

Passing Places

Megalithic Chambered Tombs

These are striking monuments, found along the Atlantic fringe of northwest Europe. They are known locally in Cornwall as quoits. Megalithic tombs (from the Greek *mega* – ‘large’, and *lithos* – ‘stone’) are visually impressive and the colossal form of monuments such as Lanyon Quoit has made them iconic archaeological sites within the Cornish cultural consciousness.

Most are of a simple design; a stone box or chamber formed by large upright slabs known as orthostats, usually three or four in number, supporting a massive capstone. More complex examples, such as Zennor and Lanyon, had one end closed by a large stone, while the other end had a façade and antechamber. The chambers were often blocked possibly to prevent disturbance, robbing or maybe to prevent uncontrollable spirits escaping! There is evidence that some quoits were once partially covered by a mound of stones, which have since been robbed for use as hedging or building stone.

It is generally accepted that quoits were built between five and six thousand years ago and are roughly contemporary with tor enclosures. It should be remembered, however, that there has been limited excavation of Cornish quoits and that their dating depends on comparison with better-researched examples elsewhere in northwest Europe. Most quoits are found today in upland areas in rough ground and some archaeologists suggest that they were deliberately mimicking the tors which rise up from the moors in these areas. On the other hand some quoits are to be found in lower-lying locations. These lowland quoits are the least well-preserved examples and it is quite possible that there may have been other quoits in lowland areas, now farmland, which have been destroyed over the centuries since they were built.



Trethevy Quoit shows the typical simple design of most quoits, with a simple chamber made of upright slabs supporting a massive capstone. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Long barrows and long cairns

Neolithic long barrows are roughly rectangular earthen mounds, often flanked or enclosed by ditches. Across Britain they vary greatly in size; ranging in length from 15 to 125 metres and surviving to heights of up to five metres. Well preserved examples often incorporate single or multiple stone chambers containing human remains.

Only a handful of long barrows are known in Cornwall; the best example is Woolley Barrow near Morwenstow which was partially excavated in 1976 when a number of flint tools were recovered. In moorland areas of Cornwall a few examples of long cairns are known. These are the upland equivalent of long barrows and typically survive as rectangular mounds made of stone rather than of earth. The largest is 30 metres long; although several have traces of internal structuring at only one, at Bearah Common on Bodmin Moor, is there evidence of a substantial inner chamber.

It is possible that in lowland Cornwall long barrows may have been more widespread than their current distribution suggests. Centuries of ploughing will have removed all traces of their above-ground remains. One probable example discovered during Cornwall's National Mapping Programme is a cropmark site at Tregavone near Padstow. The cropmark consists of a rectangular enclosure ditch with an entrance facing east. Within the enclosure is a cropmark of a rectangular hollow which may be the remains of an internal chamber.



Tregavone, St Ervan. A possible long barrow, consisting of a ditch forming a small rectangular enclosure, is shown towards the left in this map. This feature is visible as a cropmark on aerial photos. An earthen mound would have filled the rectangular area enclosed by the ditch; its form resembles Neolithic long barrows found elsewhere in England. Other cropmark features in the vicinity include a circular ditch which is likely to be an early Bronze Age round barrow, linear features which might be associated or which may be later prehistoric field ditches, and a number of pits which might also have had a ritual or ceremonial function.

How Were Quoits and Long Barrows Used?

Quoits and long barrows were elaborate tombs in which to house the dead. Clearly they are the expression of a complex belief system; Neolithic farmers in inland central Europe, by way of contrast, buried their dead in simple earth graves.

Evidence from excavations across the country indicates that many of these tombs were used, sometimes constantly, over long periods of time. The internal chambers of long barrows remained open for burials to be added over time – in some cases 25 to 50 years, in other cases for hundreds of years - before finally being closed. In this respect they are like the mausoleums of today.

The builders of these tombs did not treat the bodies themselves as we do today. There is evidence that they were left to rot inside or outside the tombs and the bones then later rearranged. Bones were moved around to make way for new interments and some bones were removed, possibly for ritual ceremonies taking place elsewhere. For these reasons we see the long barrows and chambered tombs of the earlier Neolithic period very much as communal burial places, with special significance for the societies that built and used them.

It would be too simplistic to describe these sites solely as tombs in the same way that today's churches are not simply graveyards. We must suppose that these striking monuments were the focus for a range of activities. Both quoits and long barrows are frequently sited on prominent landmarks such as tors and hills with distinctive profiles, leading to the suggestion that they may have been marking landscape boundaries and were possibly significant territorial markers. The monuments may have been designed to venerate the community's own ancestors. In some tribal societies today the dead are believed to affect the living; protecting the community, ensuring good harvests and healthy herds. For this reason they are venerated, and sacrifices and offerings are made in their honour. It is not difficult to imagine that Neolithic people similarly believed in the power of their ancestors and this is manifested in the care and attention paid to their tombs.



Mulfra Quoit, West Penwith. Many quoits were located in rough ground in upland areas; one reason for this may be because these areas were considered somehow separate from the everyday world of the lower ground where the monument builders

probably lived. The significance of prominent landmarks such as tors is perhaps reflected in the design of the quoits with their great capstones deliberately mimicking natural tors. Photo © English Heritage. NMR. 18469/12

It is currently thought that chambered tombs were designed to look much as they do now, with their great capstones deliberately replicating natural tors. Perhaps this was a way of associating the community's ancestors with the creator beings who made the tors.

One theory put forward to explain the shape of long barrows is that they are designed to mirror the rectangular houses found at early Neolithic farming settlements. Although these long houses, as they are known, are typical of Neolithic settlements in central Europe, very few have been found in England and those that have are of an older date than most long barrows. Some archaeologists interpret long barrows as an attempt to provide homes for the ancestors. Their shape, modelled on early house styles, might embody a collective social memory of the design of the houses in which the ancestors actually lived.

We will, of course, never know for sure the full meaning of these evocative monuments but their solid construction from durable stone as opposed to the transitory wooden homes of their builders tells us they must have been (as they still are) a symbol of permanence in the landscape.

In a society in which the community seems to have been more important than the individual this permanence might represent the community's own ancestry as a counterpoint to the brief and ephemeral life of the individual. The megalithic chambered tombs and long barrows were places where Neolithic people passed from transitory human life into the ancestral lineage.



Lanyon Quoit, West Penwith. One of the most familiar archaeological sites in the county, Lanyon Quoit has become an icon in the Cornish cultural consciousness. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service.