



A guide to the  
**ARCHAEOLOGY**  
of the open moor



The history of human activity on Dartmoor goes back more than 10,000 years, although the visible remains date from about 4,000 BC to the present. Here people have lived, farmed, worked stone and minerals, practised their religion and buried their dead. All these activities have left their mark as archaeological features on the ground - stone walls, earth-covered mounds and banks, stones set upright, hollows and ditches.

Dartmoor is one of the few areas in the country where we can see not just individual features, but collections of related features. These show us how large areas of land were organised and used in the past. The reason why so much has remained undisturbed over the years is because Dartmoor has not been intensively farmed in recent times, and also because most features were built using hard-wearing granite. These features will endure wind and weather, but can so easily lose their meaning and value if disturbed by digging or by displacement of their stones.

The purpose of this guide is to illustrate the variety of archaeological features you might come across on the open moor. It is hoped that by learning to recognise them damage will be prevented.

## PREHISTORIC DARTMOOR

At one time, thousands of years ago, Dartmoor was almost wholly covered in trees. Prehistoric people made clearings in the forest and hunted wild animals. Later (from around 4,000 BC) they began to use the area as a burying ground and (from about 2,500 BC) erected stone monuments which were probably used for ritual or religious purposes. Meanwhile most of the woodland cover was gradually removed and Dartmoor then became an important farming region, used chiefly for grazing animals. From approximately 1,600 BC or earlier, circular houses were built and eventually fields were laid out using stone boundary walls. Around 1,000 BC changes in the weather and soils led to the gradual desertion of the high moor.

## Burials

Burial mounds, usually known as **cairns**, are very common. They appear as rounded piles of stones (sometimes turf covered), often low and flat but some are as high as 3.5m, and can be anything up to 35m in diameter. Some cairns have a retaining circle of upright stones around them.

Many burials within or below mounds were contained in **cists** - box-like structures made from granite slabs. The mounds originally covering these have often disappeared.

More difficult to recognise are **ring cairns** - no mound, but instead a low ring of small stones 1-2m wide enclosing a level area.



*Large cairn © DNPA*



*Cist © DNPA*



*Ring cairn © DNPA*



Stone row © DNPA



Stone circle © Stephen Woods



Menhir © DNPA

## Monuments

**Stone Rows** are made up of upright stones of varying size set some distance apart in single, double or very occasionally triple lines. The shortest known row is 32m in length, and the longest is over 3.4km. Often burial mounds are found in or near stone rows.

**Stone Circles** - consist of upright stones enclosing a flat circular area, diameter 19 - 35m.

**Standing Stones**, or menhirs, are isolated upright stones. The stones which make up these monuments can vary in height from a few centimetres up to 3 metres. Some of the taller stones may have fallen over.

## Houses and fields

Prehistoric **round houses** are sometimes known as hut circles. These are formed either of upright granite slabs or of 'drystone' walling, with a gap for the entrance. They can be up to 1m in height and 3-10m in diameter. Originally they had a conical roof of wood and turf or thatch.

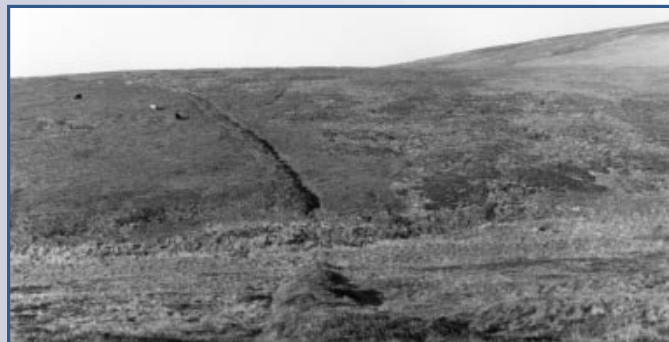


*Round houses (hut circle) © DNPA*

The round houses can be isolated but usually occur in groups, like villages, sometimes scattered over a hillside or sometimes surrounded by an enclosure wall.

The remains of prehistoric fields cover a vast area of Dartmoor (over 10,000 hectares), and their remarkable survival makes them of national importance. The field boundaries, known as **reaves**, are low rounded earth and stone banks, which can be up to several kilometres long. Often the ground is divided into long rectangular fields by an arrangement of parallel reaves.

Small irregular-shaped fields occur sometimes around settlements.



*Reave © DNPA*

## MEDIEVAL AND LATER DARTMOOR

In medieval and later times central Dartmoor was used in many different ways. In particular it became an important industrial area. From the 12-19<sup>th</sup> century, tin ore was taken from the ground and crushed and smelted. Granite from the surface, and later from quarries, was used for gateposts, water troughs and so on. Peat was cut from the high moor and used as fuel. Networks of channels (leats) were dug to carry water to power machinery at industrial sites or to supply farms and dwellings.

