

Continuity and Change

Roman Cornwall

The transition from Iron Age to Roman periods in Cornwall is marked by a continuity of lifestyle and tradition. Rounds and enclosed settlements as well as unenclosed round house hamlets continued as the predominant forms of settlement, and there are few signs of Romanisation with only two forts and a single villa.



The Roman fort at Restormel surviving as a rectangular earthwork. Only one other fort is known – that at Nanstallon near Bodmin. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

There were some changes: hillforts fell out of use, houses became oval instead of circular, and in West Penwith and the Isles of Scilly courtyard house settlements developed. These were a variant of round house settlements. They were unenclosed and contained a number of houses; each house consisting of a group of stone-built rooms arranged around a courtyard. They were in use from the second to the fourth centuries AD.

Everyday life in Cornwall changed little under Roman rule; the archaeological record shows a remarkable degree of continuity from the later Iron Age. Enclosed farms or hamlets continued to be the predominant type of settlement in the countryside. Their number increased during this period, with an apparent spate of enclosure building taking place in the second century AD. It is possible that rectangular-shaped enclosures are a sign of Roman influence but this is not necessarily so and round enclosures were certainly built during the Romano-British period.

Courtyard Houses

During the Romano-British period in West Penwith and on the Isles of Scilly a new type of settlement unique to these two areas developed; the courtyard house. Courtyard house settlements were in use from the second to fourth centuries AD. Each settlement generally contains a group of courtyard houses, sometimes with round houses as well.

The houses are oval or irregular in shape and are enclosed by a massive stone-faced earth bank two to three metres thick. Within this enclosure are several rooms joined together and arranged around a paved courtyard. The usual arrangement consists of a round or oval room opposite the courtyard entrance with a long room to its right. Excavation has shown that the round or oval rooms served as domestic areas, and the long rooms housed animals or were used for storage. Archaeologists are uncertain whether the courtyards were roofed or not.



Courtyard house settlement at Chysauster, Madron. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Most courtyard house settlements are unenclosed although some are found within rounds. Many developed directly from later Iron Age round house settlements; the round houses were incorporated into courtyard houses as rooms. Courtyard house settlements are farming hamlets like the rounds and unenclosed settlements with which they are contemporary.



The field system associated with Chysauster courtyard house settlement. Most courtyard houses are situated within extensive field systems arranged like the neat

rectangular fields in this photo. These particular fields were badly damaged during agricultural improvement in the 1980s. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

From Romans to Normans

The end of the fourth century AD was a time of repeated upheaval in Britain. The Roman Empire came under ever increasing threat and shortly after AD 400 the armies were withdrawn for the defence of Italy. It is likely that around this time the government of the British province collapsed. From the 440s onwards large areas of Britain were lost to Saxon invaders. In the west, however, there remained a strong sub-Roman enclave whose power against the Saxons is symbolised by the legendary King Arthur.



Illustration Tintagel. Tintagel Island. Legend has it that Tintagel was the birth-place of King Arthur. Tintagel was originally thought to be a monastic site but is now generally accepted as the seat of power of the Dark Age kings who ruled Cornwall between the fifth and seventh centuries. There are numerous rectangular buildings from this period on the island and its special status is illustrated by the enormous quantities of imported pottery found there. ©English Heritage. NMR 18251/12

The fifth to seventh centuries, a period referred to by archaeologists as 'post-Roman', was a time of changes. The most significant of these was the adoption of Christianity, which was introduced from the Mediterranean and France and, particularly, from Wales. The early Christian foundations in Cornwall were, like those in Wales, not simply isolated churches, but actual settlements. They were called lanns and consisted of an enclosure which defined the consecrated area. Within the enclosure were probably houses, a cemetery and a chapel.



The medieval parish church at St Buryan is on the site of a post-Roman lann, whose enclosure is fossilised in the present-day churchyard. The lann enclosure re-used the line of the enclosing bank and ditch of an Iron Age or Romano-British enclosed settlement. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Post-Roman and early medieval settlements have proved difficult to locate in Cornwall and evidence for everyday rural life is sparse. There was continued occupation in some Cornish rounds; at Trethurgy oval houses were in use into the sixth century after which the round fell into disrepair.

At Tintagel the buildings dating from the post-Roman period are rectangular, but this was a site of special status and may not have been typical of everyday settlements. Buildings at Gwithian dating from the sixth to eighth centuries are small and sub circular, but these may be workshops rather than houses.

What is certain is that by the tenth century the typical Cornish medieval settlement – a hamlet consisting of unenclosed groups of rectangular houses – had developed. Archaeologists do not fully understand the development from the oval houses of the Romano-British rounds to the rectangular houses of the medieval period, why enclosed settlements were abandoned, or what led to these changes. The abandonment of rounds marked the end of a settlement tradition which had lasted for nearly a thousand years. At the same time pottery styles changed, and there was a change in trading contacts from the Mediterranean to France. Maritime contact with Wales, Ireland and Brittany intensified and a local British kingdom emerged, providing a degree of political stability.

Another factor which may have acted as a catalyst for change is the occurrence of a widespread natural disaster around AD 540. Although the nature of this event is uncertain it is linked to outbreaks of plague in the Mediterranean and resulted in restricted growth in trees for several years. We can guess that it also caused crop failures and, if it was accompanied by plague, may have led to a drop in population and the abandonment of settlements.

