

Perranarworthal Local History Group

The medieval roots of the modern landscape with Steve Hartgroves

Steve spoke about the origins of the landscape of this area in his talk on Tuesday 13th Aug. In the interest of improving accuracy, Steve has allowed me to use his notes to help in writing this report.

Steve unveiled his model for the development of the modern landscape of the parish, based on research carried out for the Neighbourhood Plan by the Historic Environment Working Group.

His story of the development of Perranarworthal from the prehistoric period to the present was based on evidence gathered from the Cornwall Historic Environment Record (HER), documentary research, place name studies, maps, aerial photos, and Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC).

The prehistoric period, is not well represented, having just a single site – a Bronze Age burial mound, or Tumulus, discovered when half of it was excavated for a railway cutting in the 1860s.

That the parish was inhabited during the prehistoric period can be inferred from the Bronze Age houses discovered during the construction of the Carnon Downs bypass in 2006, and from a wealth of prehistoric finds from stream-workings in the Carnon valley in the 18th and 19th centuries. This material indicates that people were living, working and dying in this area, from the beginning of the Neolithic to the end of the Roman period (4000 BC - AD410).

The early phase of the medieval period is represented by place names; the earliest recorded example being Arworthal, recorded as the manor of 'Arewothel' in 1180. Other early place names include Bissoe (1250), Bargus (1278), Risick (1278), Pellyn (1327), Mellinsey (1327), Greenwith (1479) and Pencoose (1480).

It is noticeable that several of these names incorporate tree references and this may indicate that the landscape was heavily wooded at the beginning of the medieval period. This could explain perhaps, the dearth of prehistoric settlements in the parish.

Placing these settlements into a landscape context is achieved through HLC, a technique which was pioneered in Cornwall in the 1990s. It involves classifying field systems, on the basis of their shape, size and layout, into a series of 'types' which can be described, analysed and dated, giving an insight into the development of field systems in Cornwall. Steve has reassessed and updated the HLC map for the parish to incorporate some recent developments in the methodology.

Steve suggested an emerging picture of three key early field systems - in the south east, north and west of the parish, centred around Churchtown, Bissoe, and Pellyn(wartha). In these areas the fields were consistent with typical early medieval 'open fields', farmed communally. They seem to have been gradually extended, by clearing woodland or colonising the downs around the fringes, to establish long thin 'strip fields' and the more rectangular 'cropping unit' type fields. It is significant that all the medieval place names occur within these areas.

Throughout most of the medieval period, large tracts of the parish, particularly along the river valleys, remained tree-covered and the areas between the medieval fields where the trees had been cleared formed the open downs and commons which were extensive and unenclosed until the 18th century. Eventually enclosure of most of these areas created smallholdings comprising three to five small rectangular fields, each with a single house. By 1880 almost all the parish had been enclosed piecemeal and only a few islands survived, mainly on Greenwith Common. This pattern remained little changed until the mid-20th century when detached houses were built on Greenwith Common, and bungalow estates on Perran Downs.

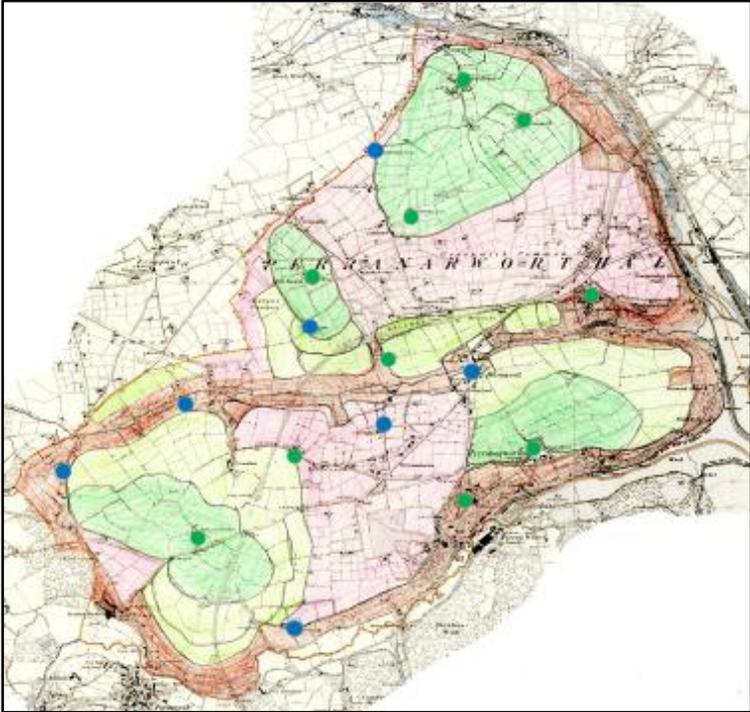
Steve was able to take to the air this June and his aerial photos, shown for the first time at this meeting, were a revelation as well as providing a valuable resource for the parish in the future. Steve combined historic maps with his aerial photos which made these processes of change and development easy to understand.



Greenwith Common: mainly C20 housing set within the fields of c19th smallholdings



C19th smallholdings on Great Downs (Goonvrea) shown on the OS map of 1880 overlaid on the AP showing the field boundaries removed to create 'modern' fields.



Steve's model showing medieval fields (green), downs and commons (pink), woodland (brown). Early medieval settlements (green dots), later medieval settlements (blue dots).