

Godrevy Warren Archaeology

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ARCHAEOLOGY BENEATH THE DUNES

The Remarkable Archaeology of Gwithian Warren – a story of people and land

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Background

Over 70 years ago a remarkable **archaeological study** took place in the parish of Gwithian, a stunning coastal paradise of long wide beaches backed by massive sand dunes, the Towans, and which lies between Hayle and Godrevy Head.

From the late 1940s to the early 1960s, over 70 sites dating from the Mesolithic (over 7,000 years ago) to the post-medieval periods (the 17th century) were discovered and investigated across this special landscape.

The **Gwithian project** evolved into one of the most important **landscape projects** in British archaeology during the 1950s. It became a unique archaeology field school and trained a new generation of archaeologists, established professional field practice. Remarkable discoveries entirely new to Cornish and British archaeology were made.

The project was developed and directed by the late Professor Charles Thomas.

In recent years, the Gwithian archaeological project and its archive has been revisited and the significance of this pioneering work has been reassessed. The archaeology discovered here is of national significance and, as a model study in landscape history. Today Gwithian holds a very special place in British Archaeology.

An up to date summary of the project is published in the county journal, *Cornish Archaeology*, in 2007: *Return to Gwithian: shifting the sands of time* by J A Nowakowski, H Quinnell, J Sturgess, C Thomas and C Thorpe.

The Gwithian archive is owned by the Thomas family and is on loan to the Royal Cornwall Museum, River Street, Truro.

Gwithian and The Warren

“Gwythian....a parish standing near St les Baye, much annoyde with the sea sande, which flyeth at a lowe water with the winde out of the choked haven into the Lande, swallowing up muche of the lande of the inhabitants, to their great improverishment”

John Norden, c 1584

Gwithian has remained one of the few undeveloped sandy landscapes on the north Cornish coast. The undulating dunes of wind-blown sands, today chequered by fields and bonded in places by scrubby maritime prickly gorse and thick maritime swards, have formed massive blankets which have ensured the protection of lost places, ancient settlements and have “locked-in” hidden landscapes.

The special alkaline properties of the Gwithian sands (shell-sand made up of millions of crushed dead marine animals – mussels, limpets and cockles) has favoured the excellent preservation of organic materials (shell, bone, wood charcoal, seeds of ancient cereals). All significant data which give detail and colour to the backdrops, and the changing lives and fortunes of the early farmers and traders who once lived and thrived in this area. The gradual development of the massive sand dunes across Gwithian Towans and the Warren has provided a protective shield which has buried and sealed in these earlier landscapes – significant places where small communities lived and farmed here in prehistory and the early historic periods.

Not all is so clearly visible at surface today although it is possible to see some of the ruins of the Bronze Age, Dark Age and medieval sites in the Warren.

Furthermore the constant sand dune development from at least the 17th century onwards, and no history of later settlement in the Warren, have ensured that the ruins of ancient settlements are protected.

Under today's dunes lie the clear imprints and stone walls of **Bronze Age roundhouses and fields**, animal footprints and plough marks – remarkable intimate and vivid insights of life at Gwithian over 4,000 years ago. The remains of a unique **Dark Age site**, over 1200 years old, were also discovered close by and high up on the edge of the Warren, lie the ruins of the lost **medieval manor house** known as **Crane Godrevy**. All of these lost sites shared a similar fate by eventually succumbing to the extensive sand blows which engulfed Gwithian and were so vividly described by John Norden in the late 16th century (see above).

Principal Sites

The earliest evidence for settlement at Gwithian is in the **Bronze Age** over 4,000 years ago (c 1800 - 1000 BC). Remarkably there is a long history of settlement dating to this period which is why the archaeology of this period found at Gwithian is so special.

Three main phases of Bronze Age settlement have been recorded beneath the dunes at Gwithian: each ancient major horizon is separated by layers of wind-blown sand which has given the Warren its uniquely deep stratigraphy enabling us to encounter an unusually detailed story of people and land through time. The Bronze Age story spans 1000 years.



