

East Portlemouth Parish Heritage Appraisals

in the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty



Introduction

This is a brief account of the development of East Portlemouth parish from the earliest times to the present. It concentrates particularly on the changing patterns of landscape and settlement. It summarises the much more detailed study of the parish commissioned by South Hams District Council and written by local archaeologist Robert Waterhouse.

Geology and Topography

The underlying rocks are very hard mica and hornblende schists, of the Devonian period (c.350 - 270 million years ago), or even earlier. The majority are a hard grey rock, shot through with strings of white quartz. To the south, jagged cliffs fall abruptly to the sea, while to the north, the land slopes steeply to the Kingsbridge Estuary, with several short valleys cut into it.

Neolithic finds 4500 BC - 2300 BC

Flint scatters have been found in the parish near Vinivers Cross and near Moor Sand, while chance finds of a flint arrowhead and a polished greenstone axe have been made on the coast path.

Bronze Age 2300 BC - 700 BC

Several burial mounds lie beside a ridge road which was probably a cattle droving route, which passed from east to west down the centre of the parish from its junction with a more important route near Prawle.

Part of this ridge road was followed by a long curving boundary bank, which ran in a great horseshoe from Goodshelter, via High House Farm to Holset Cross, and formed the terminal reave of a coaxial field system, which measured 1.9 kilometres east to west, and 1.2 kilometres north to south.

The droving routes seem to have connected seasonal pastures linking the high ground of Dartmoor with the coast, where field systems of this type are found.

The best preserved part of this field system is at Decklers Cliff, where two small clusters of hut circles survive.

Several bronze swords found in the sea at Moor Sand could be from a wreck, but could also have been deliberately buried as a founders' hoard for later retrieval by a bronzesmith, being inundated by later sea level rises.

Iron Age 700 BC - 50 AD

Two small enclosures have been found, just east of Decklers Cliff, one of which was called Woodberry, from the Saxon word burh, meaning a fort. A wood may have adjoined it, in the valley to the east.

A possible hillfort site lay on a steep-sided spur just above West Prawle Wood. This is a roughly square enclosure with rounded corners, which may have been used for stock management and protection.

Romano-British c.50 AD - 400 AD

No finds of this period have been made in the parish so far.

Dark Age & Anglo-Saxon c.400AD - c.950AD

East Portlemouth church was probably founded in this period. It is dedicated to the Celtic St Winwalloe and lies in a very small oval enclosure, with an outer enclosure forming a D shape against the ridge road to its north. The outer enclosure may have been a corral for stock management, but the inner enclosure may be an early Christian graveyard of a type found in Cornwall from the 5th-11th centuries. Another possible early Christian site at South Pool was connected with East Portlemouth by the ancient Wood Lane, which climbs the steep, formerly wooded valley side from Waterhead to the ridge road at Newhouse Cross.

Later Medieval c.950AD - c.1540AD

The parish of East Portlemouth was created in the 12th or 13th century, based on the lands belonging to the manor of West Prawle, the church being first recorded in the late 13th century.



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Domesday Book records only West Prawle manor, but other settlements are likely to have existed, notably around East Portlemouth Church. The settlement here grew considerably as a port and fishing village, and probably had a planned layout in the valley below the church. This was of some importance in the medieval period, often supplying ships to the King for military expeditions abroad.

By the 13th-14th century, other farming hamlets existed at Holset, Goodshelter, Rickham and Walland. All of these settlements had open field systems clustered around them. Close to the settlements, field strips were grouped into long blocks, containing ferlings, each of which was a single farm holding, measuring 25-30 acres.

Subdivision and enclosure of these open field systems with hedge banks may have begun by the late 13th century, and was probably complete by the 16th century. For some reason, Rickham kept one of its areas of open fields until the later 19th century, and this is shown on the tithe map.

Many of the smaller lanes in the parish were made to serve the fields and date from this period.

