

# West Penwith

## Key Characteristics

- Exposed windswept granite plateau in the north, with boulder strewn slopes.
- Extensive treeless heathland and granite moorland.
- There is an ancient pattern of often tiny, irregular fields enclosed by Cornish hedges, scattered farmsteads and hamlets.
- An especially high concentration of prehistoric monuments of international significance.
- Dispersed settlement pattern of hamlets and farmsteads with villages of mainly recent industrial origin.
- Coastal valleys, spectacular sea cliffs and sandy coves.
- Intensive horticulture, particularly for early vegetable production in the south and east.

## Landscape Character

West Penwith is a sparsely populated peninsula, ringed by high cliffs buffeted by the Atlantic winds and rising to high, rocky moorland at its centre. Its landscape is renowned as having a wild, ancient and mysterious character. Separated from the rest of Cornwall by a low-lying isthmus, it is also known as the Land's End peninsular – the south-western extremity of the mainland, jutting out into the hostile waters of the Atlantic. Its geographical isolation is matched by the distinctiveness of its character. Rugged sea-swept cliffs and coves contrast with ancient field systems and settlements, with high granite moorland and with the dramatic remains of a bygone mining industry. There are wide views seawards and across the Cornish hinterland. Impeded drainage and hard rock have given rise to shallow streams and wet heathland which form a mosaic with dry heathland, rocky outcrops and cliff slopes. Streams wind through the higher ground and cut down sharply in their lower reaches.

In the sheltered, lower-lying areas, pasture and occasionally cultivation is possible. To the south, vegetable crops are

grown in the fields around St Buryan in a very open landscape. However, much of the area is open moorland and heath crossed by a maze of minor roads, lanes and trackways. The enclosed land commonly lies within massive granite banks, many of which may be of Romano-British or earlier origin. The archaeological sites, which include hillforts, cliff castles, standing stones and stone circles, commonly in the most dramatic and windswept locations, are an historic landscape of international importance.



ROY WESTLAKE

The irregular patchwork of a prehistoric field system which remains in use, gives a powerful visual character to the Zennor/Morvah coast.

Moorland rises in sweeping curves from the steep, boulder strewn slopes and fields reverting to rough pasture around its fringes. In summer it can be bright and colourful with heather and gorse and other wild flowers but more often it is brooding and sombre, dotted as it is with dark rock outcrops and tors. Here the ancient and mysterious qualities of the landscape are heightened by the prolific remains from the earliest periods of settlement. There are numerous quoits (megalithic tombs), standing stones, stone circles and many other reminders of prehistoric tribes.

Below the moors, especially on the sloping coastal plateau

in the north-west around Zennor is a quite different ancient landscape. Here the rough pastures are divided into a maze of thousands of tiny, irregularly shaped fields by massive Cornish 'hedges', in this case stone walls built of great granite blocks, in places with an earth core and commonly topped by a growth of scrub. These are probably prehistoric fields, originally thought to have been constructed by the Celts, with evidence of occupation in the Bronze and Iron Ages. The historical ecologist Oliver Rackham had said that the great stone banks are 'the world's oldest artefacts still in use'.

The occasional spectacular remains of the engine houses of tin and copper mines clinging to the cliffs also add interest to the coastal landscape. At Land's End, the steep granite cliffs offer spectacular views to the Scilly Isles, and of waves, crashing on offshore rocks, all befitting a place known to the Romans as 'Seat of Storms'.

**Physical Influences**

High granite cliffs form much of the coast of the peninsula rising up from the ocean in great columnar steps and blocks. These are considered to be some of the most magnificent cliffs in Britain. The coastline is irregular and