Fig 1 Charles Thomas and the deep Bronze Age sequence revealed again in June 2005 at Gwithian. The lines of ancient plough marks are well preserved in the buried landsurface and earlier land surfaces lie below (© J Nowakowski)

Early Bronze Age farming

In the 1960s the footprint of an **early oval wooden building** was discovered. It lay within a wooden fenced enclosure. Linear marks, made by an ancient wooden plough (called an ard) were found scratched into the thin soils and revealed that the earliest occupants were farmers.

Seeds of barley and other ancient cereal grains were found showing that arable crops were cultivated. Particular species of ancient land snails indicated open countryside at that time. Fragments of marine shells found in the thin soils may suggest that seaweed, alongside other organic waste, had been added to the thin soils to enhance the fertility of the land. Such innovative methods of composting are a distinctive feature of this ancient settlement and show resourcefulness and persistence, marked hallmarks of the Bronze Age human story. These early farming techniques are well-documented at Gwithian and was the first time in British Archaeology that such discoveries were made.

Wood charcoal of oak, hazel, hawthorn and gorse show that the earliest farmers here had access to nearby woodland. These resources were managed, harvested and gathered to build their houses, for roofing materials as well as provide bedding for animals.

The discovery of an **early Bronze Age building at Gwithian** was very significant: it was the first evidence for a dwelling house in Britain. The building, made of wood, had an elaborate doorway which faced downslope and looked out onto ancient fields. Caches of unusual objects, such a copper awl (a piercing tool), a perforated whelk (perhaps an ancient musical instrument) as well as bit of broken pots and saddle

querns (milling stones to process grain) were found. All this evidence provides a vivid picture of an **early domesticated landscape** which was formally organised into fields and small homesteads. It still remains the earliest evidence for settlement of this period in south-west Britain.

Although the location, deep up the Warren as it follows the Red River is relatively sheltered, sand blows appeared to have been a constant hazard of daily life in prehistory and the earliest fields were buried by a major episode. Despite this the landscape remained attractive to early farmers who continued to lay out their fields: this time with thicker field hedges later crowned by stone hedges. Great areas of **criss-cross plough marks** were revealed by the excavation team and are vivid in their remarkable clarity and extensive preservation: it was the first time such direct evidence for agriculture had been found in Britain. The exciting discovery of the imprints of wooden spades in these fields also gave a real intimacy and direct connection to these early farmers - tapping into and unlocking single events, unique human stories.

Relatively recent excavations at The Warren in 2005 partly revealed again these discoveries when a new scientific dating technique to date the buried horizons and the old land surfaces was tested (OSL dating, see Fig 1). The new dates were successful in confirming this exceptional sequence and then later, in 2012, another small excavation confirmed these findings as well as revealing numerous animal hoof prints preserved in the old land surfaces. The discovery of animal footprints is rare in Britain: these show that these early farmers kept sheep, goat and cattle. Fragments of sheep, goat and cattle bones were found in the 1950s excavations.

Attachment to place and the place for the dead

One of the most striking aspects of the Bronze Age story at Gwithian is the evidence of a strong attachment to land showing persistence, resilience and sustainability. Not only is the evidence of a long history of farming special at Gwithian, but also, usually for this period, was the discovery of human burial. The cremated remains of at least 4 individual adults were found buried in a line of shallow pits dug into a Bronze Age field boundary. To find the living and the dead in such close proximity is an unusual discovery as people were generally buried into monuments known as barrows during the Bronze Age and these were in locations away from where people lived.

Within the wider landscape at Gwithian barrows have been historically documented, but their exact locations along the coastal belt have proved less easy to identify. The remains of a single solitary Bronze Age barrow however lies right on Godrevy Head. It was excavated by Charles Thomas and the Gwithian team early in the 1950s. It commands a fabulous view out to sea with the famous historic lighthouse Godrevy Light as a delightful backdrop.

Later Bronze Age farming - a prosperous community

Towards the end of the second millennium (c 1100-1000 BC) some re-landscaping of the Bronze Age fields took place and new round houses - this time built variously in wood and in wood and stone. A small cluster, probably representing a small farmstead or homestead of a few families, was found. The buildings were arranged around a shared space: perhaps an early town-place. Three of the houses had distinctive pebble-lined open hearths and were probably dwelling houses, while the other buildings were used for the storage of grain and craft-making activities: pot making, leather-working, bone working and even perhaps basketry.

