Down the Bright Stream

The Prehistory of Woodcock Corner and the Tregurra Valley, Cornwall

Sean R. Taylor

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One sees great things from the valley; only small things from the peak

G K Chesterton

Another pleasant valley Sunday
Charcoal burning everywhere

G Goffin and C King

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Abbreviations

APFU	Atoms Per Formula Unit
BL	Blue Light
BQ	Burned Quartzite
CAU	Cornwall Archaeological Unit
CDK	Corn Drying Kiln
EDS	Energy-Dispersive X-ray analysis System
FB	Furnace Bottom
GIS	Geographical Information Systems
GPS	Global Positioning System
HER	(Cornwall and Scilly) Historic Environment Record
HREE	Heavy Rare Earth Elements
HWRC	Household Waste Recycling Centre
ICP-MS	ICP Mass Spectrometer
LBK	Linearbandkeramik
LiDAR	Light Detection and Ranging
LOI	Loss-On-Ignition
LREE	Light Rare Earth Elements
MCO	Monument Cornwall (reference number in HER)
MFT	Microfacies Type
OD	Ordnance Datum
OIL	Oblique Incident Light
PPL	Plane Polarised Light
pXRF	portable X-ray Fluorescence
QA	Quality Assurance
REE	Rare Earth Elements
SEM	Scanning Electron Microscope
SF	Small Find
SHC	Smithing Hearth Cake
SMT	Soil Microfabric Type
SUERC	Scottish Universities Environmental Research Centre
TEDC	Truro Eastern District Centre
TEPAR	Truro Eastern Park and Ride
TPQ	Terminus Post Quem
WD-XRF	Wavelength-Dispersive X-Ray Fluorescence
XPL	Crossed Polarised Light

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Summary

This monograph reports on a series of fieldwork projects carried out in the Tregurra Valley, to the east of Truro, Cornwall. The work was undertaken over a period of seven years between 2009 and 2015, predominantly by the Cornwall Archaeological Unit. The work was a response to the development of the valley as a Park and Ride facility, Household Waste Recycling Site, supermarket, and housing.

A walkover of the site as part of an assessment had identified an area above the Tregurra Stream as a potential prehistoric habitation site. Geophysical survey identified three segments of a curvilinear enclosure ditch partly encircling a knoll above the stream to the east of this as well as a rectilinear field system underlying the extant field pattern.

Subsequent fieldwork as part of a developer-funded programme of excavation and watching briefs led to the identification of a large number of pits and hearths across the site, the majority of which that have proved dateable, spanning the Early Neolithic to the end of the Early Bronze Age periods. Two concentrations of these features were located either side of the stream valley in the central part of the site. One of these was located on the site identified by the assessment. Another concentration at the site of the enclosure included a Late Neolithic pit containing a remarkable incised slate disc. Other pits contained evidence for tin processing at the start of the Bronze Age.

The segmented enclosure ditch was revealed through excavation to be composed of two, rather than three, segments, one short, the other much longer. Of considerable note was the identification of buried soils and colluvial layers pre-dating much of the prehistoric activity and found across the site.

There appeared to be an absence of evidence of activity in the valley between the end of the Early Bronze Age and the start of the Iron Age, when much of the valley was enclosed with the field ditches identified by the geophysical survey. Evidence for crop processing, charcoal burning, and ironworking suggests fairly intensive activity, perhaps associated with the enclosed settlement or 'round' known as Polwhele Castle, to the north. A sherd of amphora from the late Roman or post-Roman periods in a corn-drying pit suggests a high status settlement nearby, perhaps continued occupation of Polwhele Castle, as well as maritime links.

The medieval period saw the laying out of another largely rectilinear field system that has survived with modifications into the extant field boundaries visible today, and which have largely survived the development of the valley.

The 19th century saw semi-industrial activity in the valley grow with brickmaking, stone quarrying, and small-scale mineral prospection, and the construction of a well-made early road linking Lower Penair Farm with the Newquay Road. This later activity is reported on elsewhere.

