

## Landscape Characterisation

Cornwall's landscape has been enriched by centuries of change and modification, all brought about by human activity. Archaeologists recognise that all of Cornwall (and all of England) is an ever-changing landscape imbued with complex historical meaning. Increasingly this wider landscape view has influenced the way we study past societies, with a move away from the confines of selected areas or sites of special importance to a consideration of the bigger picture of the historic environment as a whole.

A method for understanding the nature of the landscape through its historical development was pioneered in Cornwall in 1994. The method – Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) – has rapidly developed into a national programme which is now funded by English Heritage. Historic Landscape Characterisation interprets and maps the present day landscape in terms of the historic processes which have created it. It does not define the former extent of prehistoric or medieval field systems; rather it illustrates where today's landscape is broadly prehistoric or medieval (or more recent) in origin and in surviving character. It provides an interpretation of the whole landscape and the processes of human action that have shaped it through time, and allows the landscape to be given archaeological significance on a wide scale.

Cornwall's National Mapping Programme was carried out after Historic Landscape Characterisation had been completed, but the results of our mapping from aerial photographs have been used to refine and complement the landscape character map.



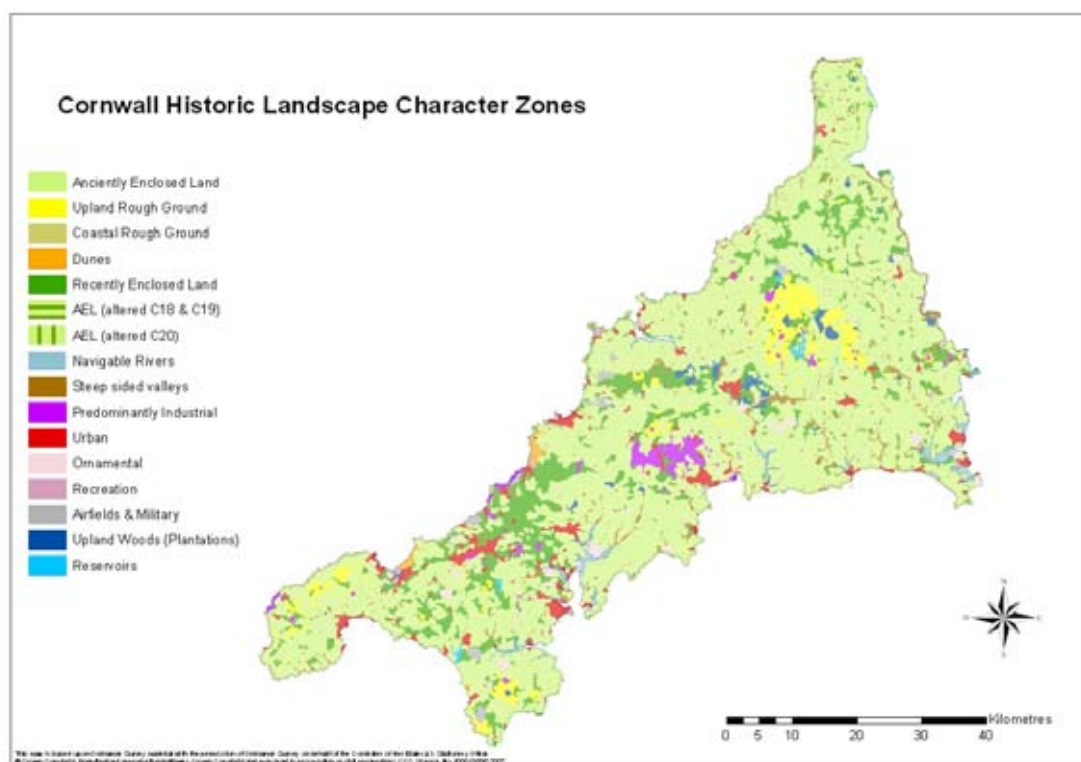
*The historic landscape at Harrowbarrow, Calstock. The sinuous fields in the foreground are medieval in character, whilst the rectangular, straight-sided fields in the distance are of more recent, probably nineteenth century, origin, enclosing areas of former rough ground. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

## Historic Landscape Character Zones

Cornwall's historic landscape was mapped and described using a number of categories of landscape character. These categories could be endlessly subdivided according to the components which make them up, so compromises were made in order that the characterisation might be applied consistently over the whole county. Three layers of landscape character mapping were produced: **types** provide the most detailed representation of historic landscape character; **zones** simplify and generalise the types; **areas** are more general still and comprise relatively large blocks of landscape.

