

## Enclosed settlements

During the late Iron Age, from about 400 BC, a new form of settlement appeared in the landscape. They consisted of groups of round houses and ancillary buildings forming farmsteads or hamlets which were enclosed by a bank and ditch (sometimes with two or more lines of bank and ditch). These enclosures are generally quite small – less than a hectare – with a simple entranceway formed by a gap in the circuit of the bank and ditch. Many are roughly circular or oval in shape but rectilinear enclosures are also common. Enclosed settlements are frequently sited on hillslopes with their entrance facing downhill.

Although archaeologists traditionally think of enclosed farmsteads as synonymous with the Iron Age, peak usage of this form of settlement in Cornwall was in the second and third centuries AD (AD100-300) during the Romano-British period. Settlements housed in enclosures were in use right to the end of the Romano-British period, some as late as the sixth century AD.

More than 2,500 enclosures are known in Cornwall. Many are ploughed down but their ditches can be recognised as cropmarks from aerial photos. In many places the enclosed settlements are sited within extensive field systems and the farmers living in these hamlets practised mixed agriculture, cultivating crops and keeping a range of livestock.

## Cornish Rounds

Enclosed settlements of the Iron Age and Romano-British period in Cornwall have traditionally been called 'rounds'. It is easy to see why. The enclosing banks of many survived after their abandonment either as isolated features in the landscape or as distinctive small round fields incorporated into later field patterns.



*A good example of a Cornish round at Gweek, on the banks of the Helford. The outline of this settlement enclosure has been incorporated into the later field pattern. Such preservation of enclosures in the present day landscape is not uncommon and has probably led to the coining of the term 'round'. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

The reason for the good survival of rounds is the substantial nature of their banks which often incorporated large amounts of stonework, including some rounds whose

banks were revetted or faced with blocks of stone. Given the small and irregular form of the later fields we should not be surprised that it was considered less bother to lay out the fields around the enclosure than to raze it. Of course in some cases the present day field hedges may well be following the lines of prehistoric hedges associated with the round.



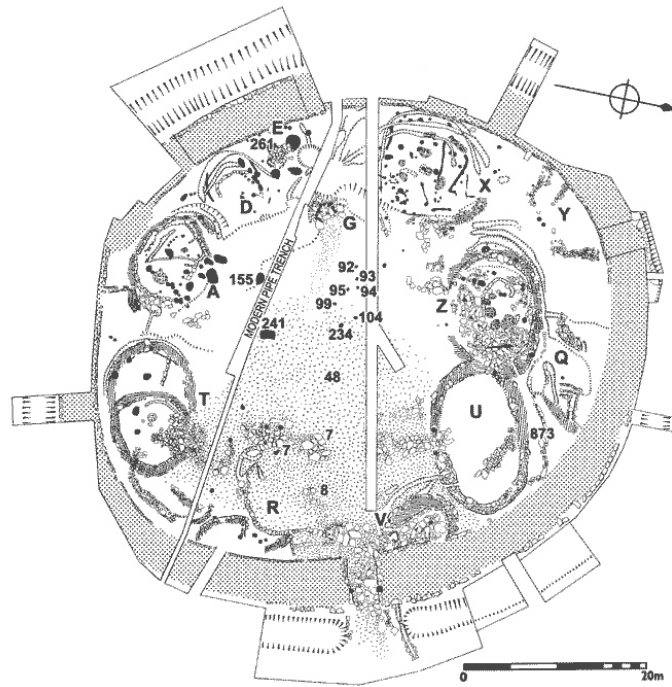
*A round at Carlidnack, Mawnan. The enclosing bank has been incorporated into the surrounding field system which is medieval in origin. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

### **How Did Rounds Work?**

Our knowledge of Cornish rounds, their dating and how they worked comes from the few examples which have been excavated. The only one fully excavated is Trethurgy near St Austell; this has a number of features which are seen as representative of Cornish rounds.

The round at Trethurgy enclosed less than a third of a hectare and was occupied from the middle of the second century AD until the sixth century. It was enclosed by a single ditch and a bank, both faces of which were revetted by stone. There was a paved entrance in the downhill side which was closed by a double-leaved gate. The enclosure contained five stone houses built around its internal periphery. There were also a range of ancillary buildings, including a byre and a granary. Throughout the life of the settlement its basic plan was maintained; the houses were rebuilt on the same spot, and the same areas were used for storage and for stock pens.