1 Background to the Investigations

1.1 Introduction

The Tregurra Valley, to the east of Truro in mid Cornwall (Fig 1.1), has proved to contain a remarkable record of human activity stretching from the Mesolithic period over 6000 years ago through to small-scale industrial activities in the 19th century. Few who gazed down the length of the valley from the outskirts of the city, or who casually looked into it from their cars as they skirted its southern edge, could have imagined the span of human endeavour that had left its mark beneath the green pastures and yellowing maize-fields. Before the tide of the car had drowned the valley in noise and dust it had echoed to the cries of hunters armed with flint-tipped arrows, the chatter of foragers collecting the fruits of the forest, artisans and artists crafting and creating, perhaps leaders holding forth at a meeting place carved from the earth. The valley may have fallen silent for a while - perhaps the ghosts of the past kept the people away? - but when memories faded farmers came back and divided the land into fields, and the air was permeated by smoke emanating from the mounds of charcoal burners as the valley rang to the sound of forgers and blacksmiths bending iron to their will. Times changed and different fields were laid out; pastoral peace followed but much later the valley once more resonated with bustle as roads were carved through the hillside, bricks were formed out of the soft valley clay, and stone was prised out of the hillside for public works. This monograph tells the story of the valley from the Mesolithic to the medieval period; the later history is reported on elsewhere (Kirkham forthcoming).

The sites reported on were encountered during archaeological fieldwork preceding, and during, groundworks associated with the construction of the Truro Eastern Park and Ride Scheme (TEPAR), a Household Waste Recycling Centre (HWRC), a supermarket and housing. The site as a whole is now known as the Truro Eastern District Centre (TEDC).

