

**The Historic Environment in the West Penwith ESA  
Briefing note for the AONB Partnership meeting 28<sup>th</sup> June 2007**

*The archaeological and historical importance of West Penwith*

The boundaries which make up the field systems of West Penwith are amongst some of the oldest continually used boundaries in the world, with many having their origins in the Bronze Age. These field patterns were laid out by some of the first settled farmers in Britain, usually radiating out from a central settlement. Many of the present coastal farms and hamlets are the successors to these prehistoric settlements, with the field boundaries enhanced in the medieval period, built over the original prehistoric core.

The areas of rough ground and heath contain further field boundaries and settlements dating back to prehistory, but these sites, always being on slightly marginal land, were abandoned and now often only survive as low stone and earth banks.

A large concentration of prehistoric ritual monuments are to be found in both the rough and improved land, including iconic sites such as Chun and Lanyon Quoits, Men an Tol, and the Nine Maidens stone circle.

Later hillforts and cliff castles top many of the moorland summits and coastal promontories, such as Castle an Dinas, Trencrom, and Trereen Dinas on Gurnard's Head. Inland there are rare survivals of Romano-British courtyard house settlements such as Chysauster and Bosulow Trehyllys, along with enigmatic fogou sites.

Medieval farming practice is reflected in field and place names, with the occasional hull or crow (stores or pig/fowl houses) built into field boundaries or farmyards.

This exceptionally rich historic landscape is capped by the remains of mining features of global significance, through the engine houses and processing buildings of Geevor and Levant to the miners' terraces and smallholdings around St Just, through to over 100 shafts recently noted on Watch Croft.

*Archaeological recording and historic designations in the ESA*

In the 1970's and 1980's, rough ground and heathland intake, combined with hedge removal in parts of Penwith motivated an extensive programme of mapping the historic landscape. This was carried out by CCRA (Cornwall Committee For Rescue Archaeology, later CAU and now the Historic Environment Service). This included detailed surveys of selected areas, the mapping of rough ground and heathland loss from 1840 to 1980's (recently updated with the HEATH project), the mapping of surviving prehistoric and medieval landscapes and a study of potential sites for scheduling around Zennor.

The Zennor survey revealed that the majority of the parish was of sufficient importance and quality to merit Scheduled Monument status due to the surviving prehistoric landscape. This raised obvious problems. Scheduling on this scale would be onerous in a working landscape, for example Scheduled Monument Consent would be required for every slight hedge repair and most ground works.

This dilemma corresponded with the suggestion of ESA status for West Penwith, which was seen as an excellent way of resolving the problem of preserving this unique landscape whilst allowing normal farming practice to continue. One of the main drivers for ESA status was the recognition of the importance of the historic landscape and the threats from improvement and hedge loss at that time. As a result of gaining ESA status, new Scheduling stopped in the area. A map of the Scheduled Monuments of West Penwith is now a poor reflection of the importance of the area, but there are still over 130 Scheduled sites in the ESA.

Scheduled Monument designation is therefore not as comprehensive as it should be to provide adequate protection following the end of the ESA scheme.

Since July 2006, most of the western part of the ESA is now within the Cornwall and West Devon Mining Landscape World Heritage Site.

#### *Agri-environment and the historic environment in West Penwith*

#### HLS

- The new Higher Level Scheme (HLS) is closest to the current ESA scheme in delivering good environmental benefits. HLS has potential to achieve positive outcomes in West Penwith as it would introduce more proactive environmental management. Such works have been available through the ESA under Conservation Plans but are not compulsory.
- Entry to HLS is points based, gained by the ability of a holding to meet a series of targets. Unfortunately many Penwith holdings will be unable to achieve the points required to enter the HLS scheme, particularly with the current national emphasis on PSA targets which concentrate on SSSI condition. The Penwith SSSIs are generally confined to the coastal fringe and combined with the small size of most of the holdings, gaining points for entry will be more difficult than for larger Cornish farms.
- The care of the Historic Environment is not a PSA target, so high historic/archaeological value is unlikely to be sufficient to gain entry. Limited funding for HLS will also make the scheme far more competitive than its predecessor, Countryside Stewardship. At present HLS applications are open to farmers by invitation from Natural England following a pre application assessment.
- The ESA has been tailored to the area, so takes local features such as field boulders, gateways and gateposts, as well as the fine balance between the management of the rough and clean land, into consideration. The Higher Level Scheme (HLS) has national prescriptions which do not always reflect this local level.