Before the 16th century, large areas of the south and east of the parish were open heathland, as indicated by the placename 'Moor Farm' and the many large irregular fields in this area with heath, moor, down and furze names.

The tenants ground their corn at the manorial watermill at Slade, on Waterhead creek from the 13th century or before. Other mills belonging to West Prawle and Rickham were sited near West Prawle Wood and at Mill Bay. West Prawle Wood was conserved as a managed wood to supply timber for building and fencing. Other woods are likely to have existed in the Holset and Pigs Nose valleys, but have gone now.

Post-Medieval c.1540AD - c.1750AD

This period saw further expansions of agriculture into the coastal heath although most of these simply involved enclosing large areas of the heath to simplify their management. Some areas were subdivided into small plots where the tenants cut furze for fuel, notably around the open field system at Rickham.

The manor mill at Slade was acquired by the Borough of Dartmouth, which developed a quay there between 1600 and 1622, probably the one which still exists.

In 1646, Salcombe Castle was besieged for three months by Parliamentarian forces, who constructed an earthwork siege battery for cannon on Rickham Common. The fort surrendered after its food ran out.

East Portlemouth village started to shrink and lose its status in the 16th and 17th centuries, at a time when the port of Salcombe was expanding. By 1750 it was only a quarter of its 14th century size.

Two substantial mansions, one being the Rectory beside South Pool creek, the other at High House, developed

in the 16th and 17th centuries. High House had a mock-fortified courtyard wall placed in front of it, possibly with a gate arch, in about 1600. This may have been for show, but possibly for defence, as piracy was a problem in this period. A Barbary pirate vessel was wrecked on Decklers Cliff in the 1620s with a cargo which included Islamic gold coins and bullion from North Africa.

Early Modern c.1750AD - c.1900AD

This period was characterised by the slow desertion of many settlements, with smallholdings unchanged for centuries being swallowed up by larger farms and their buildings lost. The tithe map of 1841 shows this period of change in progress, many small farms being amalgamated, their landless buildings being demolished or turned into labourers' cottages.

The Dukes of Cleveland who owned much of the parish in the 19th century, redeveloped several farms, providing new farmhouses and buildings at Home Farm, East Portlemouth, Holset and Rickham Farms. Most of the villagers in these places were evicted in 1879 and their houses demolished, the only survivors in East Portlemouth being those owned by the church. Earthwork remains of the houses and farmsteads survive at all three sites.

Farming too changed, with the smaller fields being enlarged and new ones laid out.

Slades Mill was rebuilt several times, with several buildings being added, making this a busy settlement, with a corn mill, sawmill, warehouses and quay.

Mining took place on a very small scale in the middle of the 19th century at Pigs Nose and Decklers Cliff, where iron was extracted from shafts and adits, whose remains can still be seen. An inclined tramway took the ore down the coastal slope onto Decklers Island, where it was tipped onto a wooden quay for shipping. Another mine near Yalton on South Pool Creek produced black lead for use in paint.

Modern c.1900AD - present

Three major landscape changes characterise the 20th century in East Portlemouth parish. Firstly, developments in agriculture have made many field boundaries disappear, leaving huge open spaces, more suitable for combine harvesters and large tractors.

Secondly, large parts of the parish were requisitioned by the British and American Armies in 1939-46. Radio stations with cast concrete bunkers and tall masts were built near West Prawle and Moor Farms and a landing craft service depot was constructed in Mill Bay, in advance of the Normandy Landings of 1944. This caused a considerable amount of alteration to the landscape, with hedges being removed and military structures and roads introduced.

Thirdly, since the 1920s, many expensive villas have been constructed in and around East Portlemouth village, and along the coast from South Pool Creek to Mill Bay.



