

## Medieval settlement

### Medieval longhouses

The longhouse is a standard house type in Cornwall and the South West and is part of a wider tradition throughout Britain. The houses are stone built and most in Cornwall date from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, although some are earlier than this.

The main characteristic of the medieval longhouse is that it provided under one roof both the living quarters for the household and a byre for the wintering of cattle. A cross-passage running across the house provided access to both rooms. The byres or 'shippons' had mangers of wood or stone slabs built against the walls and a drain running down the centre of the floor. The living room acted as kitchen, dining room and bedroom. It was open to the rafters and contained a central hearth and fittings for benches and beds against the walls. Narrow slits served as windows.



*A longhouse and barn (to the left) under excavation in advance of flooding by the Colliford Lake reservoir on Bodmin Moor. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

Longhouse hamlets were the characteristic settlement type throughout medieval Cornwall. How these hamlets were organised can best be seen on Bodmin Moor where they survive in their entirety. As the population expanded between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries so the pressure on available land increased. Settlements were established in parts of the moor which had been uninhabited since the Bronze Age. More than thirty of these settlements are now deserted; the process of desertion began in the fourteenth century as a result of outbreaks of plague – the Black Death. With the drastic reduction in population, holdings on better farming land in the nearby lowlands became available at the expense of these moorland settlements.



*The longhouse settlement at Brown Willy. This is one of a number of well-preserved deserted medieval settlements on Bodmin Moor. The outline of the longhouses is marked by ruined walls and they are accompanied by small enclosures which served as gardens, animal pens and mowhays (yards for hay ricks). Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

Some settlements are just single farmsteads but most are hamlets containing from two to six farmsteads, clustered together around a small open area or 'townplace' – a shared farmyard. Each farmstead comprises a main farmhouse and one or two smaller outbuildings serving as barns and animal houses. The buildings are usually laid out with their long axis running downslope to help drainage

Survey of the deserted settlements on Bodmin Moor, made from aerial photographs and in the field, provides much information not only about the layout of the individual hamlets but also how they fitted into the landscape.



*The medieval hamlet of Carwether, St Breward. This hamlet covers about one hectare and consists of three longhouses, several ancillary buildings and some paddocks or garden plots. The buildings are arranged randomly along the valley side. Traces of ridge and furrow cultivation can be seen in the foreground and the settlement is surrounded by an extensive strip field system. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

### **Medieval Fields**

Medieval farms and hamlets had fields associated with them which included large areas under crop. Cultivation ridges, known as ridge and furrow, can be seen in many of the fields. The ridges, which are usually sinuous and irregular, provided raised seed beds in the thin soil and enhanced drainage. They were probably made by spade digging in rocky ground and by cattle-drawn plough in better soil.

The fields belonging to a medieval farm would often be enclosed by one or more long curving boundaries. Part of the enclosed area was cultivated and part used as pasture. Much of the arable land was subdivided into 'strip fields' with each strip defined by a low stony bank. Each farmstead within a hamlet had its own share of strips scattered through the fields.

Systems of crop rotation – ley husbandry - were employed, involving two to three years of arable cultivation (mainly of oats and rye), followed by four to nine years of grass. The turf which developed over this phase of the rotation would be sliced off by hand, then dried and burnt. The ashes would be mixed with manure and other dressings before being dug back in to replenish the soil. This technique is known as 'beat burning'.



*Well-preserved strip fields at Garrow, St Breward. These fields are of a characteristically sinuous shape and contain prominent ridge and furrow. The strips would be divided between each farmstead forming a hamlet and are often fairly regular in width, measured in multiples of Cornish rods (each rod being eighteen feet or five and a half metres). Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

### **Upland fields**

The medieval settlements on the fringes of Bodmin Moor were not abandoned and their field systems have remained in use. The form of the boundaries may have changed through time, with some added or removed, but today's hedges very often fossilise the layout of the former strip fields.



*The present-day fields at Fernacre, St Breward are clearly fossilising the pattern of former strip fields by the continued use of some of the strip boundaries. In the*

*distance towards the top left of the photo are the fragmentary remains of some original strips. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

Strip fields are found not just on Bodmin Moor, but throughout all upland areas of Cornwall. Where the strips survive they are thought to result from outfield cultivation. Outfield cultivation was practised in parts of Britain with large areas of poor land. It involved the temporary cultivation of land normally used as pasture. Documents show that in Cornwall outfield areas were only occasionally cultivated – maybe only every fifty years or so, when demand for produce was high or perhaps when prices were particularly favourable.



*Extensive survival of strip fields on Rosenannon Downs, St Wenn. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

### **Lowland fields**

Few deserted longhouse settlements survive in lowland areas; here most have been superseded by later buildings. On the other hand the extent of the lowland farming landscape in the medieval period is shown by the widespread occurrence of former strip fields which were enclosed at a later date in a similar way to those at Fernacre.



