatively large territories may have been controlled. They might also have served as trading centres. Neolithic axes made of Cornish greenstone have been found as far afield as East Anglia and the large number of greenstone axes found at Carn Brea certainly supports this interpretation of the site.

The enclosure at Carn Brea contained a number of levelled platforms into which posts and stakes had been set; these structures were interpreted as possible buildings. The evidence for permanent settlement at tor enclosures is, however, inconclusive. Numerous circular house platforms at Rough Tor and Stowe's Pound, as well as at Carn Brea, are more likely to be Bronze Age or Iron Age than Neolithic.



Roughtor, Bodmin Moor. A well preserved stone-built tor enclosure incorporates the natural outcrops of Roughtor and Little Roughtor. Its stony banks are shown as solid black lines in this plan. It was surveyed on the ground in the 1980s. The site plan shows two complex entrances on the northwest and south sides and a third possible entrance in the north. Two groups of hut platforms lie just inside the entrances and probably belong to a later phase of occupation. Several cairns are built around the perimeter; two large ones crowning the summits of each of the tors and five others incorporated into the two main entrances. © English Heritage and Cornwall County Council

Neolithic causewayed camps do not appear to have contained permanent settlements, nor are many of them defensive sites. Excavation has shown that they were the scene of feasting and ceremonies probably involving large numbers of people. At some, large quantities of human bones have been found leading to the suggestion that these enclosures were Neolithic cemeteries in which bodies were left out in the open for the birds to pick clean – a ritual known as excarnation. At a later date the bones were buried amid a formal ceremony.

Tor enclosures too were most probably used as the site for ceremonies and rituals, although we do not know precisely what form these might have taken. The construction of these enclosures must have taken considerable man-power and organisation. They are a communal endeavour on the part of what was a highly dispersed society.

It is easy to appreciate how the physical process of its creation was an important aspect of the monument itself. Building a tor enclosure would have solidified links and created a common identity for the community (a team-building exercise on a large scale). In this way it would have become a symbol of the cultural identity of the group that built it, furnishing the community with a sense of permanence and place within the landscape.

Tor enclosures should be seen as important gathering places for a widely dispersed society where ritual ceremonies, seasonal feasting and social events would have taken place. By enclosing the most locally distinctive hilltops with banks, Neolithic communities separated them from the everyday world and invested them with a spiritual value; they created sacred spaces in the landscape.

Later Hilltop Enclosures

Tor enclosures were in use during the fourth millennium BC (from 4000 BC to 3000 BC). A different type of hilltop enclosure has recently been identified which is thought to date from the later Neolithic period of the third millennium and into the early Bronze Age (up to 1500 BC).

These enclosures are far smaller than tor enclosures – none is more than 75 metres in diameter – and all of them are roughly circular in shape. Rather than being enclosed by substantial banks made of granite blocks they are defined by low stony banks. These banks could probably have been stepped over because none of the enclosures has an obvious entrance.

All of these enclosures contain cairns, which supports the view that they were used as ceremonial or ritual centres. To date only four such enclosures are known, all of them in west Cornwall. Two of them, at Caer Bran and Castle an Dinas, have been surrounded by the ramparts of Iron Age hillforts. It is possible that future excavations at Cornish hillforts might uncover evidence of more examples of these earlier ceremonial enclosures beneath the Iron Age ramparts.



Castle an Dinas, West Penwith. Faint traces of a circular banked enclosure lie inside the circuit of innermost rampart of the Iron Age hillfort. These slight earthworks are likely to be much earlier than the hillfort and a late Neolithic or earlier Bronze Age date has been proposed. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service