Wheat, barley and some oats were cultivated and livestock were farmed. Small-scale copper alloy production and the smithing of iron took place. A tin ingot from the fourth century was found suggesting that tin was being mined and smelted in the area, perhaps by the occupants of the round.



*Plan of the excavated Roman-British round at Trethurgy, St Austell, showing the stone-revetted enclosing bank, lengths of the outer ditch, the entrance (towards the bottom of the plan), and the layout of the oval houses and other stone built structures.*

### **Cropmark Rounds**

Inevitably many rounds have been levelled by centuries of ploughing. Because the enclosing ditches and banks of rounds were substantial features – the ditches are two metres deep on average, sometimes more – they often form very clear cropmarks and numerous rounds have been identified from aerial photos.



*The enclosing ditch of a plough-levellled round is visible as a cropmark showing as a green mark against a background of ripened cereal at Trenithan Bennett, Probus.*

*This enclosure has a number of features typical of Cornish rounds. There is an entrance formed by a simple gap in the ditch on its downhill (left-hand) side; there is a trackway leading up to and through the entrance (showing as a strong green band); and a number of internal features, some of them possibly houses, are visible. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

### **Other enclosures**

Many thousands of enclosed settlements from the Iron Age and Romano-British periods are known throughout the British Isles. Cornish rounds are sometimes compared with enclosures of apparently similar size and construction found in South Wales (where they are called 'raths' or 'ringworks') and from Ireland ('raths' or 'ring forts'). However there are differences in the date range of the three types of enclosure and a more recent view is that it is misleading to link the Welsh and Irish sites with those of Cornwall.

On the other hand the term 'round' as a class of monument has become a handy label to refer to any enclosure in Cornwall thought to be a prehistoric settlement. Within the county there is an enormous variation in the size and form of enclosures. This is especially the case with those which have been ploughed down and have been identified from cropmarks on aerial photos. Many are not round, and there is little or nothing to distinguish them in appearance from enclosed settlements found in many other parts of the country.



*An enclosed settlement at Carnevas, St Merryn. The enclosure ditch is visible as a cropmark where the crop over the ditch has grown taller than that in the surrounding field. There is an entrance towards the left of the photo and the faint cropmark of a round house in the interior of the enclosure. Carnevas is one of the smallest enclosed settlements known in Cornwall, measuring a tenth of a hectare. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*



*An unusual hexagon-shaped enclosure at Tregaverne, Port Isaac. This is one of the largest enclosures recorded during Cornwall's National Mapping Programme, covering well over a hectare in extent. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*



*A double-ditched square enclosure at St Mawgan, Restormel. Enclosures of this type are known from several parts of the county, particularly in east Cornwall. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

### **Chronology**

Enclosed settlements first appeared in the Cornish landscape around the fourth century BC in the later Iron Age. At roughly the same time Cornish hillforts developed from being large irregular enclosures with a single rampart and ditch into smaller, more regular-shaped structures with one or more concentric ramparts. These

changes in monument style are contemporary with the adoption of a new type of pottery, South Western Decorated ware.

A minority of the enclosed settlements dated by excavation were occupied in the Iron Age. Some were in use from the later Iron Age into the early part of the Romano-British period; a few were inhabited beyond the Roman period up to the sixth century. But the peak period for the use of enclosed settlements was the second and third centuries AD, followed by a gradual decline during the fourth century.

Some enclosures saw two phases of use; the original settlement expanded, its enclosing ditch was filled in and a new ditch, enclosing a much larger area, was dug. Other settlements began life as clusters of round houses which would be enclosed in the future. At a number of locations enclosed settlements are sited in very close proximity to each other: whilst this may be a sign of local population increase, in some cases it is probably the result of one enclosure being abandoned and a new one being built close by.



