

## **The Medieval Landscape**

By the end of the Roman period the farming heartland of Cornwall would have been densely populated. Given the number of probable settlements discovered during Cornwall's National Mapping Programme we think there were more than 100,000 people living in the county. They were housed in settlements set amid a network of small irregular brick-shaped fields.

The period between the collapse of Roman rule in Britain at the beginning of the fifth century and the Norman invasion of 1066 is traditionally known as the Dark Ages. Obviously it was a time of political upheaval and this was accompanied by great social change. During this time rounds and enclosed settlements, with which Cornwall was densely populated during the Roman period, fell out of use. By the time of the Norman invasion the typical settlement was the medieval farming hamlet, consisting of rectangular farmhouses known as longhouses, arranged around a shared farmyard. However few settlements from this period of transition have been excavated and we know little about how this development took place.

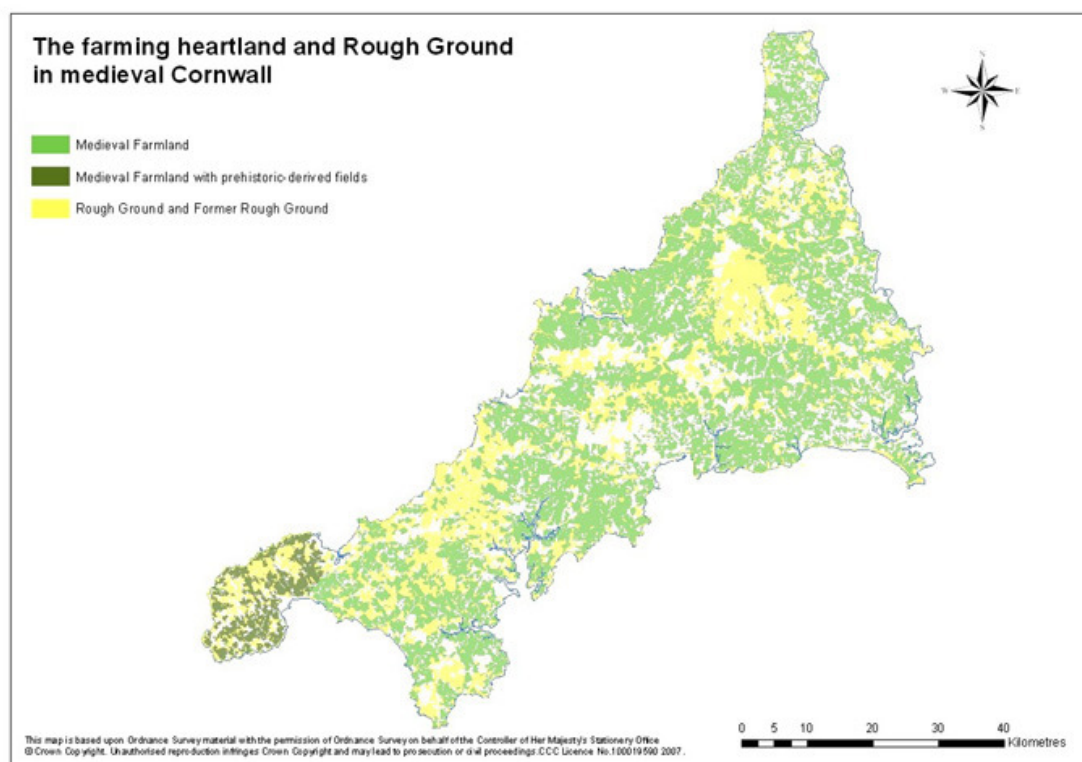
In some parts of Cornwall medieval farmers re-used the lines of prehistoric fields; in this way the irregular field layout of later prehistory was perpetuated. This is certainly the case in West Penwith, and in places on the Lizard Peninsula, St Hilary and elsewhere. A good example is the irregular field system at Kestle Merris in St Keverne. Here the present day fields fossilise the medieval pattern; this in turn is based (at least in part) on the prehistoric field layout and the surviving stony banks of prehistoric fields can be seen running into the moorland beyond the edge of today's fields.