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century a large area of moorland has been used as a military training ground and a new set of artefacts, such as observation posts and target tramways have been added to the landscape.

From perhaps as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD onwards, new attempts were made to farm the open moorland. Farmhouses were built and new fields created, but many were later abandoned, particularly during the 14<sup>th</sup> century; other farms have been deserted as recently as the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Industry

Old industrial sites can usually be recognised by heaps of discarded stones, sometimes retained by drystone walls or arranged in long low banks. They will often be found by streams, or next to large gullies (openworks) or around mine-shafts and quarries. Near some of these sites may



*Tinners' spoil* © DNPA

be seen the remains of the processing areas, buildings, water channels, pits and walls which give the ground a very uneven surface.



*Tinners' hut* © DNPA



*Beehive hut © DNPA*

At some of the later industrial sites the remains of railways or tramways may be seen. Some carried stone, tin or peat off the moor.

You will see the ruins of many buildings on Dartmoor. Some, like **beehive huts**, once used as stores or shelters, may be difficult to recognise. More often buildings are rectangular with the remains of drystone or mortared walls. Some were built and abandoned quite recently but their ruins are still important. They are associated with both industrial and agricultural activities. The ruins of **blowing houses**, where tin ore was crushed and smelted, may be encountered. Here may be seen the remains of the pit where a waterwheel stood, the hollowed-out granite mortarstone on which the ore was crushed, or the mouldstones for making ingots.



*Blowing house, mouldstone and furnace © DNPA*

## **Farming**

Most medieval farmhouses on Dartmoor were **longhouses** where humans and animals lived under the same roof; these often have outbuildings nearby, and small fields. Farmhouses, cottages and barns abandoned more recently survive as substantial ruins; these too are important monuments to Dartmoor's history. Field boundaries can vary from low stony banks (like reaves) to well built granite walling 1m or more in height.



*Longhouse © DNPA*



*Farm building abandoned less than 100 years ago © DNPA*

From medieval times onwards rabbits were kept in warrens for their meat and fur. **Pillow mounds** can be found in old rabbit warrens. These are made of earth, oval or rectangular in shape, and can vary from about 5 - 30 metres in length; they were made for rabbits to burrow into. A well organised rabbit warren had **vermin traps** for catching stoats and weasels. These usually survive as small granite 'funnels'.



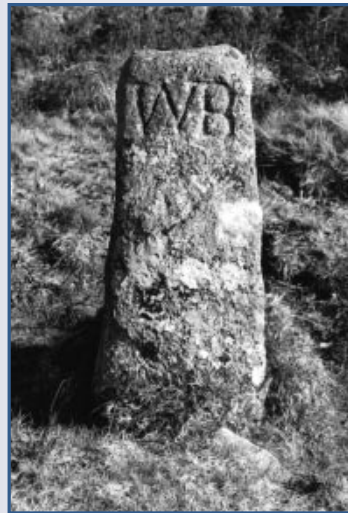
*Pillow mound © DNPA*



*Vermin trap © DNPA*

## **Boundaries and Route Markers**

**Boundary stones** marking parishes, landownership, rabbit warrens and the like are common. They come in many forms, but usually as upright stones with a letter or letters carved into them. Route markers indicated safe tracks across the moor. The commonest form is the medieval granite cross, although others may have letters carved on them or plaques attached to them.



*Boundary stone © DNPA*



*Medieval crosses © DNPA*

## PLEASE PROTECT THE FUTURE OF OUR PAST

### Please Remember:

- 1 Dartmoor is one of the most important archaeological landscapes in Britain. Each individual feature may hold a vital clue to the past.
- 2 Many archaeological sites are protected by law (*The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979*).  
YOU MAY BE BREAKING THE LAW if you disturb them.
- 3 Many archaeological features are smaller than you might expect. Some are only a few centimetres high.
- 4 If you are not sure whether something is an archaeological feature or not, give it the benefit of the doubt and leave well alone.
- 5 Never disturb an archaeological site or ruined structure by moving stones around.
- 6 Never dig in or around an archaeological site. Information buried below ground is as important to the archaeologist as that which can be seen above ground.
- 7 Do not camp or light fires in or around archaeological sites.
- 8 Do not use archaeological sites to store equipment or as hiding places or as bivouac sites.
- 9 Mineshafts and old mine workings can be dangerous.
- 10 A pile of stones is not just a pile of stones. A moment's carelessness can destroy thousands of years of history.

For further information contact:

Dartmoor National Park Authority  
High Moorland Visitor Centre  
Princetown  
YELVERTON  
Devon PL20 6QF  
Tel: (01822) 890414

Dartmoor National Park Authority Website  
[www.dartmoor-mpa.gov.uk](http://www.dartmoor-mpa.gov.uk)



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Traveline: 0870 608 2 608