The farmstead was surrounded by small square fields: some under arable cultivation, others were stock enclosures. A rich and varied collection of animal bone found during the excavations reveal that not only were farmed animals kept, but wild animals were also exploited: the bones of wild pig, roe and red deer as well as whale bone were found.

The Bronze Age farmers at Gwithian also cast a much wider net revealing an open and innovative community by collecting gabbro clays from the Lizard to make into their pots; Kimmeridge shale was brought down from Dorset to make into bracelets; bronze axes using stone moulds made from Devon chlorite schist were also crafted on site. By 1000 BC the picture is one of a thriving, resourceful and vibrant outgoing community.

The abandonment of this landscape after 1000 BC may have been precipitated by a major sand blow which ultimately resulted in desertion: the community left and moved elsewhere. The settlement now in ruins – their houses and fields - were not only buried by sand blows but also by dumps of rubbish rich in finds. These now sealed the roofless roundhouses and abandoned fields. Bronze Age Gwithian was locked in and sealed under massive dunes, long forgotten until its accidental discovery in the 1950s by a group of archaeologists some 3,000 years later.

Today we can see where the main part of the settlement lay but the ruins have largely been reburied – occasionally it is possible to pick up the odd piece of Bronze Age pot or shell which has been burrowed out of the sand by the Gwithian rabbits!

Dark Age Gwithian: the post-Roman story

The remarkable Bronze Age settlement at Gwithian is not however the end of the story.

Rabbit burrows yielded the first evidence of settlement dating to early medieval times; a period sometimes referred to as the **Dark Ages or the post-Roman period**. This is spanned the 5th to 8th centuries AD. In January 1953 Charles Thomas picked up shell, bone and few interesting pieces of early pottery which had been kicked out of the rabbit holes in the long, grassy dunes located a quarter of a mile inland from the tidal mouth of the Red River. This kickstarted the major landscape project at Gwithian and discoveries of a post-Roman “settlement” at Gwithian was a major find – both regionally and nationally.

The Dark Age story at Gwithian is just as intriguing as the earlier Bronze Age one and is equally significant. Exceptional preservation of buildings and rubbish dumps was once again discovered – all buried under layers of wind-blown sand which effectively captured and fossilised a once-lived place.

Over 4 years from 1954 to 1958, the Gwithian team excavated a series of stone buildings within a discrete complex. Up to 12 small cellular stone buildings were found although not all were fully excavated. They were arranged in a row and built along the southern side of the top of a linear sand dune (Fig 2). Two of these buildings can still be seen at surface today.

The buildings are unusual: small, oval and built in large artificial hollows. Their stone walls had been built against turf which had once lined the sides of the hollows. The sockets for wooden posts found set into the walls show that the buildings had all been roofed – perhaps with turf.

Also found to one side of the complex was a larger rectangular stone and wooden building with an unusual open-sided front.



Fig 2 View of the linear sand dune and location of the Dark Age site at Gwithian (© Gwithian Archive)

An industrial quarter – artisan workshops?

Stone-lined pits containing iron slag and metal waste were found close by and this gives us some clue as to the distinct character of this **Dark Age settlement**: it does not appear to be a dwelling place but a small centre for small-scale craft industries perhaps operating as artisan workshops.

The rich and varied collection of finds dating to this period include locally made grass-marked platters and jars and bar-lug pots, a sizeable collection of imported pottery (amphora and fine wares from the Mediterranean) worked iron, stone and bone tools. They reveal a number of related craft activities such as iron-smelting, bone and leather working, weaving and even perhaps salt-making. Most of the finds come from rubbish heaps and include broken bits of pottery as well as older objects which are reused, refashioned into other objects – for example recycled amphora pots made into spindle whorls (spinning weights for twisting yarn/wool).

Gwithian in the wider post-Roman world - Dumnonia

This unusual site dates from the late 5th to 8th centuries AD and the discovery of non-native and imported pottery shows a community well-connected to the wider

world. For whom are these objects made and traded for? And where is the settlement? These are not easy questions to answer.

The 1950s excavations discovered a significant long forgotten place here at Gwithian Warren – one that clearly played a role in post-Roman Dumnonia and its major maritime connection with the Mediterranean and Atlantic worlds of the late Roman Empire. Gwithian's coastal location is the key – this is the first major bay and landfall for boats sailing westwards from the Isles of Scilly and around Land's End. If long-distance trading ships regularly tied up in the mouth of the estuary at Gwithian some 1,500 years ago, then this site may have developed in part to service passing maritime traffic. If so, perhaps the workshop complex may, among other things, have provided chandleries for the repair and refurbishment of boats.

