

Prehistoric Archaeology



Dartmoor Factsheet

Prehistoric Archaeology of Dartmoor

Dartmoor National Park covers an area of 954 sq km (368 square miles) and contains the largest concentration of Bronze Age remains in the country. The reason for the survival of so many archaeological remains within the National Park is due to the fact that many of the structures were built of granite, a very durable stone, and also because human activity on the Moor in later centuries was not intense. Dartmoor's high soil acidity means that virtually no pottery, bone or metal from the prehistoric past survives here. Many of the monuments are protected by law making it an offence to damage or interfere with them in any way. They are infinitely valuable and fascinating relics of a long gone age.



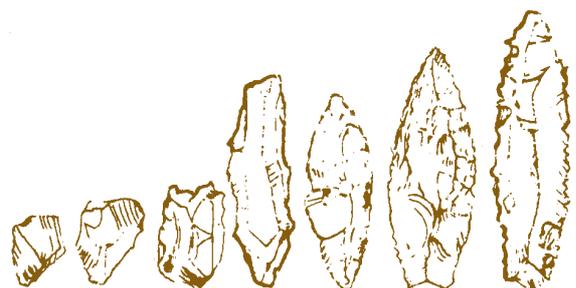
*Spinsters' Rock, Drewsteignton
– Neolithic burial chamber.*

Although few visible remains can be dated to before 2500 BC, there has been human activity on Dartmoor for much longer. At one time almost the whole Moor was covered with trees, but from about 10,000 BC, if not earlier, the first clearings in the forest began to be made by small groups of wandering, hunting and gathering people. Animals, encouraged to graze in the clearings, could then be hunted more easily. The remains of flint tools used by these groups of the MESOLITHIC period, or Middle Stone Age (circa 8000 – 4000 BC) have occasionally been found on the fringes of Dartmoor.



Flints arranged to form a spearhead.

In the **NEOLITHIC** or New Stone Age (circa 4000 – 2500 BC), a more settled way of life emerged; in the lowlands farms were created and animals and crops domesticated. On Dartmoor further clearance of trees took place. Today, the only remains of this period, apart from the flint tools, are a handful of earth burial mounds (long mounds) and more rarely, the stone chambers where the bones were laid to rest.



*Range of worked flints from fields at Week, Dartmoor.
Lengths between 16 and 61mm.*

There is a wide range of structures and monuments on the Moor reflecting different aspects of life during the **BRONZE AGE** (circa 2500 – 600 BC) – fields and farms, houses, burial places and 'ritual sites' (stone rows, circles and standing stones) where religious ceremonies are thought to have been carried out. By the middle of the Bronze Age, most of the trees had been cleared from high Dartmoor and the land had become farmland. Some time around 1700 BC people began to create what we would today call fields; these were long strips of land bounded by low, stoney banks known as reaves. Inside these banks animals were grazed and crops possibly grown. The crops would have been viable due to a warmer and drier climate than today. Dotted around in the fields are the remains of hut circles (round dwelling houses) of the prehistoric farmers. Beyond the field systems, hut circles can sometimes be found enclosed by a stone wall (these are often called pounds) or in an unenclosed group like a modern village, where they are scattered about in ones and twos.

Some of the houses may not have been lived in permanently. Excavation of a small enclosed group prior to being destroyed by the clay quarries on Shaugh Moor, suggested that they were occupied only occasionally, perhaps by farmers and shepherds from the lowlands bringing their cattle and sheep up on the moorland for the summer months only.

Bronze Age huts.



On Dartmoor there are remains of over 5,000 Bronze Age houses or huts; only granite walls survive and we refer to these as **hut circles** or round houses. They are generally circular and can be anything from 1.8m (6ft) to 9m (30ft) in diameter. Sometimes the large upright stone which formed the doorway can still be seen, and some hut circles had porches to protect the entrance from wind and rain. The roof timbers would have been supported on a ring of posts inside the wall giving the roof a conical shape. The overall covering might have been of turf, heather, gorse or thatch – whatever was most readily available.



Hut circle and pound wall.

Cooking was done on an open fire in the centre of the dwelling. Hut circles continued to be built and lived in during the Iron Age.

Bronze Age people divided their land with low walls that we now call reaves. Reaves can best be seen from a distance, looking from one hillside to another. Generally, the low banks run in parallel lines down valley slopes, dividing the land into narrow strips. At the higher end of these strips can usually be seen a reave running at right angles to them, dividing the enclosed land from the open moor above. The strips themselves are sometimes divided into smaller units by short banks running across them. It is thought that

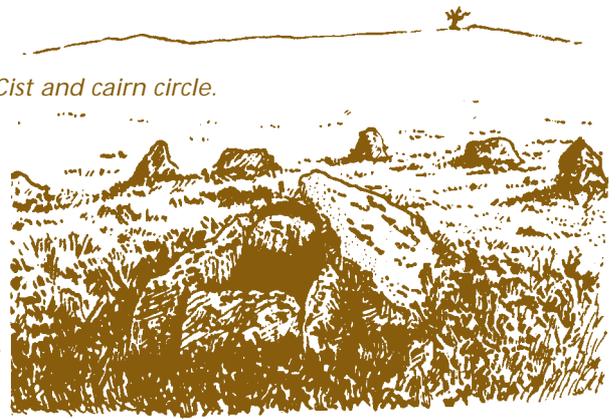
blocks or areas of reaves might have

formed a territory or estate used by a single group or tribe of people, a bit like a modern parish.



Basic structure of a Dartmoor reave with hut circle.