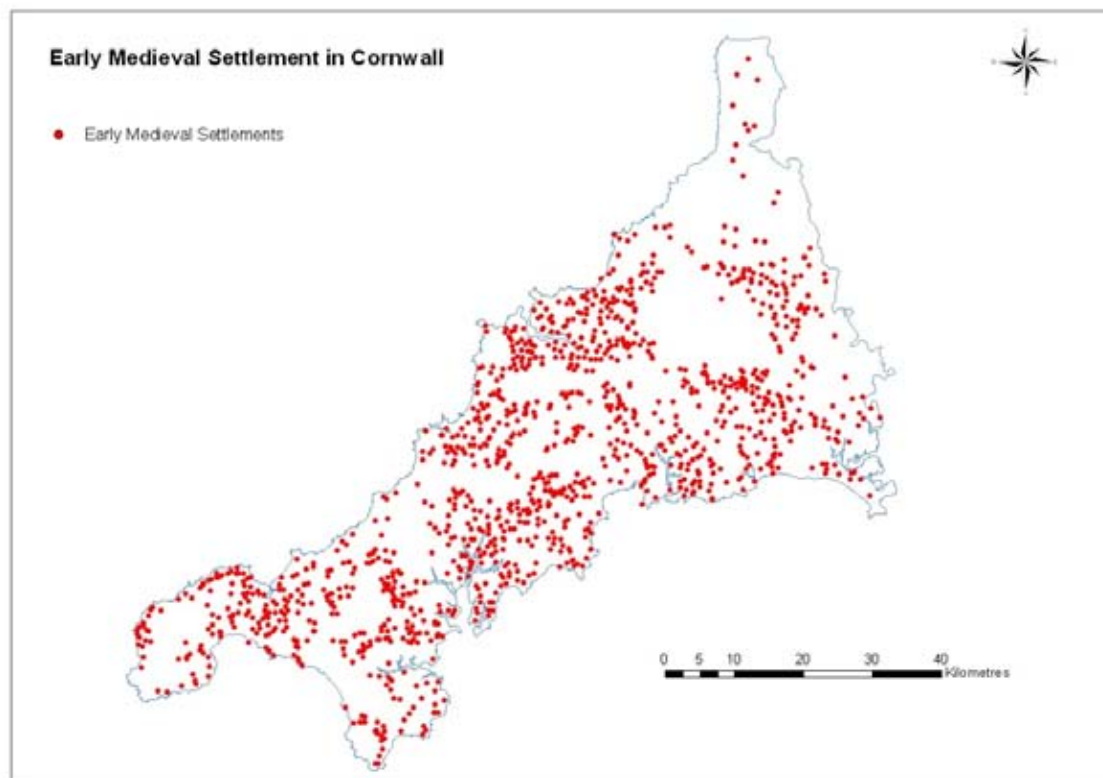
Against a changing political background, affected by contact with different people, influenced by a new religion, it is perhaps not surprising that the post-Roman population gradually moved away from the old system which had been in place in

one form or another since the later Iron Age. Crop failure and plague may have accelerated the degeneration of that old system. Enclosure, once a symbol of status and certainty, was now a symbol of the past.

The Pre-Norman landscape

Very few post-Roman settlements have been excavated in Cornwall and we cannot say for sure what the typical form of settlement might have been. We do know, however, where many of them were. This knowledge comes from analysis of place-names and their meaning. Settlements regarded as medieval in origin are those that were first recorded in documents or on maps before 1540; in Cornwall there are roughly 7,500 of these.

The majority have Cornish rather than English names (for instance 'Trebartha' is a Cornish name, 'Fernacre' is English). The Cornish names which contain the elements **tre** meaning 'farm, estate, or hamlet', and **bos**, meaning 'dwelling', are known to be of early origin; farms with names like Tregiffian or Bosfranken may date from anywhere between the fifth and eleventh centuries but are most likely of post-Roman origin.



Map showing the distribution of early medieval settlements in Cornwall based on place-names containing the elements tre and bos. There are gaps in the settlement pattern on the poor soils in areas of rough ground and moorland such as Bodmin Moor. This map does not show the full extent of early medieval settlement in northeast Cornwall where 90% of place-names are English rather than Cornish.



Cropmark of an enclosed settlement near Bosfranken farm, St Buryan. Of great interest is the fact that many rounds and enclosed settlements are situated close to farms with early medieval names. The inference is that enclosures such as this were abandoned and that the communities they once housed established new settlements nearby which have been in use ever since. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

Another place-name element relevant to the changes in settlement in the post-Roman period is **ker**, meaning 'fort'. Ker often appears as 'caer', 'car' or 'cra' in today's place-names. Settlements with ker in their name may date from the fifth to seventh centuries. This name element is generally taken to mean the site of a round or enclosed settlement and this is borne out by field and aerial survey.



An abandoned round at Crasken, near Helston, whose enclosing bank is incorporated into the present-day field pattern. The name Crasken contains the early medieval element Ker. This suggests that occupation moved some time between the fifth and seventh centuries from the round to the site of today's farm. It is very likely that today's field hedges are built on the lines of the field pattern contemporary with the round. In the lower part of the field to the left of the round are the faint cropmark remains of a rectangular enclosure, which may also have been a settlement. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