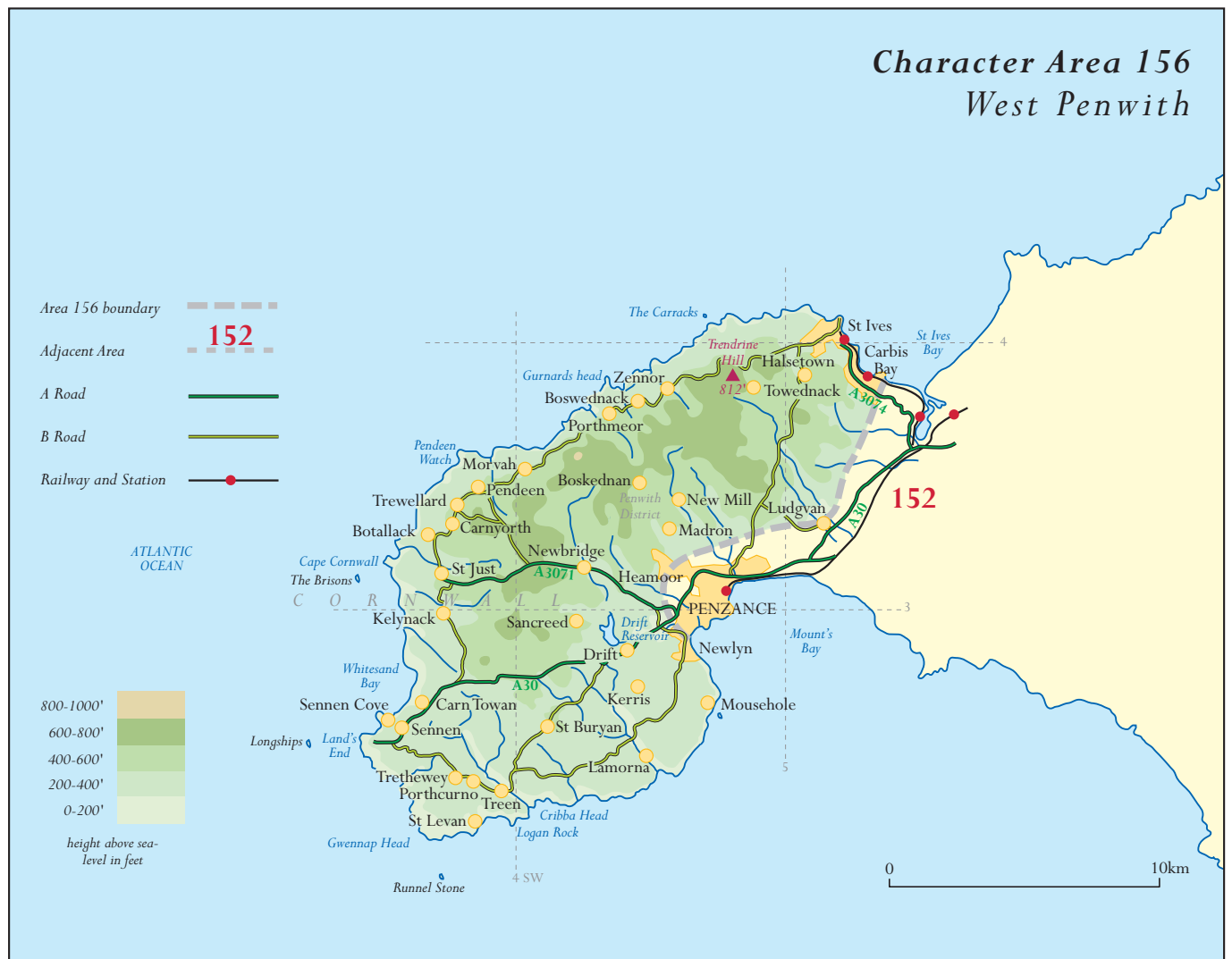
indented by many small coves, and narrow inlets known locally as 'zawns'.

Granite lies at the heart of the West Penwith landscape, part of the chain of granite uplands running down the spine of south-west England. It was formed by igneous intrusion taking place under intense heat and pressure. The surrounding Devonian rocks consist mainly of slate. Relatively less-resistant overlying rocks have been eroded to expose the granite and periglacial action has shaped the tors and clutter slopes of the higher ground. The centre of the granite mass is an irregular plateau with poor surface drainage where water collects in bogs and mires. The core of the area is a wide, elevated and open moorland.

It is the natural influences of the underlying granite rocks and the erosive and sculpting effect of the sea, and the streams that drain from the moorland core, that have done most to shape West Penwith. But although the natural aspects of the landscape are still prominent, human settlement and activity has created some of its most distinctive features.

**Historical and Cultural Influences**

The influence of the most ancient settlers is perhaps the



most important of all human contributions to the character of the landscape. It is said that West Penwith has a greater concentration of archaeological sites than any other comparable area in western Europe. Many of the relics that remain were built more than 4,000 years ago if not before. They include a range of megalithic monuments, later hut circles, enclosed farms, courtyard houses and Iron Age hill-forts, as well as the remarkable field systems around Zennor. The great granite block walls were made from rocks cleared from the fields which, over the centuries, have retained their original shape and boundaries. The high ground of the Penwith peninsula has megalithic tombs, cairns, standing stones and other monuments, which form today a 4,000-year-old ritual landscape. The spread of Christianity also left its mark on the landscape; holy wells, wayside crosses, churches, chapels and numerous place names pre-fixed with *Saint* are common in the area.



ROSEMARY EVANS/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

Levant Mine and Pendeen Lighthouse: monuments of tin mining and the sea dominate the coast between Morvah and St Just.

Around the high ground, irregular fields, enclosed by largely treeless Cornish hedges, lie in complex patterns. These reflect piecemeal enclosure of the moorland and the mixed farming and mining economy that persisted for centuries. The extensive areas of irregular fields with scattered hamlets and farmsteads represent a range of ages of enclosure. They contrast with the 18th and 19th century enclosures with rectilinear boundaries and larger

farmsteads. Mining of tin and other minerals seems to have taken place in a small-scale way over a long period: tin was probably being won in the Bronze Age. Most of the present day features, however, are the remains of the large-scale expansion that began in the 18th century. Even at its height, the mining industry was part of a mixed economy with most miners having small holdings. This accounts for the dispersed and complex pattern of settlement and piecemeal enclosure.

The entry points to the peninsula on the north and south coasts are marked by the coastal towns of St. Ives and Penzance. These, and other settlements, notably Newlyn and the fishing village of Mousehole, have long provided a focus for visitors. The dramatic scenic landscape of West Penwith has also attracted the attention of numerous artists. The St. Ives and Newlyn schools of artists were particularly drawn to West Penwith, especially its granite outcrops, coastal scenery, evocative historic landscapes and the unique qualities and effects of its light.