The different ways in which the landscape character mapping is used dictate which layer is the most appropriate. When a small area of landscape is being studied, the historic landscape types would be the most useful. When considering larger chunks of landscape or when taking a more generalised appraisal of Cornwall's historic landscape the historic landscape zones are more suitable. And in looking at how aerial photos help us to decode the landscape the zones map is a good starting point.

The zones map illustrates how much of the Cornish countryside is in reality an ancient landscape; modern features – settlements, fields, sacred sites – are built on top of precursors that date back many centuries. By far the most widespread zone is Anciently Enclosed Land (shown in light green on the zones map). This is the agricultural heartland containing farms documented before the seventeenth century and characterised by irregular field patterns with either medieval or prehistoric origins.

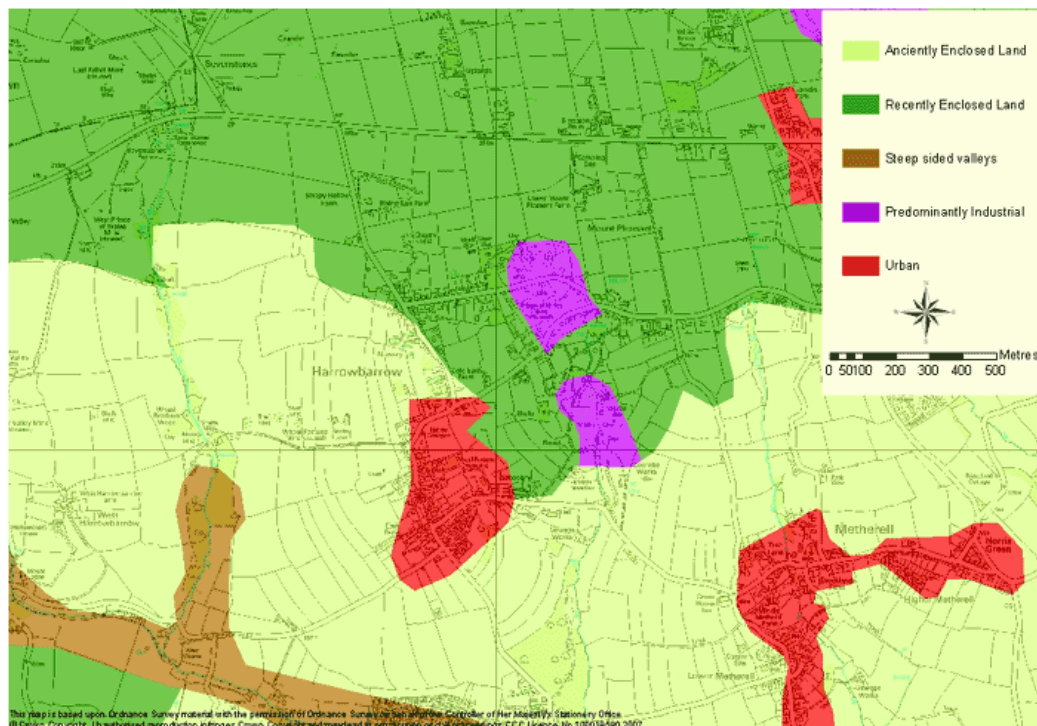


*The Cornwall Historic Landscape Character Zones map*

Much less widespread is Recently Enclosed Land (shown in dark green). This is land (usually former upland rough ground) enclosed by fields in the seventeenth to twentieth centuries. Most was taken in from rough ground in the nineteenth century.

Upland Rough Ground (shown in yellow) is an important component of the historic landscape and was used over the centuries for summer grazing and as a source of fuel. Superficially it may appear to be a natural habitat. Upland heaths were, however, formed directly by human interference. Environmental evidence demonstrates that former woodland cover was cleared during prehistory for arable and pastoral farming and that, as a result, upland soils quickly deteriorated through nutrient loss and leaching. Probably by the end of the Bronze Age, around three thousand years ago, peat was forming and the vegetation of the uplands had settled into its present-day open, heathy form.