Some of the imported pottery – certainly the luxury commodities of wine and olive oil contained in the amphora – may have been payment for services rendered. It's highly likely that the ultimate destination for these boats was the dark age citadel of Tintagel a major 5th to 6th settlement at this period further up the north Cornish coast.

Crane Godrevy – early settlement in the round, medieval farm later abandoned medieval manor

On the top of Gwithian Warren lies the **medieval site of Crane Godrevy** which was discovered as a set of stone buildings in 1951. Excavations took place in the 1950s and finished in 1969. This was the final large-scale excavation undertaken by the Gwithian team.

Crane Godrevy has a complex history dating from at least the late Roman period (c 3/4th centuries AD) through to the later medieval period in the 17th century.

By 1956 it was realised however that the earliest settlement at this location was a **sub-triangular enclosure**, about an acre in size, with a deep V-shaped ditch with an internal berm and bank. An entrance way was found on western side of the site. This has been interpreted as a **Round**. Parts of this ditch are still visible today. Local grass-marked pottery found here shows occupation **in the late Roman period** and the settlement here would have been linked with the **Dark Age site** found in the Warren below (see above).

That the location continued to be attractive for a farming settlement is certain as the physical evidence of an **early medieval** (stone) building (dating to c. 11th century AD) was also found here.

The final settlement which can be seen today as a set of stone buildings is the **later medieval manorial farm**. These comprised one long low sub-rectangular building – perhaps dating to the 12th-13th centuries AD and this had two rooms: a cowshed (shippon or *pen isaf*) and a hall/living space (*pen uchaf*). A cross passage lined by a wooden screen was later replaced by a stone cross wall (around c. 1400 AD). An additional annex – perhaps a dairy – was added later (c. 1400 AD). This place became the **manor house of Godrevy** before being abandoned – sometime in the 17th century.

A large and varied collection of finds from Crane Godrevy illustrate the site's complex story: Romano-British and early medieval pottery and stonework to medieval and later window glass. An impressive collection of iron tools and objects: nails, hooks, knife blades, scythe blades, horse shoes, drill bits, bolts, keys, hinge hooks, candle holders, rings and spikes. However, there is nothing quite so vivid perhaps as the

farthing of Charles II (1675) and the large iron door key which were both found on the sandy floor of the abandoned manor house which signalled the end of a living family here at Crane Godrevy in the 17th century. The fate of the manor farm of Crane Godrevy was one shared by the other sites on the Warren when the place finally became engulfed and buried by sand blows.

Crane Godrevy represents one of the very few excavations in Cornwall of a medieval rural settlement with its rare survival of an essentially unaltered medieval farm.

Overall Significance and future potential

Exceptional preservation of the buildings and fields of ancient and historic farming settlements together with their rich and varied collection of artefacts has ensured that the archaeology discovered and investigated at Gwithian continues to be of great significance at a local and national level.

The long history of Bronze Age settlement and arable and animal husbandry recorded at Gwithian is unmatched in south-west Britain. The Dark Age story is equally without parallel and the exceptional preservation of an intact medieval farmstead also merits special attention. The research potential of the physical landscape as well as the archives of the excavated sites have high educational value. Such knowledge will inform the long-term future management of the wider Gwithian area as well as pointers for the special potential of similar coastal landscapes in western Britain.

The archaeology tells a vivid and intimate story of people and their persistent and enduring relationship with the land through time. The fragile and challenging coastal location of Gwithian may be perceived today as socially marginal and economically peripheral, but the rich archaeology of the area tells us that this has not always been the case. While earlier settlements endured and persisted in sometimes challenging circumstances with a backdrop of the historic development of the sand dunes, a strong continuing attachment to land and place is a constant theme from the Bronze Age through to later medieval times at Gwithian. There is great amount of information in the human Gwithian story which reveal stories of innovation, endurance, persistence, resourcefulness, sustainability and inspiration. This, above all, has ensured Gwithian's special place in Cornish and British Archaeology alike.

Sources

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