

“Ceremonial Complexes on Dartmoor”

Talk by Emma Cunis 24th November 2022

Our second talk of the 2022/23 season and the first on “Zoom” was by Emma Cunis on the prehistoric monuments of Dartmoor, which include 22 stone circles, 60% of the UK’s stone rows as well as multiple standing stones and burial chambers. Emma grew up near Dartmoor but moved overseas in her 20s. Eight years ago she returned to the area and began to “reconnect”.

As with many prehistoric complexes, those on Dartmoor have many theories regarding their original purposes; were they gathering places, demarcation boundaries, ritual centres, agricultural calendars, astronomical sites or a combination of more than one? Emma talked us through some of the sites and the theories about their ancient use and also some associated legends. The climate of Dartmoor in prehistoric times was different from today, being warm and dry with plenty of stone for building, animals to hunt and land for crops,

The first site discussed was the prehistoric complex normally underwater in Tottiford Reservoir, revealed by the drought in summer 2022. This site, damaged by being submerged, consists of a Mesolithic (middle Stone Age) mound, a later stone circle, three stone rows and a possible burial mound with processional way; all are features of a ceremonial complex, showing layers of use from Mesolithic times into the Bronze Age.



Tottiford Lake (Emma Cunis)

The community gathering theory can be applied to Fernworthy, which consists of a stone circle and stone rows. Nineteenth century excavations revealed a layer of charcoal on the bedrock, indicating the lighting of fires. Finds included beaker pottery from about c2800 BC and worked flints, suggesting the complex was a place for the living, not the dead.

Victorian excavations at White Tor revealed more charcoal, whilst the stone circle at Langstone Moor revealed a possible “cooking stone”, leading the site to be interpreted as a place for feasting

and gatherings. The standing stone is 10 – 11 feet high and was damaged by being used for target practice during the Napoleonic Wars. Grey Wethers shows a pair of stone circles (much restored) and, again, excavation revealed charcoal on the bedrock.

Whit Moor, reconstructed by the Victorians, has been interpreted as a site for the demarcation of boundaries. Although now remote, the site is close to ancient tracks and Bronze Age settlements. Burial chambers and ditches surround the stone circle.

Other sites, such as Shovel Down (array of stone rows but only three stones of the circle survive), Bedworthy (21 of the 24 stones re-erected in Edwardian times) and Sourton Tors (potential stone row) are very ruinous or have been reconstructed. Shovel Down is one of the largest areas of Bronze Age archaeology left on the moor and legend tells us that the standing stone was once a peat cutter who met a sticky end!

Knowing the time of the solstice would have been important to farming communities. Merrivale is well preserved and shows double stone rows, stone circles, a standing stone and burial chambers. The theory is that this site was used as an agricultural calendar as it aligns with a 'notch' on a nearby tor for plotting the rising sun.

We will probably never know for sure what the stone circles were for. Emma thinks they were a combination of the practical and the spiritual and people are still drawn to them today. HADS visited in 2010 and even since that time new discoveries have been made. The stone circle at Sittaford was rediscovered following a moorland fire in 2008. When excavated the stones "glowed".



Merrivale Stone Rows (from HADS 2010 Dartmoor tour)