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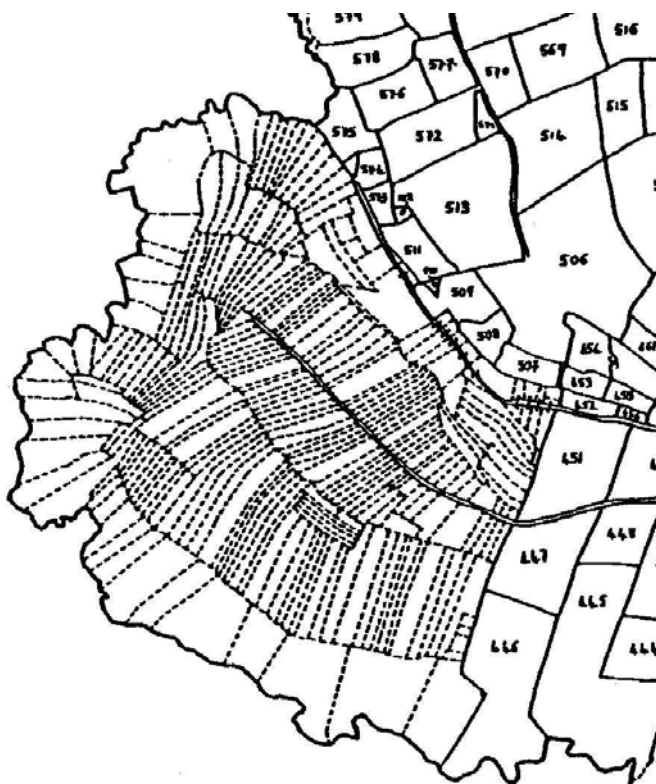
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Further reading

This is a summary of the detailed parish heritage appraisal for East Portlemouth parish commissioned by South Hams District Council and first published in 2002. Reference copies are held in local libraries.

This is one of a series of factsheets about the South Devon Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which can be viewed on www.southdevonaonb.org.uk.

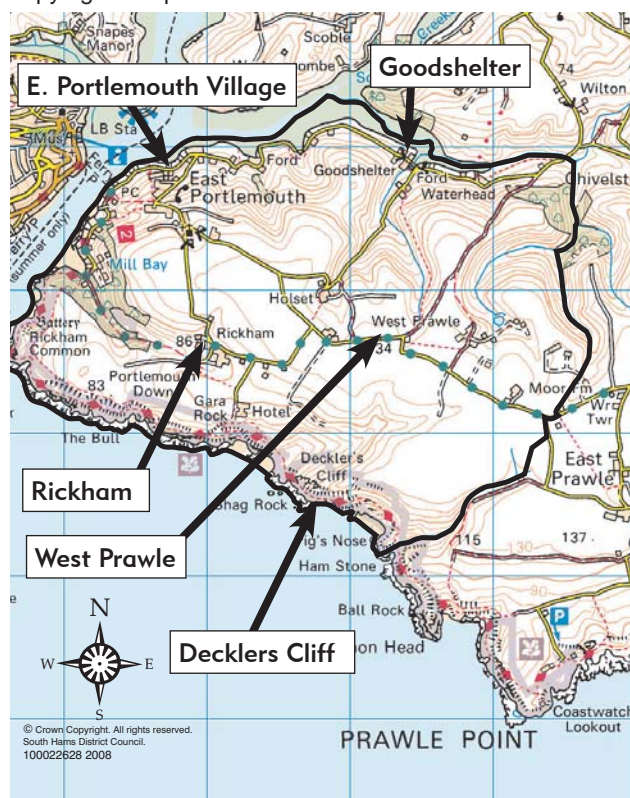


Tithe Map showing the open strip field pattern surviving into the 19th Century, long after most open fields had been enclosed.

Acknowledgements

This fact sheet was written by Robert Waterhouse, BA, AIFA. He is a freelance archaeologist and architectural historian and has lived and worked in South Devon for most of his life. Thanks are also due to Win Scutt for some of the ideas on prehistoric fields and agriculture.

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