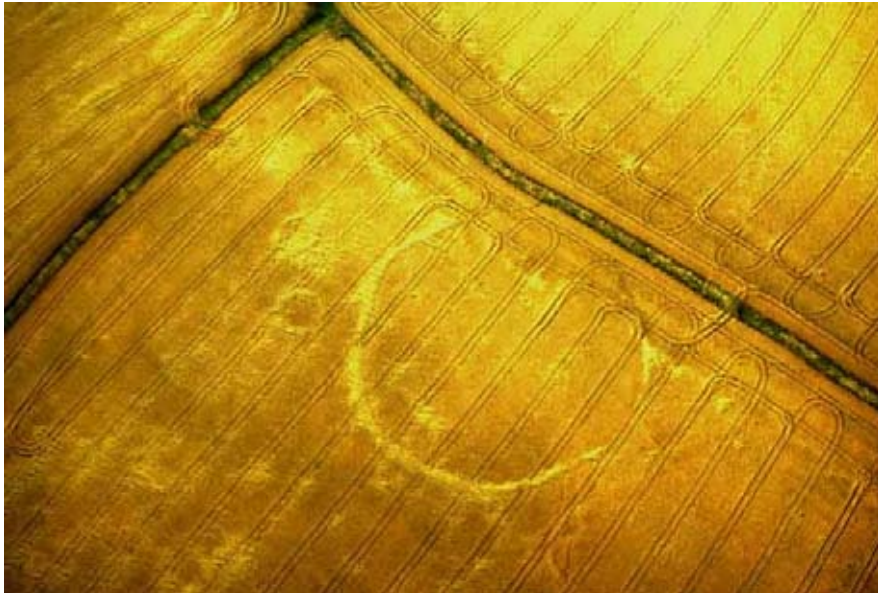
*Enclosures at Great Lizen, Lansallos. Towards the top right is a large enclosure with two wide-spaced ditches. Adjacent to it is a smaller more rectangular enclosure. Overlying this enclosure is a double-ditched feature, most probably a trackway, which appears to be leading to the larger enclosure. In the top left of the photo is the faint cropmark of a third enclosure which is much more rectangular in shape. This enclosure may be the remains of a field. Other faint cropmarks hint at a landscape of great complexity and time depth. Note how along the right hand side of the present day field, the hedge kinks around the enclosures; this tells us the enclosures were still standing as earthworks when the hedge was constructed. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

## The Meaning of Enclosures

Some archaeologists see the enclosure of settlements as a response to social instability; substantial banks and ditches thrown up around Iron Age farming hamlets for protection or defence. But the opposite view is proposed by others; the fact that enclosures are the predominant form of settlement for such a long period (up to a thousand years) is a symptom of stability in the countryside rather than stress.

If the banks and ditches around enclosed settlements are not 'defences' then what are they for? Why did these ancient farming communities go to all the trouble of building such substantial boundaries around their homes? An enclosure as a barrier may have had symbolic meaning that we in the twenty first century can only guess at.

What is likely, though, is that the defining of a settlement by an enclosure was a mark of prestige and a measure of the status of its inhabitants. Open settlements similar to those in use in the Bronze Age were a feature of the Iron Age and Roman countryside and are found side by side with rounds and other enclosed settlements. To use a modern urban analogy, the prehistoric open settlement might be seen as the equivalent of a row of terraced houses, whilst the enclosed settlement corresponds to an avenue of detached houses with large gardens.



*The outline of a round or enclosed settlement visible as a cropmark at White Cross, St Columb. To the left of the enclosure two round houses are also visible. Open round house settlements shared the Iron Age and Romano-British landscape with rounds and at some excavated rounds contemporary round houses have been found nearby. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

If the two forms of settlement represent a differentiation in status between co-operative groups of farmers living in open settlements and those in enclosures, how and by whom was this status conferred?

The answer lies with the hillforts with which these two forms of settlement shared the landscape. Recent theories about Cornish hillforts see them as the regional centres where farming communities held counsel on issues relating to local society and economy. According to this model they were the communal centres for populations who controlled their own territories and resources, rather than housing an aristocracy who ruled over the local population, as has traditionally been presumed.

The development of multiple enclosure hillforts took place around the same time as the first enclosed settlements appeared in the Cornish landscape. These changes are likely to be linked; they suggest that licence to build enclosures was granted (presumably in return for a tribute) at the community level of society centred on the hillforts. Thus the role of the community level authority, formerly a committee of local farmers, had become extended and was being remodelled as a more fixed body of individuals with local power. This extension of authority was marked by the new form of hillforts.