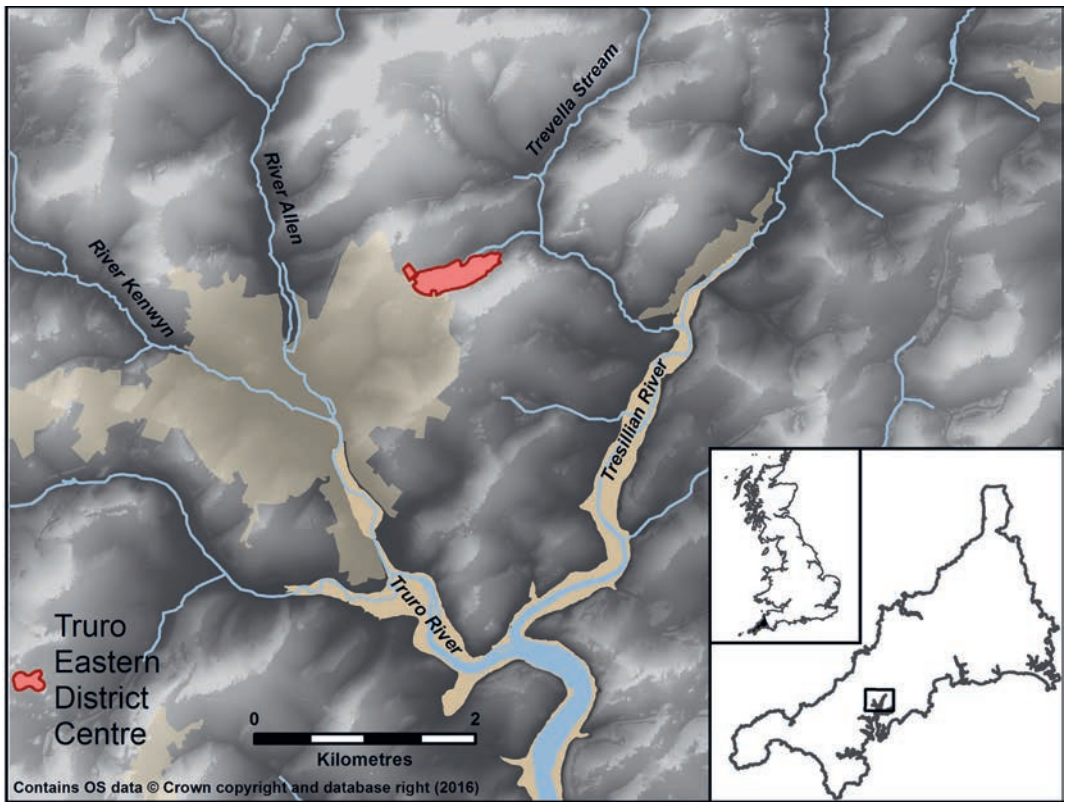

Figure 1.1: Location map.

1.2 Report structure

The monograph reports on all stages of the project undertaken between 2009 and 2016. The first chapter serves as an introduction to the site and offers a summary of the various stages of work.

The second chapter considers the geology and topography of the valley and surrounding areas, which may have had a bearing on the use(s) of the valley throughout its occupation.

The third chapter outlines the site stratigraphy and summarises the artefactual and ecofactual evidence from each feature.

Chapters 4-11, present the detailed specialist reports on the artefacts (ceramics, stonework, flint), the archaeometallurgy (cassiterite and ironworking), the ecofacts (charred plant macrofossils and charcoal), the geoarchaeology (palaeosols and analyses of two pit fills), and the programme of radiocarbon dating.

Chapter 12 analyses the distribution and nature of features and identifies possible groupings and relationships. Only two coherent prehistoric structures were identified on the site, a segmented ditched enclosure at Woodcock Corner, and a post-ring structure on an area which has been termed North Terrace. An interpretation of the spatial distribution of some of the pits has also been made.

Finally, Chapter 13 draws together the strands of the various analyses and discusses them in relation to comparable sites in Cornwall and beyond.

1.3 Terminology used in this report

Detailed records of every archaeological feature were made during the fieldwork, each context being allocated a unique number. Numbers were allocated in blocks according to which of six fields they were located in (features in Field 1 start at 1001, in Field 2 at 2001, etc). An attempt has been made to avoid discussing features as being in Field 1, for example, due to the irrelevance of much of the extant field system to the periods under discussion but the field numbers are shown in Fig 1.2 (below) as the context numbering system allows a feature's location to be narrowed down for the reader. Features recorded during the evaluation trenching (Cotswold Archaeology 2010; see 'Overview of work undertaken on the site', this Chapter) have been renumbered to follow this organisation.

For the purposes of this report the site has been divided into four distinct areas based on topography and the archaeological features encountered (Fig 2.2). The West Ridge forms the higher ground at the western end of the site; the North and South Terraces lie on either side of the Tregurra Valley, including the dry upper part of it; Woodcock Corner lies on a promontory of land protruding into the valley at the eastern edge of the site. An enclosure identified here has been named 'Woodcock Corner' on the basis of the nearest placename, a sharp bend on the former turnpike road which is now the A390 (first documented in the *Royal Cornwall Gazette,* 17 May 1850, p6).

Context numbers for cut features are given in square brackets, for instance [1010], while those for layers and fills are given in rounded brackets, for instance (1009). The segmented ditched enclosure is referred to throughout as the Woodcock Corner enclosure. The post-ring (structure) is referred to as the North Terrace post-ring (structure). Full details of the recording methodology and project archives can be found in the grey literature for the site (Taylor 2013a; 2015a; 2015b).

Pits of similar form and/or stratigraphic history have been grouped into, 'pits', 'burnt pits', 'hearth pits', and 'artefact-rich pits'. The distinction between burnt pits and hearth pits, for the purposes of this monograph, are that burnt pits contained charcoal-rich fills and/or other burnt material (for example, burnt earth) but no evidence of *in situ* burning, whereas hearth pits all displayed evidence for *in situ* burning in the form of heat-oxidised sides and/or bases and/or ashy or charcoal-rich primary fills. Features displaying *in situ* burning were further characterised as ovens, corn dryers, or furnaces where the evidence permitted. Artefact-rich pits were those particularly rich in finds, as the term suggests; the numbers of finds from these were of a magnitude higher than those from other pits. A fuller definition is given in Chapter 12.

