

Heaven and Earth

Cursus Monuments

The annual cycle of the seasons would have been of tremendous importance to Neolithic people, especially those making the first attempts at crop cultivation. This in turn will have led to a keen interest in the movements of the sun and the moon. Events such as the longest and shortest days of the year (the summer and winter solstices), will have been invested with special significance. The monumental tombs of Neolithic people, the quoits and long barrows, were symbols of permanence; fixed points of reference in the landscape which will have allowed the movement of the sun and the moon to be related to sacred places on the earth. And some Neolithic monuments are aligned on important solar directions.

One type of monument which often appears to have an astronomical function is the cursus monument. Few monuments from any period are as mysterious as cursuses. Their sheer size, early date and enigmatic purpose have made them a subject for much speculation and study. Cursuses were constructed between four and six thousand years ago; they have been found across Britain but until recently none were known in Cornwall.

Cursus monuments are very long and narrow enclosures. Their parallel sides are usually formed of a bank with external ditch. They may run for several kilometres before terminating in rectangular or rounded ends. Their size is their most amazing feature; the largest known, the Dorset Cursus on Cranbourne Chase, being over 10 kilometres long.



The eastern terminal of the Dorset cursus. This is the longest known cursus, running for 10 kilometres. It was built in three sections, the middle of which was solar aligned. Photo © Crown copyright. NMR. 4284/02

There has been much debate as to the function of these monuments. The name 'cursus' derives from nineteenth century antiquarian theories that they were built for horse or chariot racing – similar to the races that took place in the Roman *Circus*.

More recently the idea that they were used for ritual processions has become widely accepted. The irregular and sometimes ephemeral nature of the ditches at some excavated examples suggests that they are formalised sections of long-established paths or routeways across the landscape that were visited on a seasonal basis, the structure being added to year after year.

Despite occasional minor deviations, most cursuses are obsessively straight. Alignment is also significant and it has been noted that cursuses may be aligned on other monuments or to take into account astronomical events such as midwinter or midsummer sunsets. Many cursuses are sited in transitional places in the landscape, at the crossover points of different geologies or more commonly alongside or cutting across valleys and streams. Some lie at or link the confluence of two water courses. The variety of their alignments and settings suggests a desire by their builders to link the monuments and their associated ceremonies with prominent features of the natural world; the rivers, ridges and astronomical events.

Whatever their function, cursus monuments are often associated with later ritual monuments such as round barrows which suggests that the significance of the cursus in the landscape continued for several centuries after they were built, well into the early Bronze Age.

One exciting discovery made during Cornwall's National Mapping Programme is a probable cursus monument at Triffle near Downderry on the southeast coast. This is the only cursus so far identified in the county.



A probable cursus monument at Triffle, Deviock. The parallel ditches of the monument can be seen as green lines crossing two fields and a lane; there is a

terminal towards the bottom left of the photo. Like many cursus monuments the feature is aligned in a northeast to southwest orientation. © Cornwall County Council

Henges

Henges were constructed towards the end of the Neolithic period (3500-2500 BC). They are roughly circular or oval spaces usually enclosed by a single bank with internal ditch although this is not always the case; some have no ditch at all and others have three. The term henge comes from the most famous of all British examples, Stonehenge, which is actually not typical of the class having no internal ditch: the famous stones were added at a much later date.

Henges vary in size from just a few metres to half a kilometre in the case of the largest sites such as Avebury in Wiltshire. The earth and bedrock taken from their ditches would have been used to construct the banks. Access to the central area was via formal entrances and the numbers of these entrances have been used by archaeologists as a basis for henge classification. Most have one entrance (Class I) or two opposed entrances (Class II) although a small number have four facing each other in pairs (Class III).



Castlewiche Henge, Callington. This enclosure was designated as a Scheduled Monument in 1930 as a prehistoric 'camp'. It was first recognised as a henge in 1951. The flat central area is more than 40 metres across with a single entrance on its south side. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

What Were Henges Used For?

