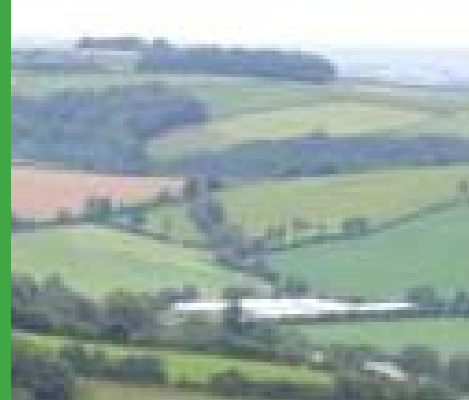


Field Patterns and Boundaries

in the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



Introduction

Today the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty has in total about XXXX km (xx miles) of hedgebanks. Despite the removal of many hedges in the second half of the twentieth century, on average every square mile of land still contains xx linear miles of hedge. This creates an intricate patchwork of fields and boundaries and is one of the most distinctive features of our landscape.

It is the legacy of centuries of farming, with the patterns of fields and hedges laid out over thousands of years. Initially they reflected major territorial and landownership divisions, but were then shaped by the changing needs and traditions of pastoral and arable farming.

There are at least seven large prehistoric field systems still recognisable within the AONB today, while every parish has evidence for Medieval and later field enclosures.

Layout of field systems

The pattern of fields and boundaries varied considerably as new areas of land were enclosed in successive phases over time.

Prehistoric field systems (before c50AD) tended to be used for holding livestock. They generally comprised networks of small enclosures, often with internal droveways linking the fields. They were typically established on hilltops and south-facing slopes, as well as on very steeply sloping ground. At this time, the pattern of settlements was a scattered one, with the farmsteads and buildings dispersed amongst the fields.

By contrast, field systems from the **late Saxon and Medieval periods** (c 900AD to 1540AD) were largely used for arable farming. These were clustered around the enclosed settlements which were to become the villages we see today. They were not confined to particular terrain, although gentle south-facing slopes were always preferred if available. The villages were connected to the fields by lanes, used for driving ox teams out to plough the land.

Livestock grazing was often limited to open areas of heathland outside the field systems or to semi-enclosed areas of common land.

More recent field systems were sometimes reorganisations of earlier smaller fields, but in South Devon were more often associated with the later **18th and 19th century** enclosure of the former outlying open heathlands. These were mostly located away from the villages on hilltops and coastal margins, and were probably used for a rotation of mixed arable and pastoral farming.

Territorial and landownership boundaries first appeared in prehistory, dividing the land into large blocks. Later patterns of settlement and ownership tended to follow these early boundaries, suggesting that today's patterns of ownership are as old as the ancient boundaries that contain it. Many country lanes in use today developed from tracks serving Medieval fields.

Links to Dartmoor

Recent research has begun to suggest that many of today's ridge roads which descend from Dartmoor to the South Devon coast originated as droveways, along which stock was moved at different times of the year between the moor and the coast. The practice of moving stock between summer and winter pastures is known to geographers as 'transhumance agriculture.'

Archaeological study of field systems on the fringes of Dartmoor shows that between about 1900 BC and 1200 BC, field systems were laid out on a grand scale, with long parallel hedgebanks, each of which was subdivided into fields of between 1 and 3 acres. Each of the parallel banks was attached at one end to a common terminal bank. As the Devon dialect term for a hedgebank is a 'reave', that is the name which was given to the banks of these field systems, which are described as 'coaxial field systems' due to their many parallel banks.



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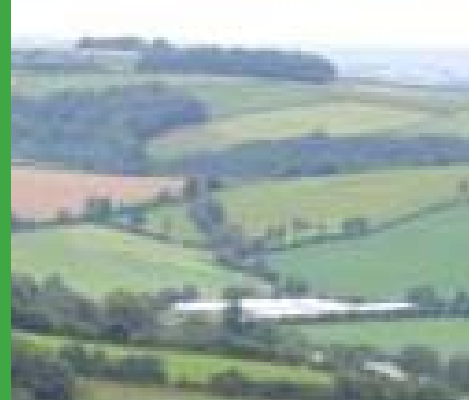
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History & development

Field systems first developed at a time when agriculture was new to Western Europe (from 4500BC.) Most very early agriculture was pastoral - that is to say, where animals were domesticated, often being herded from place to place to ensure that good grass was available for them. Gradually, semi-permanent settlements grew up in the places where they stopped for considerable periods of time.