Measurements in metric are used throughout and heights are given in metres above Ordnance Datum (OD).

Measurements between features are taken from centre to centre. Dimensions of cut features are given across the top of features unless otherwise stated.

The probability distributions for the radiocarbon determinations have been calculated using OxCal v4.3 (Bronk Ramsey 2009) except for the specialist chapter on the radiocarbon dating (Chapter 11) which has used OxCal 4.2. The 95 per cent level of probability is used throughout this report unless otherwise stated. Where determinations from other sites are quoted in full they have been recalibrated with OxCal v4.3. Consequently, they may differ from the original published sources, where earlier calibration curves were used. All calibrated dates have been rounded outwards to ten years to avoid false precision.

1.4 Overview of archaeological work undertaken on the site

Two previous projects had been undertaken within the site, both at the far western edge. An assessment (Exeter Archaeology 2001) and watching brief (Passmore 2002) for a water main replacement did not identify any features while a watching brief on a gas pipeline (Ruddle 2004) identified only post-medieval features.

The programme of work reported on here (Fig 1.2) began with an assessment and walkover survey in 2009 (Lawson-Jones 2009). This identified post-medieval sites of local importance including a quarry, removed field boundaries, lanes, and roads. The assessment did not cover the field at the far eastern end of the development, or the field to the north of Tregurra Lane (Fig 1.2); these were added to the development envelope at a later stage. The assessment did identify one site that is relevant to the results published here and it is worth repeating the description in full:

> *An ephemeral, slightly raised oval area (130 m long, 60 m wide) was recorded within the northern half of [Field 2]. It was aligned east to west, running parallel to the valley bottom and would probably have been close to seasonally flowing water along its northern edge prior to subsequent alterations and improvement to the land. It is approximately 1 m to 3 m high (although this is difficult to judge, given the natural undulations visible across the area and its sheer scale). Interpretation too is difficult, it could be an entirely natural feature, but the depression vaguely defining its southern, eastern and western sides would seem out of place given that water would have naturally followed the lowest (northern) base of the valley. The 2009 geophysical survey did not pick up on any obvious archaeological activity on this site, but there is still the potential for activity here, particularly given that it would have made an ideal livestock watering spot and hunting place.*
>
> (Lawson-Jones 2009, 17-18)

This area was subsequently proved to contain the greatest density of Neolithic to Early Bronze Age pits on the site, as well as the largest cluster of Iron Age metalworking features.

Two geophysical surveys were undertaken on the site (GSB 2009; 2010), the first covering the area considered by the assessment, the second including areas added to the development envelope. These surveys identified a curvilinear segmented ditch, comprising three sections, forming an enclosure at Woodcock Corner, a rectilinear field system underlying the extant field pattern, and various linear features representing later medieval and post-medieval activity. These were also reported on in conjunction with a programme of test pitting (Shepherd 2010).

