



Book Reviews

ARCHAEOLOGY AND LANDSCAPE AT THE LAND'S END, CORNWALL: THE WEST PENWITH SURVEYS 1980–2010 BY PETER HERRING, NICHOLAS JOHNSON, ANDY M. JONES, JACQUELINE NOWAKOWSKI, ADAM SHARPE, AND ANDREW YOUNG

Cornwall Archaeological Unit, Truro. 2016, 346pp, 293 col and B&W figs and plates, hb, ISBN 978-0-993392-92-4, £29.00

The historic character of the West Penwith landscape, which forms the subject of this volume, is unusual. In most parts of the British Isles, the exploitation of land has been sufficiently intense and has changed its character often enough, that signs of previous management regimes have been largely effaced leaving only fragmentary remains. More rarely, conditions and imperatives in the past have changed relatively rapidly, sometimes leading to wholesale abandonment of the land creating the potential for the preservation of extensive tracts of relict landscapes. Often, such survivals represent relatively short, well-defined episodes of activity and are frequently situated in the uplands where the low intensity of subsequent agricultural and other activity has enabled survival. West Penwith lies between these extremes. Here, human occupation has been continuous from deep prehistory to the present day yet, due to a combination of remoteness, historical factors and local conditions, instead of the continual cycle of destruction of the evidence for prior use, each successive regime has adapted the remains of what has gone before to its own needs. The result, in many areas, is a landscape of great archaeological depth and wealth in which changing patterns of landscape perception, use, tenure and history over the course of millennia can be discerned.

As the volume's title suggests, it is a synthesis of a 30-year period of fieldwork and research into the landscape of West Penwith which was initiated in response to the threats posed by changing agricultural practices in the 1980s. It examines the tension between continuity and change in the West Penwith landscape over the course of the last six thousand years in order to understand the ways in which the perceptions, social organisation and economic strategies of its human inhabitants have been influenced over that time. It achieves this through the clear and concise textual style forming its backbone which is pleasingly easy to read and absorb and avoids the technical dryness of the archaeological report which it could so easily have adopted given its subject matter. This is supported by a scale of analysis which telescopes seamlessly, between examinations of the West Penwith peninsula in its entirety to that of individual landscapes, farms, sites, buildings and artefacts. This is facilitated by the use of frequent case studies exploring individual sites and landscapes of the region accompanied by high quality and abundant illustrations including aerial and ground photographs, historic images, and survey and excavation drawings most of which are in full colour. A comprehensive glossary supports the text.

The main body of the text is divided into 11 chapters, the first of which examines the scope and character of the West Penwith landscape, the forces of continuity and change which have shaped it and some of the earlier ways in which it has been experienced and studied. This is followed by a chapter describing the genesis and methodological evolution of the West Penwith Surveys in the developing conservation crisis of the 1980s brought about by the destruction wrought by changing agricultural practices. The third chapter supports this, expanding on some of the techniques used, including the development and application of Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC) as a method of classification and analysis. Most useful in this chapter are illustrated descriptions both of field boundary types and the

HLC categories identified and used in the surveys. These begin to give a real feel for the way in which the surveys approached their subject and, for me, make this one of the stand-out chapters in the book. The fourth chapter shows the application of these techniques in detail by presenting a detailed case study of a landscape on the northern side of the peninsula which explores its development from the Neolithic to the modern day.

Chapters 5 to 10 form the backbone of the volume, widening the scale of analysis to examine the pattern of developments across the entire West Penwith district chronologically. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 focus on prehistory, with the first two pursuing a standard division of this vast span of time into an examination of the ceremonial and conceptual landscapes of early prehistory followed by a discussion of the first evidence for settlement and agriculture in the form of the surviving Bronze Age fieldscapes. The South West contains numerous other relict landscapes of this date, but it is in Chapter 7 that the unique character of West Penwith, driven by the continuity of human occupation and exploitation, begins to make itself apparent as the focus shifts to later prehistory and the evidence which illustrates how the region's inhabitants adapted preceding Bronze Age landscapes to their changing needs. This theme is strengthened further in Chapter 8 which turns its attention to medieval developments. In most parts of the UK, the much-debated term; the 'Dark Ages', applied to the early medieval period, is well-deserved given the normal sparsity of available evidence. In contrast, the archaeologically rich landscape of West Penwith enables the evolution of its inhabitants social organisation, based on a hierarchy of land holding types with their roots in the prehistoric and Romano-British system, to be discerned and discussed. This in turn, forms the basis of the later medieval situation which developed from it. Chapters 9 and 10 complete the chronological picture, with an increasing variety of evidence enabling the continuing story of changing agricultural landscapes and practice to be traced in the first. Of course, perhaps the most iconic features of the Cornwall's past generally and that of West Penwith specifically is mining, especially of tin and copper. The tenth chapter of the volume explores the industrialisation of the district focusing strongly on the metal mining landscapes and their associated settlements and accompanying infrastructure which have earned parts of the area recognition as part of the Cornwall and West Devon UNESCO World Heritage Site. Also covered are examinations of quarrying, China clay working and the archaeology of tourism.

One of the significant strengths of this volume is its presentation of the threats to and the archaeological investigation of West Penwith's landscape as an integral part of its development. Rather than representing them as events which have affected the district's archaeology, yet exist outside it, they are portrayed as the latest episodes in its long history. This serves to highlight the destructive potential of modern agricultural practices and policies, driven by factors originating outside West Penwith, in contrast to those stemming from more local considerations which have pertained historically and which have led to the preservation of such a marvelously rich archaeological landscape. Chapter 11, finishes the volume by continuing this theme, examining the significance of the archaeology and landscape of West Penwith and asking pertinent questions about its future management and conservation.

Most obviously, this work has great value to those with an interest in the evolution of the landscape of West Penwith and, more widely of Cornwall. Its style and level of detail makes it readily accessible to those with a casual interest in its subject, while there are also plentiful signposts to deeper levels of interpretation and discussion for those with a professional or academic interest. Despite this, it would be easy to assume, given the geographical remoteness of West Penwith that this work is of limited relevance to archaeological practice and research elsewhere. However, in synthesising and interpreting the results of three decades of co-ordinated fieldwork, its authors have shown the potential of the application of a methodical and consistent strategy to landscape investigation when undertaken over significant periods of time. In addition, and at the risk of being melodramatic, they have also demonstrated the worth of 'total archaeology'; employing varying scales of analysis and skillfully using evidence from a wide variety of techniques and sources to support, augment and illustrate their findings and interpretations from field survey.

However, perhaps its most important contribution lies in illustrating that threats to irreplaceable archaeological remains are not restricted to urban areas or large infrastructural developments, but can also stem from agricultural practice, especially when this is driven by poorly thought through, short-term governmental policies. Despite the incredible level of archaeological survival still present in West Penwith, the book is replete with examples of sometimes large-scale destruction incurred within the last few decades which serve to remind us of this. This is particularly relevant now, given the current uncertainty of future policy directions as the consequences of the Brexit referendum loom. Now, more than ever, the many and varied values placed on our precious historic landscapes, including the agricultural and archaeological as well as many others, need to be clearly acknowledged and protected in future through more holistic land management policies and practices. This volume is a valuable part of that necessary process.

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