Bronze Age field systems

The prehistoric reave field systems established on Dartmoor, continued in use for a long time after the Bronze Age, their banks incorporated into present day field boundaries. In the last five years or so, two local

archaeologists, Win Scutt and Robert Waterhouse, have found several coaxial 'reave' field systems on the South Devon coast. Their interpretation of these, which all lie near the ends of ridge roads, within regular areas enclosed by territorial boundaries, is that both they and the Dartmoor field patterns represent seasonal pastures, connected by ridge roads.

While at least six coaxial field systems have been identified around the coast of South Devon, only one small coaxial system has been found between the coast and the edge of

Dartmoor, which is largely empty of settlement evidence from the Bronze Age, although there is more evidence from the Iron Age (c.700 BC - c.50 AD).

One exception is the large number of Bronze Age burial mounds which are commonly found along the ridge roads, especially at major junctions, such as Stanborough, where four ridge roads meet.



Prehistoric field system at Strete



Iron Age field system at Decklers Cliff (distance)

Iron Age ranch boundaries and field systems

Some parts of the South Devon AONB have little or no evidence for planned field systems, but nevertheless have clear evidence for land division into large regular blocks.

These areas include the eastern side of the South Hams between Slapton and Start Point; and the western side between Bolt Tail and the Avon. Both areas have inland ridges aligned north-to-south, along which major ridge roads run.

Long boundaries run at right angles to these, following a mix of natural and manmade features, subdividing the land into long sub-rectangular blocks.

On the western side of the peninsula, recent study of two similar 'estates' forming the later medieval parish of South Huish showed that the linear banks forming their side boundaries lined up with the ramparts of the late Iron Age hillfort of Burleigh Dolts, which sat at their eastern end. No traces of early field systems remain within these areas and it is thought that the hillfort acted as a central 'corral' - the 'estates' being large areas of open heath, used for ranching stock, probably cattle. Similar arrangements have been identified around hillforts elsewhere in Southern England (Cunliffe 1991).

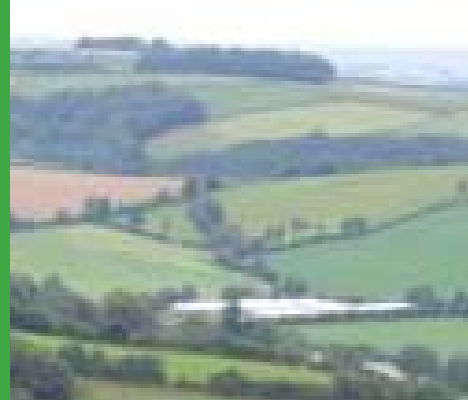
Romano-British field systems

We have little evidence of new field systems in the Romano-British period, from about 50 AD to 350 AD, but there was a definite increase in rural settlement at this time, a number of farmsteads of this period having been identified in the South Devon AONB, such as that at Lower Well Farm, Stoke Gabriel, which may have had a field system associated with it.



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Early Medieval field systems

After 350 AD, the population of Britain is thought to have fallen, as a result of the collapse of Roman civilisation, and the effects of several epidemics and coastal piracy. It is assumed that existing field systems were used to some extent, though we do not have proof of this. Some human occupation of the South Devon AONB continued during this period, but no archaeological research has identified the locations of their settlements.

Later Medieval field systems

From the 9th century AD onwards, 'open field systems' began to appear. These were usually centred on a settlement, often one which still exists today. They were based on a system of land tenure called the Manorial System. Manors were simply large estates, often within the areas of previous landholdings, and following in many cases the probable prehistoric land divisions described above. Part of the land was farmed directly from the Manor Farm, but the remainder was let out to tenant farmers, each of whom rented a number of narrow ploughable unhedged strips of land. Each of these was called a furlong, nominally 22 yards wide by 220 long. These furlongs could be scattered across the parish to give the tenant a fair share of the available land, or they could all be located in a block, known as a ferling, which could measure from 22 to 35 acres, a figure which varied from parish to parish. On a larger scale, the land could be measured in hides, of which a ferling was sometimes a quarter.

Where strips were in blocks, there was often a lane or open-sided track running along their ends, for the plough-teams to pass along to get to the fields. Ploughs were usually hauled by oxen, horses being expensive to feed. Many of these lanes still survive within former open-field systems, and often respect the former strip boundaries, moving through the landscape in steps, with right-angled doglegs around the strip ends where they needed to change direction. Lanes which travel diagonally across these field patterns were either crossing areas of open heath or ox-pasture, or are later than the fields.