A significant feature of the Cornish landscape is the steep-sided valleys which extend inland from creeks or coves into the heart of the countryside. The slopes of these valleys are frequently densely wooded; these woods would have provided sources of coppice wood, fuel and timber. In addition the map shows areas whose predominant character is urban, industrial (notably the china clay district around St Austell), or coastal rough ground and sand dunes. It also takes account of land whose historic character has been altered by extensive modern removal of field boundaries.



*The historic landscape at Harrowbarrow, Calstock. The medieval-derived fields in the south are classed as Anciently Enclosed Land, whilst the rectangular, straight-sided fields in the north are typical of Recently Enclosed Land.*

### **Archaeology in the Landscape Character Zones**

Historic Landscape Characterisation interprets the historic components of today's landscape and illustrates where the landscape is broadly prehistoric or medieval (or more recent) in surviving character. At the same it defines the historical processes which have produced that surviving character. In doing so it offers reliable clues as to the likely extent and nature of the archaeological remains to be found in each of the Landscape Character zones.

Most areas of Upland Rough Ground, for instance, have complex histories beginning with some settlement and arable farming leading to increasingly extensive use for rough grazing, and culminating today in relative neglect. These processes have left traces of six thousand years of human activity. On Bodmin Moor and in West Penwith there is exceptionally good preservation of coherent prehistoric landscapes – both secular landscapes consisting of abandoned fields and farms, and sacred landscapes consisting of stone circles, tombs and ceremonial enclosures. There is also excellent preservation of industrial complexes in the granite uplands.

As the upland soils deteriorated, giving way to the familiar heathland character of Upland Rough Ground, so this zone was used during late prehistoric and medieval times as a source of summer grazing and as such was a vital component of the agricultural regime. It was also an important source of fuel; furze or gorse and, on Bodmin Moor and the Lizard Peninsula, peat. Peat turfs were still being cut into the twentieth century. Turfs were stacked in ricks alongside the cuttings for storage through the summer and hundreds of turf 'steads' on which the ricks were built survive. They are typically playing card-shaped with shallow ditches and low banks around them.



*The rectangular banks of turf steads on Goonhilly Downs on the Lizard Peninsula.  
Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

Recently Enclosed Land was cut out of Upland Rough Ground and many archaeological sites will have been destroyed in the process of enclosure and farming of this land. In places, however, monuments such as Bronze Age barrows and standing stones still survive. Generally, though, because the main historical use of this zone was for rough grazing, the prehistoric and medieval archaeology here is nothing like as rich as that in Anciently Enclosed Land.

Anciently Enclosed Land is the farming heartland with early-documented settlements and field patterns with prehistoric or medieval origins. Much of this zone will have been enclosed and farmed since the later Bronze Age, around three and a half thousand years ago. Being the ancient farmland, it will also be the principal zone of ancient settlement. Of course many centuries of agriculture, including wholesale re-organisations of the layout of fields have obscured and denuded many earlier features but a rich archaeological resource lies below the ground, including prehistoric settlements and the fields of the farmers who first cleared this area.



*The area around Roseworthy Barton is characterised by Anciently Enclosed Land. Many prehistoric and medieval settlement features were plotted here during Cornwall's National Mapping Programme.*



*The area around Hingston Down in east Cornwall is characterised by Recently Enclosed Land. Few settlement or agricultural features were plotted here; there are a few Bronze Age barrows, but most archaeological features are associated with the mining and quarrying industries.*

Excavations and other archaeological investigations, particularly the mapping of sites from aerial photos, are increasingly demonstrating the richness of the below-ground archaeology in Anciently Enclosed Land. In the area around Roseworthy Barton, between Hayle and Camborne, to take one example, a landscape densely populated by prehistoric enclosed settlements and both prehistoric and medieval field boundaries was recorded during Cornwall's National Mapping Programme. This area is exclusively within the zone of Anciently Enclosed Land. It contrasts sharply with a corresponding area of Recently Enclosed Land, in this case around Hingston Down in Calstock, where few settlement or agricultural features were mapped.