

A short history of west Cornwall's downs and moors

Opening up the landscape

The earliest evidence for human activity after the end of the last Ice Age (about 10,000 years ago) comes in the form of worked flints left by small groups of hunter-gatherers. These Mesolithic people moved around the landscape: much of their food came from the sea but they also hunted for meat and skins, and collected nuts and berries from the forests which covered much of west Cornwall at this time. It is likely that they used fire and stone tools to create open spaces to attract deer which could then be hunted more easily.



18

During the Neolithic period and Early Bronze Age (roughly 6000 to 3500 years ago), the earliest farmers cleared large areas of forest to create grazing for their herds of cattle and flocks of sheep and goats, leaving largely open landscapes of grass and heath. The first stone monuments were built during this period, including the chambered structures we know as 'quoits' (10), followed later by standing stones, stone circles, barrows and cairns (sites 3, 17, 23, 24, 27). The meanings of these sites for the people who built them are now lost but we can see that they formed complex ceremonial landscapes. It is clear from the siting of these monuments that their builders gave importance to views to, from and between them, and to features of the natural landscape such as hills and rocky outcrops (21). This is a clue to the openness of the landscapes in which they were built.



19

Farming the land

From the Middle Bronze Age (about 1500 BC) there was a change: permanent settlements began to be established and large areas of better land were enclosed as fields (8, 29). The population now depended to a much greater extent on the grain and other crops they grew. Livestock continued to be important and large areas in the uplands and between settlements were used as rough grazing. The practice of sending cattle from lowland farms to the moors during the summer months began at this time and continued until at least the later medieval period.

This pattern of mixed farming, with cultivation and enclosed pasture in fields around settlements and extensive grazing on the downs and moors, continued with relatively little change in its basic elements into the nineteenth century: Middle Bronze Age farmers brought forward in time would have understood the methods of their Victorian successors.

The origins of the modern Cornish countryside

Many of the historic farm settlements we see today, particularly those with names including the Cornish elements *tre-* and *bod-*, were established between the seventh and tenth centuries AD. The typical form of these settlements was a small hamlet of several farm households. They farmed the same land as their prehistoric predecessors but the earlier field systems were altered or replaced by new layouts adapted to new methods of ploughing and land sharing. Each family cultivated a number of strips in the fields but also had rights in areas of 'common' (2, 9, 12, 20). These heathy commons were used for grazing dry cows, young beef cattle, sheep and goats, and supplied furze (gorse) and turf (peat) for cooking and heating. Bracken was harvested for animal bedding and surface stone taken for building and working into items such as gateposts. Occasionally, areas of the commons were put under temporary cultivation (7). The resources these commons provided were a vital part of the rural economy.

From about the seventeenth century parts of the downs and moors began to be enclosed as 'crofts', usually square or rectangular plots with banks of earth or stone around them (14, 30). Crofts were not held in common but rather by individual households, enabling them to manage their fuel supply more carefully or graze animals separately from those of other farms.



The creation of crofts continued during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but this period also saw large areas of former commons enclosed and improved to create new farms and smallholdings (19). This was a response to population growth and increasing demand for food, not least from the rapidly increasing industrial workforce. Major landowners encouraged the process because they then received rents for land which had previously given them no direct income.

Much of west Cornwall's industrial activity took place on the downs and moors: streamworking for tin (5, 28), mining for copper and tin (26, 33) and working surface or quarried stone (31). From the medieval period to the early twentieth century, many households in the St Just region were involved in both farming and industry.

The end of an era

The rise of steam shipping and particularly the completion of the railway link across the Tamar in 1859 opened up new markets to west Cornwall's farmers and encouraged agricultural specialisation, particularly early vegetables and dairying. Grazing on rough ground declined: dairy cattle need richer pasture and have to be kept near the farm. Railways also brought cheap coal

and the commons were used less and less as a source of fuel. A pattern of use which had continued largely unchanged over a period of at least 3,500 years went into steep decline. Mining and other industry also faded. As a result, the downs and moors which had been the focus for human activity for so long became near-deserted. Without grazing or fuel gathering many areas have become densely overgrown, especially since World War II.

Going forward

What we see on rough ground today, therefore, is not a 'natural' landscape but rather the results of a century or more of neglect. The wildlife and scenic value of these landscapes has been reduced and archaeological features are hidden and can be damaged by the growth of bracken and scrub.

To maintain and enhance its unique historic, wildlife and scenic value, heathland needs to be actively managed: in particular, scrub and bracken need to be controlled. These can be cut by hand or machinery over small areas and small controlled fires can also be used. The best solution for long-term care, however, is to restore the low-intensity livestock grazing which for so long was the major use of these areas.

