

Set In Stone

Stone circles

Among the most enigmatic and evocative archaeological sites in Cornwall are those of the late Neolithic and early Bronze Age formed by upright stones; stone circles, stone rows and standing stones. They were important ritual and ceremonial sites and were also likely to have had significance as communal gathering places in the same way that the earlier tor enclosures, quoits and long barrows did.



The Merry Maidens, St Buryan. Local tradition has it that the stones are the remains of girls who were turned to stone for dancing on the Sabbath. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Stone circles are the best known of these monuments. They are sometimes thought of as prehistoric 'temples' and it is widely accepted that they were enclosures dedicated to the performance of ceremony and ritual. Some may have been deliberately sited to observe the movements of the sun and the moon as their rising and setting marked the seasons. The tradition of building stone circles began around 3000 BC and continued for more than a thousand years. Stone circles are confined almost entirely to Britain and they were built in a range of shapes and sizes. They vary from 10 metres in diameter to over 100 metres and can be circular, oval or irregular in shape.

Cornwall has one of the richest concentrations of stone circles of any region in the British Isles. These beautiful and evocative monuments are found right across Cornwall although there are two principle groups; one on Bodmin Moor and one in West Penwith. The West Penwith group comprises five circles although it is likely that once there were many more; indeed four have been documented as being destroyed since the beginning of the nineteenth century. It has been suggested that the holed stone at Men-an-Tol is one of several stones that may have once formed part of a circle.

Whilst stone circles are variable in terms of scale and design across Britain, those in West Penwith are fairly uniform in size being between 21 and 25 metres in diameter; generally smaller than elsewhere in Cornwall. Some circles have carefully selected stones all roughly similar in shape and size while others are more random. Arguably one of the best preserved is the Merry Maidens, or Dawns Men although this near-perfect circle of nineteen stones was restored in the 1860s. The stones appear to have been dressed before they were erected and to have been graded in height, with the tallest stone in the west-south-west sector, perhaps aligned on the midwinter sunset.



The Hurlers on Bodmin Moor. Two of the stone circles from a line of three which form part of a ceremonial landscape on the southeast side of Bodmin Moor. Photo © English Heritage. NMR. 18475/05

There is wider variation in design of the sixteen circles found on Bodmin Moor and differences in size, shape and stone size could suggest possible differences in local traditions across the moor. There are a number of flattened circular forms, for example Stannon and Fernacre. There are examples of multiple circles, the best known of which are the Hurlers - a line of three large circles with a possible smaller fourth circle to the north. One circle, the Stripple Stones, is unique in Cornwall being set within an earthwork henge.

How Were Stone Circles Used?

Stone circles have traditionally been seen as temples for festival and celebration. Whilst there has been much debate concerning prehistoric astronomy, it is now generally accepted that stone circles were places for community gatherings at

special times of the year, such as solstices, with astronomical alignments marked by an outlying stone, a decorated stone or a taller stone. Some circles appear to have been carefully sited so that important natural landmarks were visible from them.

One stone circle of great interest is that at Boscawen Un near St Buryan. This circle, otherwise known as the Nine Maidens, actually comprises 19 granite uprights encircling a larger central quartz upright. A large gap in the west may be the site of an entrance. Analysis of the circle's architecture suggests that the central stone is likely to have been erected before the rest of the circle; it is shaped like an axe and contains relief carvings of two stone axes. Several sources of greenstone, from which many Cornish polished stone axes were made, are found in west Cornwall and it has been suggested that the Boscawen Un circle was built to celebrate the axe and its power to transform the landscape. Focused around Boscawen Un stone circle were the sites of four barrows, only one of which is still upstanding and this is now in poor condition.



The stone circle at Boscawen Un, St Buryan. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Stone Rows

The best known and visually most impressive stone row in Cornwall is the Nine Maidens at St Columb. Although some of the nine stones are broken, they range from 80 centimetres to over two metres in height. For many years the Nine Maidens was the only stone row known in Cornwall. Recently, however, others have been recognised.

Seven examples were discovered on Bodmin Moor in the 1980s. The stones forming these rows are very small and easily obscured by patches of vegetation; those recently discovered had become visible as a result of high grazing levels reducing scrub and rough grass. The stones forming these alignments are typically no more than 20 centimetres high. There are no doubt more undiscovered sites to be found on less grazed areas of upland Cornwall.

Apart from one possible stone row comprising a line of three large standing stones now embedded in later field hedges at Zennor, no certain stone rows have been recorded in west Cornwall. In the Isles of Scilly there is a row of three stones on Par Beach, St Martin's which from time to time are revealed when sand on the beach is scoured away by winter storms.

Whilst stone alignments may have been used as territorial markers or symbolic barriers, it is more likely that they were used as processional features in rituals and ceremonies. Some on Bodmin Moor and also on Dartmoor in Devon are directly related to other ceremonial monuments such as cairns and stone circles, whilst others seem to have been deliberately laid out pointing towards distant hills and tors.



The stone row on Par Beach, St Martins, Isles of Scilly. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Standing Stones

Standing stones, otherwise known as menhirs, are more abundant in the West Penwith area of Cornwall than anywhere else in Britain. Analysis of their location reveals few understandable patterns with no preference for any one landscape type over another, whether upland or valley side. Excavations across Cornwall have shown a variety of features associated with these stones including wooden posts, paved or cobbled floors and burials or cremations. It is unlikely that the standing stones were primarily markers for the burials as the human remains were secondary deposits placed in the stone's vicinity some time after their erection.

The stones generally range from two to three and a half metres high, but can reach over five metres high in the case of the north eastern of the two stones known as the Pipers which are located close to the Merry Maidens stone circle. The stones used as menhirs were often carefully chosen, their shapes having meanings as well as being visually striking: pillars, slender triangles or stones with pointed tops (in true Astrix and Obelix style!). Most were vertically set although it has been suggested that the axe-shaped carved stone in the centre of the Boscawen Un stone circle was

deliberately set at an angle to resemble an axe chopping into wood. A small number of stones have been cup-marked or holed, the most famous of which is that of Men-an-Tol, West Penwith, which is now considered to be part of a stone circle.



Gun Rith, one of Cornwall's tallest standing stones, is sited a few hundred metres from the Merry Maidens stone circle. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service