*Prehistoric and medieval; fields at Kestle Merris, St Keverne. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

Over large areas of Cornwall, however, changes in the design and layout of settlements were accompanied by changes in the way the landscape was arranged. There appears to have been a large scale revision of field patterns during the early medieval period, with the establishing of what we call 'open' field systems. These changes are closely associated with the way rural society was organised at this time. Settlements were composed of co-operative hamlets ('towns') made up of between two and ten households. Each hamlet was surrounded by an area of improved land (sometimes enclosed by an irregular curvilinear boundary) known as the in-ground or townland. Each hamlet and its townland would have been attached to estates or manors and its inhabitants would have been tenants of the estate. The in-ground was divided into long narrow strips and groups of strips were shared equally between each household. In upland areas of Cornwall, particularly on Bodmin Moor, there are surviving examples of abandoned medieval hamlets and their associated fields which provide a clear insight into the character of the medieval landscape.

The in-ground was not permanently under arable or pasture but was worked in rotation. The land would be cropped for two or three years and the ground then sown with grass for use as hay or pasture for a longer period – this is called a ley period and this sort of agricultural system is referred to as ley husbandry. We know that this was being practiced by the eleventh century from records contained in the Domesday Book of 1086. The Domesday texts record the extent of ploughland in Cornwall expressed in terms of land for so many ploughs, and they also record the actual number of ploughs. The number of ploughs is less than the number given for the ploughland, showing that not all the ploughland was under cultivation at any one time.



*Map showing the extent of farmland and rough ground used for seasonal grazing in the medieval period.*

There is evidence that medieval agriculture in Cornwall was based on a long ley period with crops grown for two or three years and grass for between four and nine

years. The whole cycle would take roughly ten years to complete and the fields were organised into ten cropping units or furlongs which were subdivided into strips. In this way the greater part of the farmed landscape in medieval Cornwall was divided into strips and in most cases this reorganisation of the landscape paid no heed to the previous arrangement of prehistoric fields.

You can imagine what the medieval landscape might have been like by looking at the nationally important field system at Forrabury, above Boscastle. This is one of only five remaining areas of actively farmed open strip cultivation in Britain. The fields cover more than 20 hectares and are formed by more than 40 strips, each bounded by stone and earth 'balks'.



*The open field system on the headland at Forrabury. Inland and running down to the cliffs beyond, the pattern of former open fields is clearly embedded in today's field layout. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

From the thirteenth century onwards there were significant changes in the economy, ideology and social customs of medieval society. These included a growing emphasis on private property and increasing awareness of the individual as opposed to the communal. Private inner rooms were built in medieval longhouses and some individual smallholdings were created separate from the rest of the community. The most widespread and far-reaching manifestation of these changes, and one that has left a profound imprint on today's landscape, was the enclosure of open field systems with substantial boundary hedges.

The gradual enclosure of open strip fields took place mainly between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries and transformed the landscape into that which survives to this day. The strips surrounding small hamlets were radically re-organised into block-shaped fields based on the enclosure of whole cropping units. These fields are distinctively irregular with very few straight boundaries. This type of field pattern is widespread throughout the county; the landscape around St Anthony in Meneage is a typical example of how the character of today's landscape is derived from the

enclosure of open field cropping units. Where hamlets contained many households landholding arrangements would have been complex and single strips or groups of two or three were enclosed; the resulting pattern closely resembles that of the original open field. Though less common than the larger block-shaped fields there are good examples across Cornwall, such as the fields at Harrowbarrow in the Tamar Valley.



*Present day fields derived from the medieval field pattern at Harrowbarrow in the Tamar Valley (above) and St Anthony in Meneage on the Lizard Peninsula below). Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

In today's landscape the Cornish hedges defining these fields are substantial stock-proof structures which vary across the county depending on the materials to hand. Granite and slate areas are characterised by stone-faced hedges (and sometimes drystone walls), whereas other areas have earthen banks with quarry ditches along both sides. Most Cornish hedges are covered with mature vegetation, including trees.

Some hamlets survive, but few now contain more than one farming family; many other farms are clearly shrunken hamlets. Networks of winding lanes and roads, all of them hedged and many deeply cut through by centuries of use, connect the farms with each other and with the mills, churchtowns and small villages which made up the fabric of the medieval landscape, and which give much of lowland Cornwall its uniquely ancient character.