#### SPS/ELS

- The most accessible and basic scheme available to farmers in the ESA will be through the Single Payment Scheme (SPS) and its associated Cross Compliance guidance. This is available to all farmers.
- However, not all farmers will have registered for SPS, particularly smallholders, and the level of protection provided by these schemes essentially amounts to general good farming practice, with little 'added value management' which is necessary to maintain the Penwith landscape whilst achieving economically viable farming businesses.

- Farmers can also apply for the Entry Level Scheme (ELS) or Organic ELS, which provides more environmental management requirements than through the SPS but not as much as the HLS. It is similar to the current ESA but not as detailed or area specific in its prescriptions. For instance, farmers can apply for scrub clearance of archaeological features, the creation of buffer strips and moorland rough grazing.
- ELS and OELS payments are at a basic rate and will not provide vital 'income forgone' to encourage changes to farming practice to obtain optimal environmental benefits. It is unlikely for example, to be sufficient to enable anything other than the most basic maintenance of hedges and traditional buildings, two important aspects of the ESA. In essence, these entry schemes reward basic good farming practice which most farmers will already be carrying out as part of their daily business.
- The ELS is also a 'hands off' scheme, where farmers do not get the help and guidance of project officers to show where the best environmental gain can be achieved on a holding. The Historic Environment Service has no input into ELS unless directly approached by a farmer.

#### Hedges

- One of the main issues affecting Penwith is that of hedge protection. Cornish Hedges as stone faced earth banks are not covered by the Hedgerow Regulations (the basic protection available for boundaries in Britain) unless they have 'woody growth' and can therefore be classed as a hedgerow under the Regulations. There is no protection from SPS as the guidance refers hedges back to the Regulations for protection, with Cornish Hedges only included if they have a hedgerow on top.
- Stone walls are identified as a separate boundary type within the SPS guidance and there are some such walls in Penwith. However, the guidance states that stone can be taken from a poor stone wall to repair a better wall, a practice which could be devastating for the remains of a prehistoric relic boundary.
- SPS guidance allows the creation of 10m wide gateways, which is very out of scale with the Penwith landscape.
- No protection is given to local landscape features such as field boulders, traditional Penwith gates or granite gate posts and stiles within SPS or ELS/OELS.
- Scheduled Monuments are the only historic/archaeological features protected (essentially through the level of protection they already hold).

#### EIA's

- The improvement of rough land would come under an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), but EIA's have been found elsewhere not to be as robust as they should, especially for archaeological landscapes. EIA's normally apply to land of 2ha or more in size, to field boundary removal of 2km or more, and to landscape restructuring of over 50ha or more when within AONB's. A screening notice would need to be applied for to bring a case forward under these thresholds. The majority of Penwith fields are under 2ha.

*The future*

It is important to preserve the local distinctiveness of West Penwith to prevent the potential erosion of character which would devastate this unique landscape. The ESA has been successful at largely halting the damage to the important historic environment and archaeological features of the area. It has had a high level of uptake and as such has been a valuable means of protecting the viability of the small family farms upon which the sustainable management of the countryside in the ESA depends.

Of the current schemes available for farmers, the preferred HLS will be unobtainable for many of the current ESA agreement holders and the ELS/OLS and basic SPS will not achieve the same level of protection and payments currently afforded by the ESA.

Unless the HLS has the flexibility to identify West Penwith ESA as a special case, with tailored prescriptions and entry criteria, a local scheme is required to uphold the principles of the ESA by encouraging the continuation of the traditional farming practices of West Penwith. This may be an initiative which the AONB and World Heritage Site could take forward, with the input and support of local farming representatives, The National Trust, and in conjunction with Natural England. Such a scheme could seek to incorporate aspects of relevant management plans with the best elements of the ESA.

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