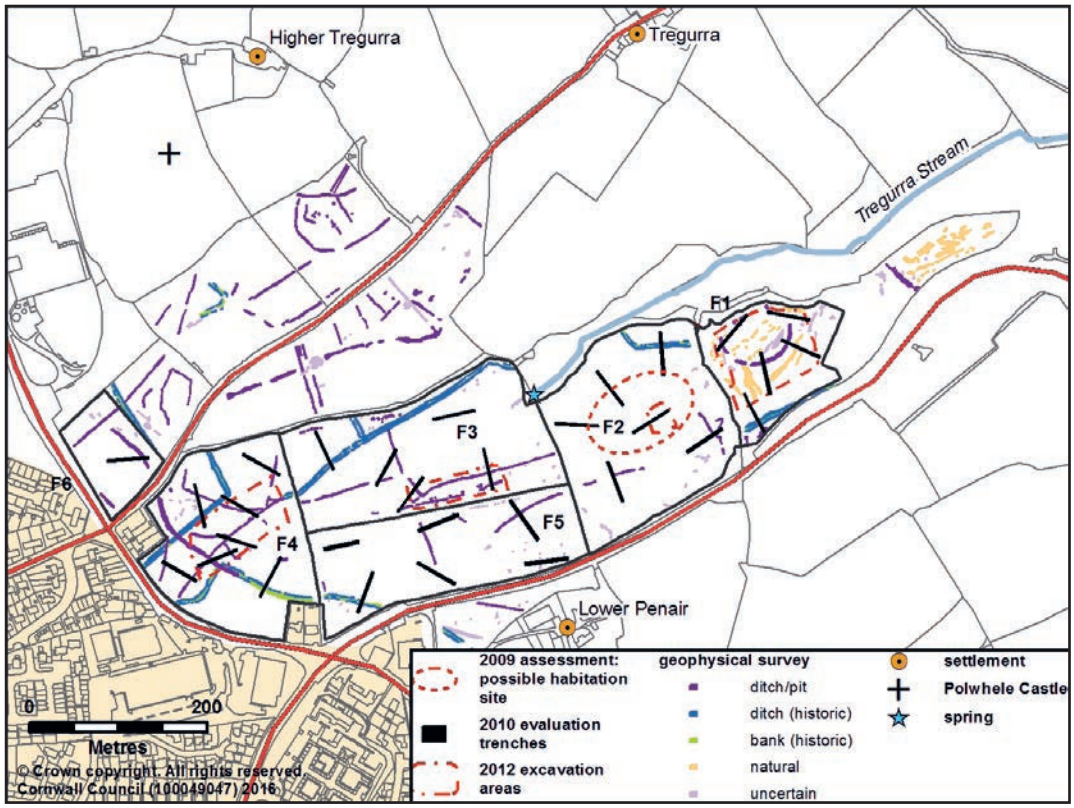

Figure 1.2: previous work on the site

Prior to the determination of the planning application for the scheme a programme of evaluation trenching was undertaken by Cotswold Archaeology (2010), targeting linear and curvilinear geophysical anomalies as well as areas that were blank geophysically. Although the evaluation did not fully excavate the segmented ditch it recorded enough information to warrant the imposition of archaeological planning conditions when the application was approved.

As part of the planning consent for the scheme four areas were subjected to full archaeological excavation. These included the area around the segmented ditched enclosure at Woodcock Corner, a small part of the area identified by the assessment at the centre of South Terrace, an area containing elements of the underlying field system and pit anomalies at the western end of South Terrace, and a large area on the east-facing slope of West Ridge that also contained elements of underlying field systems and trackways (Taylor 2013a). This stage of the work was undertaken in the summer and autumn of 2012 under increasingly wet conditions. A short article summarising the excavation of the Woodcock Corner enclosure was published in PAST, the newsletter of the Prehistoric Society (Taylor 2013b).

The identification of the importance of the monument at Woodcock Corner, and the surrounding buried soils, led to the redesign of the proposed HWRC so that the monument could be preserved *in situ*.

An intermittent watching brief had been specified for the rest of the site when groundworks began in spring 2014 but following the discoveries made in 2012 the client agreed to a more intensive watching brief between April and September of that year. This is when most of the prehistoric pits were identified and recorded (Taylor 2015a). June and July were largely hot and dry, making the identification of features more difficult during this stage of the works. This period included the bulk of the work undertaken on South Terrace and West Ridge. Late summer was more overcast enabling a higher confidence that all features had been identified. This is when the bulk of the work on North Terrace was undertaken. Further small-scale watching briefs have been carried out subsequently (Taylor 2015b).