Despite their substantial earthworks henges are not thought to have had a defensive function due to the placing of the ditch inside the bank, as if to keep something in rather than out. This distinguishes them from defensive earthworks such as hillforts where the ditch is placed on the outside of the bank.

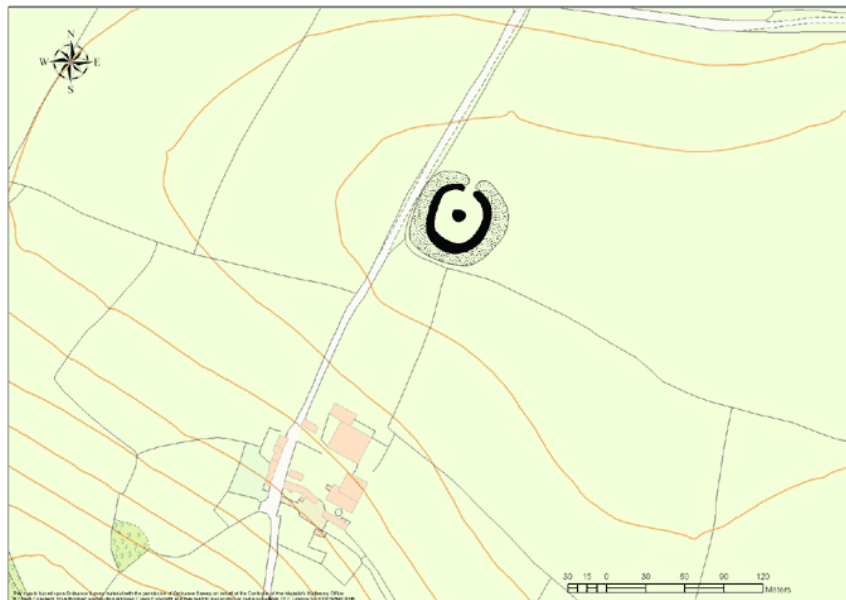
The purpose and function of henge monuments is not fully understood but due to the non-defensive nature of the earthworks, they are generally accepted to have had some kind of ceremonial, religious or ritual significance. Where excavated, a significant proportion of sites have been found to have contained settings of timber posts. A smaller number of others contain stone circles, one such example being the Striplle Stones on Bodmin Moor. Others, with close associations with later burial mounds, were clearly the focus of ritual activity over long periods.



Stripple Stones, Bodmin Moor. A Neolithic henge monument augmented in the Bronze Age by a stone circle. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

The entrances of some henges are aligned with midsummer or midwinter sunrises but in others this is not the case. In fact henge orientation is highly variable and in many cases may have been more determined by local topography. This does not necessarily mean that the orientation of these henges was not associated with astronomical events and indeed many do have a link, particularly to the midwinter sunrise.

One pattern that has been identified through a national study of henges is the tendency among those with a single entrance (Class I henges) for that entrance to be facing northeast. One of the new henges discovered during Cornwall's National Mapping Programme at Bozion, in Egloshayle, falls into this category.



A probable henge at Bozion, Egloshayle, mapped from aerial photos on which the site appeared as a soilmark. The bank appears to lie outside the ditch, a feature which is characteristic of henges. The siting of this monument is also typical; it being located on a prominent ridge overlooking the river Camel at what is now Wadebridge.



The site of a possible new henge monument at St Newlyn East. The site is visible as a cropmark with the enclosing bank visible as a pale circular line outside the ditch, which shows as a dark line. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Prior to Cornwall's National Mapping Programme the sites of three henges were known in the county. These were at Castlewich, Callington; The Stripple Stones, Blisland; and Castilly, Luxulyan. Two other potential sites were known at Penberth, Philleigh; and Halgarras, Kenwyn. As a result of the mapping programme three possible new examples have been identified as cropmarks in lowland areas.