In most parts of Devon, the open-field systems seem to have become hedged by mutual agreement of the tenants, often by the 17th century. This might have been to reduce soil loss during rainstorms, or it might have made stock control easier. Enclosure produced a pattern of roughly rectangular fields, each of which enclosed from three to five strips at a time, but with curved or S shaped boundaries. These fossilise the course followed by the plough teams in order to turn the plough at the end of each furrow.

Most woodland was conserved and managed during the medieval period, protected by the construction of thick earthwork woodbanks with large ditches on the outside, to prevent animals (and unauthorised people) from entering. As these banks were often placed around woods only after centuries of tree clearance around their edges, the areas they enclosed often had curved or irregular perimeters. These can be commonly seen in the Avon valley, where many such boundaries survive, indicating that the valley was once considerably more wooded than now. A good example of a woodbank is that which still protects West Alvington Wood near Kingsbridge.

18th and 19th century fields

These could be reorganisations of earlier field systems, in which case they were produced by removing unnecessary hedges to increase the size of the fields. They could also represent enclosure of previously open land which could have been upland heath, scrub woodland or coastal heath. In many cases, drystone walls were used, which used the often large amounts of natural stone lying on the ground surface, especially on the coast. Suggestions that many of these walls were built by French prisoners of war between 1793 and 1815 have no historical foundation.

Marsh reclamation was commonly carried out in the later 18th and early 19th centuries, and there are several areas of this around the estuaries of the South Devon AONB. Reclaimed land of this type is often poor quality grazing, divided by drainage ditches rather than hedges. A typical example is Charleton Marsh, now a nature reserve, enclosed from a former tidal creek by the Earl of Morley in about 1820.

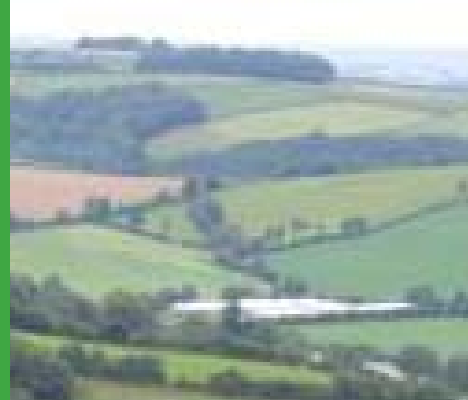


Hedgebank survey and measurement: a typical hedge in summer.



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Detail

Hedge banks

Used from Bronze Age to the 20th century. Contain large amounts of stone gathered from the fields, covered in earth. Often topped by turves into which small trees were planted and laid to make a hedge. Some hedges used large slabs to retain their sides: these are known in the Kingsbridge area as 'Shiners'.

Walls

The earliest walls appear to be of prehistoric date, and are found on the extreme southern coast. Some had vertical stone slabs, set edge to edge, forming a stone fence and are sometimes known as 'Dragons' Teeth'. Examples are to be seen just north-west of Prawle Point, and in the vicinity of Soar Mill Cove. On the south coast you can also see heavy stone walls with an earth and rubble core, with a projecting course of stone slabs at the top, to prevent sheep or goats from scaling them. Vertical slabs like dragons' teeth are often seen reinforcing the sides of these walls. On the south coast too are lightweight drystone walls, seldom more than 50cm thick, from the 17th-19th century. The local mica schist lends itself to this type of walling.

Fences (19th-20th century)

Most older fences were associated with reclamation of heathland, although the abandonment of traditional hedge maintenance from the early 20th century has increasingly led to fences being erected alongside hedges. Due to the materials used, fences older than 30 years seldom survive, although materials such as barbed wire have been in existence for over 120 years.

Gates before the 18th century

It seems that most agricultural gates were hingeless. Either wattle hurdles or framed five-bar gates, they were held in place by twisted ropes. After iron hinges were introduced, granite gateposts were brought from Dartmoor in large quantities, excepting those areas where the local stone was suitable for use in this way.

Stiles

Difficult to date, many may go as far back as the 16th or 17th centuries. Commonly a large slate slab, set vertically in the hedge, or crossing walls, the double wooden 'stepladder' form which is common now.

Animal creeps

Usually only found in walls, often used at lambing or calving time, to allow the young stock to roam while preventing the adults from leaving their paddock, and could be blocked up when not in use.