*The field pattern around Tregoss, Roche, has its origins in strip fields surrounding the medieval settlements of Tregoss and, in the distance, Pendine. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

The greater part of the farmed landscape of Cornwall appears to have been divided into strip-fields during the medieval period. Documents show that strip-fields began to be enclosed from the thirteenth century onwards. The enclosure of these strips often leaves distinctive 'markers' behind in surviving field boundaries and field patterns, such as so-called 'reversed-s' or 'reversed-j' curves, and 'dog-legs'.



*The field pattern at Trencherth, Gwinear, a settlement first recorded in 1201, is formed by the enclosure of bundles of strips. Some of the present-day fields are*

*characterised by sinuous boundaries and some of the field hedges have notable kinks or 'dog-legs'. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*



*The countryside around Metherell, Calstock, where the fabric of the medieval landscape underpins that of the present day. Many of today's farms and villages were first established in medieval times. The majority of lanes, roads and field boundaries are also medieval in origin. In this way the pattern of medieval settlement can be seen to form the basis for much of today's landscape. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

### **Medieval towns**

Historical documents and records allow us a glimpse of social life in medieval Cornwall. Beyond their own family circle medieval farmers would come into daily contact with neighbours from their own hamlet, and frequent contact with families from nearby hamlets. Church every Sunday would be a chance to meet people from the wider parish. Trips to the nearest market towns would provide contact with farming families from a wider area, as well as traders and craftsmen and people from other walks of life.

Like the rest of Britain medieval Cornwall was overwhelmingly rural in character, but by the fourteenth century was well served by a network of towns and markets. Towns in Cornwall were small but there were many of them. A number of factors define medieval settlements as towns or boroughs; their relatively large population, the ordered arrangement of houses along one or more streets, the craft specialisation of their inhabitants, and by the granting of the right to hold markets. Charters confirming borough status are common from the end of the twelfth century. Many of the towns retained rural characteristics, such as the strip fields that surrounded them.



*Camelford in North Cornwall. The medieval core of the town is in the right centre of this photo. The surrounding countryside is characterised by field patterns which clearly are based on former strip fields. In common with a number of medieval towns Camelford developed along the line of a major road (now the A39). As the name of the town suggests it was sited at a crossing point of the river Camel, the route of which can be seen in the photo as a wooded valley. It was an important market town serving the local farming hamlets as far afield as the north western part of Bodmin Moor. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

### **The origin of towns**

Five markets are recorded in the Domesday Book; Launceston, Liskeard, Bodmin, St Germans and Marazion. Helston can also be regarded as a borough at this time. All except Liskeard were important religious centres and it is likely that religious communities were a focus for early medieval settlement. This is because the major religious sites served an administrative function and there was a need to support the non-agricultural religious communities with food and materials. Other centres, such as the early medieval lann sites at St Buryan, Probus, Crantock and elsewhere, may also have acted as markets in an unofficial capacity but were not recorded in the Domesday Book.

By the time of the Domesday Book in 1086, the market at Launceston had been moved to the castle from its former site at St Stephen by Launceston, where it had been owned by the church. Similarly the Norman lord, Count Robert, established a new market at Trematon castle, thereby undermining the church-owned market at St Germans. This was all part of the Norman lords' drive to secure the valuable revenues which were generated by the towns.



*Launceston was the only Cornish town to have been provided with a defensive wall, which was built by the thirteenth century. Little of this now survives but its position is marked by the curving line of the street at the right hand side of this photo. The town grew up around the castle where, from the end of the eleventh century a market was based. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

### **The Development of Towns**

From the twelfth century onwards an increasing number of markets and towns are recorded in documents. All of the new towns which had developed by the end of the twelfth century were coastal or inland ports, and trade was an obvious factor in their location. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries many new towns were established as fishing ports. Cornish trade included the export of tin, fish, slate and cloth, and the import from Brittany, Ireland, France and Spain of salt, linen, canvas, wine and fruit.



*The port of Fowey in south east Cornwall. The town has undergone extensive development over the centuries but was founded as a medieval trading port by about 1200. The importance of the port is reflected in coastal defences including blockhouses and a sea-facing wall. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

After the twelfth century the increase in number of towns was a result of economic growth and population expansion. As well as trading and fishing ports, towns were developed inland; these grew up along major roads and the crossing points of rivers. Some towns also had important administrative functions; for instance the County Jail was at Launceston, and Helston, Truro, Liskeard and Lostwithiel were Stannary towns. Each Stannary town contained a Coinagehall for the twice yearly assaying (testing for purity and taxation) of tin. At Lostwithiel the Coinagehall formed part of the 'Duchy Palace', a large administration complex which at the end of the thirteenth century was the centre from which the Duchy estates were managed and contained the county court.



*The town of Helston in 1946. The medieval layout and street plan can clearly be seen. There is a single main street (running from left to right in the photo), with two side roads. The streets are flanked by burgage plots, long narrow plots of land running at right angles from the street frontage. RAF 106G/UK/1663/3263. CCC RAF photography*