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Trevelgue Head
Cliff castle

Signposts to Prehistory

Location: Porth, Newquay, Cornwall. Parking close by at Porth Beach (SW 826 630), and signboards are installed on the path to the site.

Main period: Iron Age

Access & ownership: Trevelgue Head is owned by Cornwall Council (Scheduled Monument Cornwall 88) and is open to the public all year round.



Aerial view of Trevelgue Head Cliff castle (© Google)

The Iron Age cliff castle at Trevelgue Head, Porth, just to the east of Newquay, is one of the most dramatic and spectacular prehistoric sites on the North Cornish coast. Cliff castles are common in Cornwall, North Devon and South West Wales where sheer-sided coastline promontories offered ideal defensive points that necessitated the construction of only a single, often short, length of bank and ditch. Trevelgue Head, however, stands out in having no less than eight ramparts – the defensive walls of a castle–, several of them massive, accompanied by rock-cut ditches. They defend a 700 m long headland which shelters the excellent natural harbour of St Columb Porth on its south side.

Within the site are traces of house platforms, a terraced field system of probable Middle Bronze Age date, and two Early Bronze Age round barrows. All are Scheduled Ancient Monuments.

In 1939 a planned excavation campaign was commenced but was terminated after just one year due to the outbreak of war. Although less than 1% of the headland area was investigated, the results revealed well-preserved remains of Iron Age settlement. It showed that Early Iron Age activity on the headland was small scale, evidenced by 6th–4th century BC pottery scraped up with earth used to form the base of rampart 7. In contrast, during the Middle Iron Age (400–100 BC) the site appears to have been a hive of metalworking activity. Iron ore exposed during the digging of the ditch of rampart 6 was quarried until the ditch line became a chasm, subsequently enlarged by the action of the sea. Inside the defences, roasting pits indicated where the ore was prepared, and furnaces show where it was smelted. Rubbish deposits, that included some 200 kg of slag, were dumped against rampart 7 to increase its height. Ramparts 6 and 7 were revetted by dry-stone walling. Most of the defences were built at this time.

Three domestic house sites were located during the excavation and many more were indicated by a geophysical survey carried out in 1983. One structure excavated in 1939 stands out – a 14 m diameter roundhouse. Its doorway directly faced the entrance though the ramparts and its walling of upright slabs linked by neatly laid dry-stone was so fine and unusual that the excavator called it ‘ornamental’ – it has no parallel in southwest England. The roundhouse had a central hearth and one to the side but these were simple and lacked the stone edging expected of a domestic hearth. The house appears to have had a special communal function. At this time the cliff castle would have been the dominant site in an area of small, open settlements.

That importance seems to have been lost after c. 100 BC. There is little evidence of Late Iron Age activity and the timber roof supports of the large house were removed, although it appears to have retained focal significance as an open ruin for five centuries. Its floor was scraped clean during the 4th century AD and then infilled with material, including Roman coins, from all over the promontory in an act of closure or deliberate destruction. The small collection of pottery and a large number of coins dating from the Roman and later Roman period show some activity here for at least five hundred years (1st to 5th centuries AD) possibly associated with a house of oval plan, typical of the Roman period in Cornwall. Work on the 1939 archive over the last 10 years by the Historic Environment Service, Cornwall Council (funded by English Heritage) has resulted in a major study of Trelvelgue Head.

Trelvelgue is much visited and easily accessible and since 2001 has witnessed an ongoing programme of remedial management works designed to stem severe coastal erosion as well as enhance presentation of this spectacular site. In August 2007 information boards promoting the archaeological importance of Trelvelgue have been erected.

References

- Nowakowski, J.A. & Quinell, H. 2011. *Trelvelgue Head, Cornwall: The importance of C.K.C. Andrews' 1939 excavations for prehistoric and Roman Cornwall*. Truro: Historic Environment Council, Cornwall Council
- Cole, R. 2005. *Trelvelgue Head Cliff Castle, Newquay Cornwall: Management works 2001-2004*. Truro: Cornwall Council Historic Environment Service

Links

For further information contact: www.Historic-Cornwall.org.uk

You can read the signboards before visiting the site at the end of this report: Cole, R. 2007. *Trelvelgue Head, Newquay, Cornwall: Erection of interpretation boards and education day*. Truro: Cornwall Council Historic Environment Service. Available at:

<http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/greylit/details.cfm?id=13180>

Heritage Gateway link:

http://www.heritagegateway.org.uk/Gateway/Results_Single.aspx?uid=MCO6584&resourceID=1020

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