Man on Dartmoor – Dartmoor's Past in the Present

Dartmoor National Park Archaeological Service

For centuries Dartmoor has defied the attempts of Man to subdue it. Now Man is coming to its defence.

People have been active on Dartmoor for over 8,000 years and have left behind a rich legacy of archaeological sites and landscapes, settlements and buildings.

At the end of the last Ice Age, about 10,000 BC, as the climate became warmer, so Dartmoor gradually became a forested landscape dominated by oak, hazel and birch. Into this woodland came travelling groups of people, who would visit Dartmoor seasonally to hunt animals and gather nuts and berries. There is evidence that from around 5,500 BC, people were beginning to remove the tree cover in order to increase the grazing for wild animals. Over the succeeding centuries, more grassland was created, animals and plants became domesticated and people gradually adopted a more settled way of life. By the middle of the Bronze Age, around 1,500 BC, all but the most remote parts of Dartmoor was a farmed landscape, grazed by cattle and sheep. Then, from around 1,000 BC, the higher parts of the moor were deserted, possibly due to deterioration in the climate and the development of less nutritious vegetation for animals to eat. Dartmoor was never to be occupied so intensively again, which is partly why there is such a wealth of archaeology to be seen.

Dartmoor's prehistoric archaeology is amongst the most important in the country. Significant are the ceremonial monuments: stone rows, stone circles and standing stones. Dartmoor has over 70 stone rows, varying in length from 32 metres to 3.4 kilometres long. They probably acted as community centres, sites of religious significance and sometimes perhaps, as seasonal sundials. There are also numerous round cairns to be seen; these are stony circular mounds, many of which would have covered a burial. Cists, square or rectangular stone 'boxes' often sunk in the ground, are another feature of prehistoric burial.

Over 10,000 hectares of Bronze Age field systems survive on Dartmoor; these are defined by low stony banks, known as reaves, which can often be seen running parallel to one another. Dotted in amongst these are the remains of prehistoric round houses in the form of low circular stone walls; that would originally have had conical thatched roofs. Prehistoric round houses can also be found outside the field systems, sometimes clustered together in a village-type settlement, sometimes sited within a stone-built circular or sub-circular enclosure wall.

During the medieval period, there was some re-occupation of the land abandoned in prehistoric times. The central area of high moor had become a royal forest (*forest* in its meaning as a hunting ground, not woodland), sometime before the Norman Conquest and it continued to be owned by the Royal Family in the form of the Earls and later the Dukes of Cornwall after it lost its forest status in 1239. Much of Dartmoor continues to be owned by the Duchy of Cornwall, providing an income to HRH The Prince of Wales.

Both within and around the forest, small medieval settlements sprang up, particularly

during the 12th and 13th centuries. The typical medieval farmhouse was the longhouse, which provided accommodation for both people and cattle. Longhouses appear on the ground today as low stone-walled rectangular structures, sometimes with visible opposing doorways in their long sides. Medieval longhouses are often associated with field systems, which can take the form of parallel shallow terraces, narrow linear ridges, or fields enclosed by stone and earth banks.

The medieval period also saw the beginning of a long period of the mining of the tin and other mineral ores in and around Dartmoor. There is evidence for tin-working from the 12th century through to the early years of the 20th century. The remains left behind are both numerous and varied: most Dartmoor streams provided a source of alluvial tin ore and many typically have heaps of stony waste material alongside them. Tin was also dug from the ground, in pits or in long steep-sided V shaped gullies; and from under the ground by way of shaft mining. Also found on the open moor are features associated with the processing of the ore (essentially, crushing, concentrating and smelting), such as the remains of rectangular tin mills and the leats (artificial waterways) that brought water to serve the waterwheels that drove the machinery in the mills. The tin industry had its own laws and regulations and for a period, Crockern Tor was the site where an occasional "tinners' parliament" was held.

The latter part of the 18th century heralded a period of change on Dartmoor, with a desire to make Dartmoor's 'wasteland' a productive area. The improvement of the road system made Dartmoor more accessible, whilst advances in technology and agriculture made change more feasible. A key figure in this was Thomas Tyrwhitt (1762-1832), one-time Secretary to The Prince of Wales and local MP; he established a farm at Tor Royal and founded a settlement nearby called Princetown; he opened up quarries at Foggintor and Swelltor to the east of Princetown and constructed a railroad for use by horses and carts to link these to Plymouth. Princetown was also the site chosen by Tyrwhitt to establish a prison to house French and later American Prisoners of war in the early 19th century.

Key to agricultural improvement was the enclosing of vast tracts of moorland with dry stone walls; these are called newtakes. However, Dartmoor proved to be resistant to all attempts to convert it to productive pasture and the vegetation within the newtakes remains largely similar to that on the open moor.

Dartmoor has been used for military training since at least the middle of the 19th century, in preparation for such conflicts as the Crimean, Zulu and Boer Wars. In 1875, part of the northern moor was licensed for permanent training and buildings were constructed at Okehampton Camp from 1892. Historic military training has created its own archaeology; for example, remains of targets constructed during the Boer War at the very end of the 19th century can be found along with those from later periods and their associated tramways.

Dartmoor was designated a National Park in 1951 and the importance of its cultural heritage is clearly recognised. However, although it is rich in sites and monuments, which tell us much about people on Dartmoor through the ages, these are not indestructible or proof against damage; many indeed are susceptible to 'being modified', by having stones re-arranged or removed from them. Once a monument or historic artefact has been disturbed, it is changed forever and has lost some of its value.