Cist and cairn circle.



Prehistoric people buried their dead in a number of ways. Sometimes the body or, if cremation was practiced, ashes, were placed in **cists** (stone chests) sunk into the ground. These might be covered with a mound of stones and earth called a **cairn**.

Cairns (which are the same as 'barrows' or 'tumuli' but made of stone rather than earth) could also be built over a simple burial in a hole in the ground. Sometimes burials were placed within the mound itself. In other cases the grave was just marked by a ring of stones known as **ring cairns**. On Dartmoor there are about 1310 round cairns and over 210 ring cairns.

Upright stones of various shapes and sizes arranged in **rows** (single, double or even triple) or **circles** were fairly common on Dartmoor, but we have very little idea what use they were put to. Some are associated with burials and it is thought that they might have been used for religious or ceremonial purposes. There are about 70 stone rows and 18 stone circles to be found on Dartmoor. It has been suggested that some stone rows were used for astronomical sitings, but we cannot be sure of this.



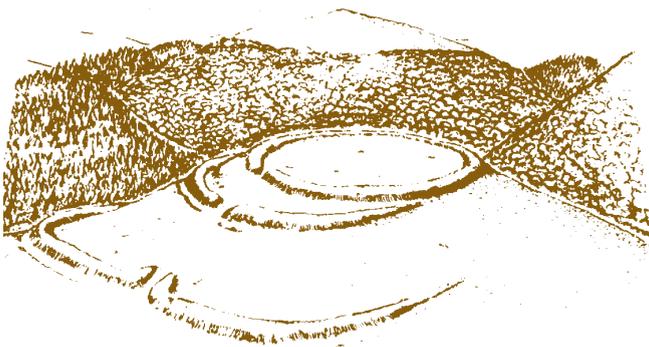
Stone row and menhir on Long Ash Hill, near Merivale.

Single stones standing by themselves (or near stone rows or circles) are known as **menhirs**; their purpose too is unclear.

Towards the end of the Bronze Age the weather began to get colder and wetter and the soils became acid, causing grass and crops to grow less easily, and Dartmoor became a less pleasant place to live.

Gradually the houses and fields on the high moor were deserted as their inhabitants moved to the lower ground, the burial places of their ancestors were abandoned, and the stone rows and circles were left for us to enjoy and puzzle over today.

The **IRON AGE** is the name generally given to the period from 600 BC until the arrival of the Romans in Britain in the first century AD; in remoter parts of the country, however, the impact of the Roman invasion was hardly felt and life continued little changed. It was during this period that iron working skills began to be developed. On Dartmoor there was a general movement of people away from the exposed high moor to the sheltered areas at its edge, and some people continued to live in and build hut circles on the lower slopes of the Moor.



Iron Age hillfort.

Also during this period defended settlements, called hillforts, were built to protect houses and animals against raiding by neighbours. These are to be found, as their name suggests, on hill tops. Groups of houses, outbuildings and animal pens were defended from possible attack by digging deep ditches and high banks all around them. As the houses and other structures were generally of wood, which decays, all that can usually be seen today are these banks and ditches enclosing a flat area of land. There are about a dozen hillforts within the National Park. Hembury Fort with its deep ditches and high ramparts is a fine example. Other notable forts can be seen along the Teign Valley at Prestonbury, Cranbrook and Wooston.

For further information, and a list of other Fact Sheets available, contact the
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Please Remember

- Dartmoor is one of the most important archaeological landscapes in Britain. Each individual feature may hold a vital clue to the past.
- 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.
- Many archaeological features are smaller than you might expect. Some are only a few centimetres high.
- If you are not sure whether something is an archaeological feature or not, give it the benefit of the doubt and leave well alone.
- Never disturb an archaeological site or ruined structure by moving stones around.
- 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.
- Do not camp or light fires in or around archaeological sites.
- Do not use archaeological sites to store equipment or as hiding places or as bivouac sites.
- Mineshafts and old mine workings can be dangerous.
- A pile of stones is not just a pile of stones. A moment's carelessness can destroy thousands of years of history.

Useful Reference Books

- Butler, J. *Dartmoor Atlas of Antiquities*, five volumes (Devon Books, 1991–97) (T)
- Dartmoor National Park Authority, *A Guide to the Archaeology of Dartmoor* (Devon Books, 1996) (ST)
- Devon Archaeological Society *Devon Archaeology No 3: Dartmoor issue* (Devon Archaeological Society, 1991) (T)
- Devon Archaeological Society *Proceedings of the Dartmoor Conference 1994* (Devon Archaeological Society, 1995–96) (T)
- Fleming, A. *The Dartmoor Reaves* (Batsford, 1988) (T)
- Gerrard, S. *Dartmoor* (Batsford & English Heritage, 1997) (ST)
- Gill, Crispin (editor) *Dartmoor: A New Study* (David & Charles, 1983) (ST)
- Hemery, Eric *High Dartmoor* (Robert Hale, 1983) (ST)
- Todd, Malcolm *The South West to AD 1000*, (Longman, 1987) (T)
- Sale, R. *Dartmoor the Official National Park Guide* (Pevensey Press, 2000) (ST)
- Woods, S. *Dartmoor Stone* (Devon Books, 1988) (ST)
- Worth, R.H. *Worth's Dartmoor* (David & Charles, 1971; Peninsula Press, 1994) (ST)

S - recommended for students

T - recommended for teachers

Dartmoor National Park Authority on the World Wide Web:
 <<http://www.dartmoor-npa.gov.uk>>

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