Visiting ancient field systems in the South Hams

Deckler's Cliff

Grid Reference SX 758 367

This spectacular prehistoric coaxial field system, re-used in the medieval period, is best viewed from Gara Rock, just across the valley to the west. The parallel lines of field divisions lie at the south-east corner of a much larger field system, laid out on a north-south axis from a terminal reave to the north, probably dating to the middle Bronze Age (Waterhouse 2000). Two small groups of circular huts survive on a terrace near the top of the slope, while a mid-19th century iron mine cuts across the lower slopes. Other traces of the former field system can be seen as parallel hedge banks to the north and west.

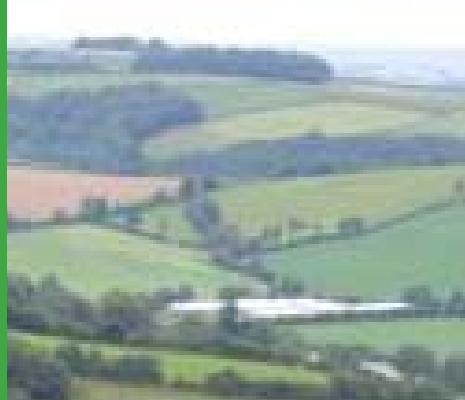
How to get there

The South West Coast Path crosses the southern edge of the site, which can be followed from Gara Rock, where a small number of parking spaces are available.



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Soar Mill Cove to Bolt Head

Grid References **SX 697 372 to SX 726 364**



Bolt Head looking west towards Soar

This extensive coaxial field system, which is of more than one phase, but may originate in the middle Bronze Age, covers the coastal plateau and steeper coastal slopes between Bolt Head and Soar Mill Cove. It is laid out on a roughly north-south axis, with slight deviations to the south-west and south-east at

its extremities. It has two terminal reaves, the earlier of which runs between Bolberry in the west and Rew (thought to derive from the dialect term 'reave') in the east; an additional one abutting the first just north of Higher Soar, and running down the ridge to the sea at Sharpitor.

A number of hut circles are scattered among the fields and were first noticed by Mark Bawden, Curate of Malborough in the 1750s. Several of the huts he identified have since fallen into the sea, but up to 15 were re-identified when

parts of the site were scheduled as an Ancient Monument in 2002. Look for the small hut circle alongside the Coast Path overlooking Starehole Bay, just north of the Second World War lookout on Bolt Head. There are others nearby.

19th century antiquarians believed that the Starehole valley was the site of a Danish settlement, supporting up to 60 people. They based this theory on the discovery of a hoard of Scandinavian coins which were dug up there, and assumed that the many earthworks in the valley bottom which actually belonged to the field system, must have been remains of houses. We now know that the valley supported three or four medieval farmsteads, all deserted before 1777, and that fishermen's huts were sited near the cove. Remains of the rectangular buildings associated with these are to be found scattered among the fields in the valley bottom, and traces of medieval open field strips inserted into the earlier system can be seen on the Warren on the higher ground to the west.

How to get there

The South West Coast Path passes through the field system. The nearest places where cars can be parked are at Higher Soar and Sharpitor, though the latter gets very crowded in the summer. Both of these are between 1 and 2 kilometres steep walk from the field systems. The fields are best viewed in the winter and early spring when the bracken is down.



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Where can I find out more?.

A good starting point is *Historic Landscape Analysis*, by Stephen Rippon, published by the Council for British Archaeology in 2004. Specific information about field systems and landscape types is provided by Brian Roberts and Stuart Wrathmell in *Region & Place*, published by English Heritage in 2002.

An excellent general introduction to prehistoric field systems in Devon is *The Dartmoor Reaves*, by Andrew Fleming, published by Batsford in 1988, but now out of print.

The Heritage Appraisals for Charleton, East Portlemouth, Slapton and Stokenham, researched and written by Robert Waterhouse between 2000 and 2002 contain much detailed information on the parishes' changing field systems. Copies are available in Kingsbridge Library, Devon Record Office and Devon County Council's Historic Environment Record.

Specific published accounts of field systems in South Devon are in the Proceedings of the Devon Archaeological Society for 1973, 1979, 1983, 1985, 1994 & 1995

Acknowledgements

This factsheet was written in 2005 by Robert Waterhouse, BA, AIFA. He is a freelance archaeologist and has lived and worked in South Devon for most of his life.



View from Bolt Tail. Much out lying coastal land remained as open, unenclosed heathland until it was hedged and improved in the 18th and 19th Centuries. By contrast, some more accessible land was methodically enclosed into rectangular fields in the Bronze Ages and Iron Ages.

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