### **Rough Ground in Medieval Cornwall**

The use of rough ground for summer grazing formed a fundamental part of the agricultural regime in medieval Cornwall, as it appears to have done in prehistory. At the time of the Domesday Book, in 1086, records suggest that roughly one third of Cornwall was pasture. In the Domesday Book 'pasture' refers to land used permanently for grazing and we interpret this as being the rough ground.

Areas of rough ground would have belonged to one or more estates and grazing rights were provided to tenants by the lords of the manors. Medieval farmers would have had rights to an area of rough ground, usually in common with other farmers. Some hamlets had rough ground adjacent to them and this would often be used only by them – these parcels of rough ground are referred to as hamlet commons. Other hamlets had rough ground at some distance away. Here the land was shared between several hamlets. Large areas of rough ground, such as Goonhilly Downs on the Lizard Peninsula, were owned by several manors and grazing rights were granted to all the surrounding hamlets for the use of the whole of the land.

Although much rough ground remained open land, during the later medieval period parts of it were subdivided by the erection of pasture boundaries, either Cornish hedges or drystone walls. Some of these boundaries are ring fences defining the hamlet commons attached to medieval farms. These survive best in today's landscape in parts of the Lizard Peninsula and in West Penwith.



*The landscape at Embla in West Penwith. The patchwork of small irregular fields adjacent to the farm would have been the in-ground or permanently farmed fields. To the left an area of rough ground has been enclosed, probably in the later medieval period, by a curvilinear ring fence boundary. Cornwall County Council Licence 2007. © Geosense 2005*

Livestock were moved to the rough ground in summer partly to take advantage of the seasonal growth of grasses and other herbage, and partly to make it easier to grow crops and hay in the in-ground. In large areas of rough ground, such as Bodmin Moor or Goonhilly Downs, where the grazing areas were some distance from the hamlets, transhumance was practiced. Transhumance is the movement of some members of the household with the animals to the summer grazing grounds. Transhumance huts from the medieval period have been found on parts of Bodmin Moor and we think similar structures may have once existed in other areas.

Documentary evidence from other parts of Britain where transhumance was practiced, such as Scotland and northern England, show that it was often teenage girls and unmarried women who accompanied the stock onto the moors; the rest of the family would stay at the settlement to harvest the arable crops. Traditionally the girls would leave around May Day and return at Halloween.

### **The Ornamental landscape**

One of the earliest impacts of privatisation on the late medieval landscape was the creation of deer parks by estate owners and lords. Venison was an important commodity in medieval society. It was valued as a prestigious part of the aristocratic diet, important as a special item at banquets, and was often used as a gift to other feudal magnates as a sign of favour. The provision of venison reflected the status and wealth of the provider, as did the ability to entertain important guests with hunting. The management of deer to supply quantities of venison and to provide hunting involved the creation of deer parks. Other forms of entertainment might be enjoyed in the parks such as fishing, boating, and relaxing in viewing areas from where the estate could be seen in its full glory.

Deer parks were large areas of land taken into private ownership and made inaccessible for the majority of the local population. The parks were enclosed by high wooden stake fences known as 'pales'. Licence to 'empale' was granted by the King and was accompanied by strict laws preventing public access. Deer parks were often imposed on former farmland or rough ground which had been previously been available as common grazing land.

By the twelfth century at least twelve castles and manor houses in Cornwall had deer parks attached to them, and almost fifty deer parks are known to have existed in the county by the end of the fifteenth century. Most had been disparked or had become decayed by the mid sixteenth century but their imprint on the landscape can still be traced today. In some cases, such as the park surrounding Restormel castle, the present-day landscape retains a park-like quality with clumps of trees and wooded areas set amid open grassland. In other cases, such as Higher Deer Park at Three Burrows near Truro, the park pale has been fossilised in today's field pattern by its re-use as field hedges.



*Higher Deer Park, near Three Burrows. Field hedges still follow the deer park boundary creating a large oval enclosure which has cut across earlier fields. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*