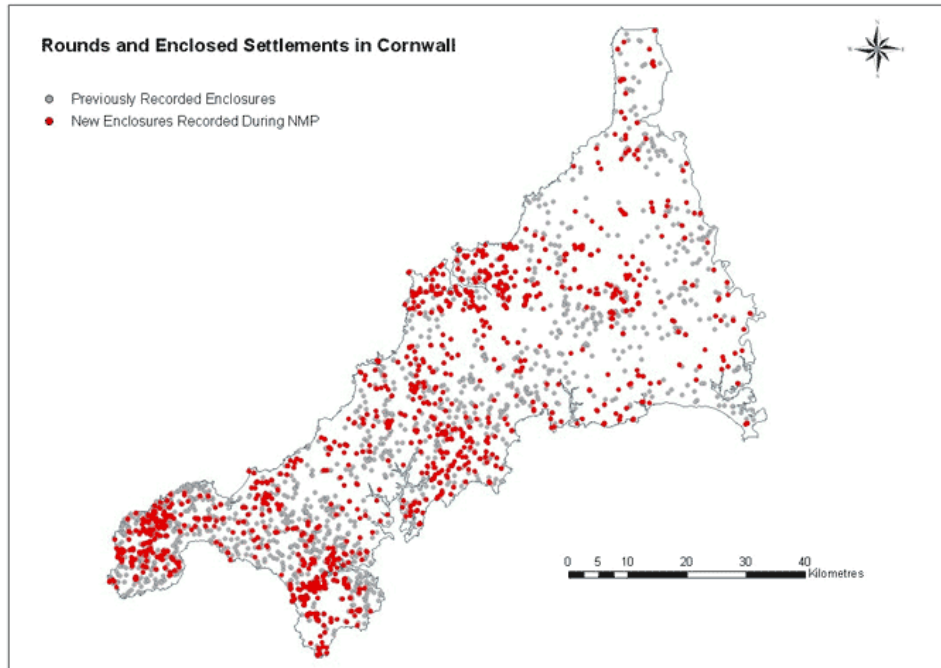


*Tregonning Hill, Breage. Castle Pencaire, a multiple enclosure hillfort, sits on the summit. On the lower slopes are two rounds, one of which in the foreground has been partially ploughed down. Rounds situated in the immediate vicinity of hillforts are not uncommon in Cornwall, but we do not fully understand the significance of this pattern of distribution. The corrugated effect on the hill slope is made by cultivation ridges known as 'ridge and furrow'. Generally ridge and furrow is a feature found in fields cultivated in the medieval period but some archaeologists believe that the ridges on Tregonning Hill are Iron Age, made by the inhabitants of these two rounds. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

### **Aerial Photography and Enclosed Settlements**

The ditches and banks which surround enclosed settlements are frequently substantial features; enclosure ditches are typically up to two metres deep. Ditches of this size readily produce clear cropmarks in favourable conditions and many enclosures have been identified from aerial photos. In a number of cases internal structures such as round houses and additional features like outer ditches also appear on the photos.

The mapping of enclosed settlements is one of the most important aspects of Cornwall's National Mapping Programme. More than one thousand new enclosures were identified and this outcome has led to a reappraisal of the density of rural settlement in Iron Age and Roman Cornwall.



*Map showing the distribution of rounds and enclosed settlements in Cornwall. Enclosures discovered during Cornwall's National Mapping Programme are shown in red.*

The enclosures that we know about are, of course, not the only ones. An unknown number await discovery. Already new sites are being spotted on recent photography taken since Cornwall's National Mapping Programme was completed. The formation of cropmarks is not a consistent process and depends on a number of factors. Our experience of aerial archaeology tells us that cropmarks may appear one year but not the next, so the discovery of archaeological sites relies in part on luck as well as knowledge and skill. It's a case of being in the right place at the right time.



*An Iron Age or Romano-British enclosure at Paul in West Penwith, visible as a cropmark. We mapped this part of Cornwall in 2000: this enclosure first appeared on digital photography taken in 2005. By continuing to carry out more flights we will doubtless make more discoveries of this sort. Cornwall County Council Licence 2007. © Geosense 2005.*