Writers too have responded to the landscape. At the beginning of this century W H Hudson described the landscape, and D H Lawrence and his wife lived near Zennor for a time at the beginning of the First World War. Lawrence's perceptions of the Cornish landscape found a place in his novel *Kangaroo* where he writes of the 'twilight, awesome world of the previous Celts'. More recently Derek Tangye wrote a popular series of books about life on the coast between Penzance and Land's End, based on the area of the Lamorna Valley.

'The black, frowning, wave-beaten cliffs on the one hand, the hills and moors on the other, treeless, strewn abundantly with granite boulders, rough with heath and furze and bracken, the summits crowned with great masses of rock resembling ancient ruined castles. Midway between the hills and the sea, half a mile or so from the cliffs, are the farms, but the small houses and walled fields on the inhabited strip hardly detract from the rude and savage aspect of the country.'

W H Hudson, 1908

Although agriculture has shaped and maintained the rural landscape over the centuries and fishing has had a big influence on the coastal towns and villages, the other features of West Penwith that are particularly distinctive are the relics of its industrial past. St Just and Pendeen were, for many years, the centre of a thriving tin mining industry, which has left an outstanding landscape of industrial archaeology, including the dramatic remains of the coastal mines at Levant, Botallack and Geevor. Other minerals have also been worked over the years and, since the second world war, there have been a number of attempts to start new mining activity, to re-open old mines or to look for new uses for the sites, particularly in

connection with tourism. However, the high quality of the landscape has meant that the renewal of industrial activity has generally been resisted.



JOHN TYLER/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

In the south of the area, large-scale fields, often sown with early vegetables and potatoes, dominate the area.

### Buildings and Settlement

The settlement pattern is one of dispersed hamlets and farmsteads. There is hardly any settlement on the open moorland. At the edges of the moors, the farms and hamlets occupy the most sheltered sites so that the land can appear to be very sparsely populated. Older buildings are almost universally built of granite with slate roofs and some slate hung walls. The occasional, widely spaced, granite-built farms and hamlets in this historic farming landscape are thought to be fairly ancient in origin.

On the more sheltered sites and better land, modern farm buildings tend to dominate the older dwellings. The farming pattern is overlaid by groups of miners' cottages and small villages, some recent and rather shapeless, others of medieval origin with buildings clustered around the square-towered granite churches. Within the mining areas, Methodist chapels are also prominent. The fishing villages around the coastline of the area also have simple granite buildings.

### Land Cover

In West Penwith, beyond the coastal plateau, a narrow strip of low coastal heath, sometimes known as 'morrop', borders the top of the sea cliffs, occasionally cut by streams with scrub filled valleys. The land cover of the central uplands is a mosaic of heather, extensive grassy marshes, wet heaths and gorse scrub. The moorland core of the rest of the peninsula falls away from the highest land to the east

and south in gently rolling plateaux and hills cut by the sheltered valleys of numerous small streams. In the valleys there is a wide variety of scrub, some woodland and enclosed pasture fields.

Overall, however, grassland is dominant although market gardening is a particular feature of West Penwith. The open plateaux are a green, predominantly pastoral, farmed landscape with generally small- or medium-sized fields divided by hedgebanks. Most of the land is used for mixed farming and dominated by dairying but the lighter soils in the south sometimes allow early cropping of potatoes and growing of bulbs and flowers. Other sheltered parts of the peninsula also support more specialised crops of this type.

### The Changing Countryside

- Archaeological features, including hut circles, courtyard villages, quoits, standing stones and field systems have been destroyed or eroded. This has been arrested through ESA designation.
- There has been insufficient maintenance of Cornish hedges. There is great variety within the hedges, from earth banks to massive piles of boulders assembled by prehistoric farmers. Restoration needs to respect these differences. Careful research is needed, as well as appropriate sources to help landowners with restoration.
- Conversion of heathland to farmland and agricultural improvement of grassheath has historically been a problem and may continue to be so outside of the ESA.
- Field scale market gardening in southern West Penwith has resulted in obtrusive packing sheds and removal of field boundaries.



JOHN TYLER/COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY

Enclosed landscape and rock moorlands provide a contrast at Halsetown, near St Ives.

## Shaping the Future

- A range of countryside management mechanisms including agri-environmental schemes, access agreements and Scheduled Monument agreements, remain well-suited to the particular needs of this character area. The pattern of fields and boundaries is particularly important.
- The continuing development of the tourism industry is an opportunity to improve interpretation, access and understanding, particularly of archaeological sites.
- The undoubted high landscape quality of West Penwith has long been acknowledged and its conservation needs to be considered. This lies particularly in its wild, remote, upland character and in the evocative presence of outstanding historic landscapes. Wide views, ever changing character with climate and seasons, contrasting enclosure in the sheltered valleys and a sense of remoteness in a very ancient landscape are among the most obvious characteristics, with the added attraction of West Penwith's outstanding rugged coastline.

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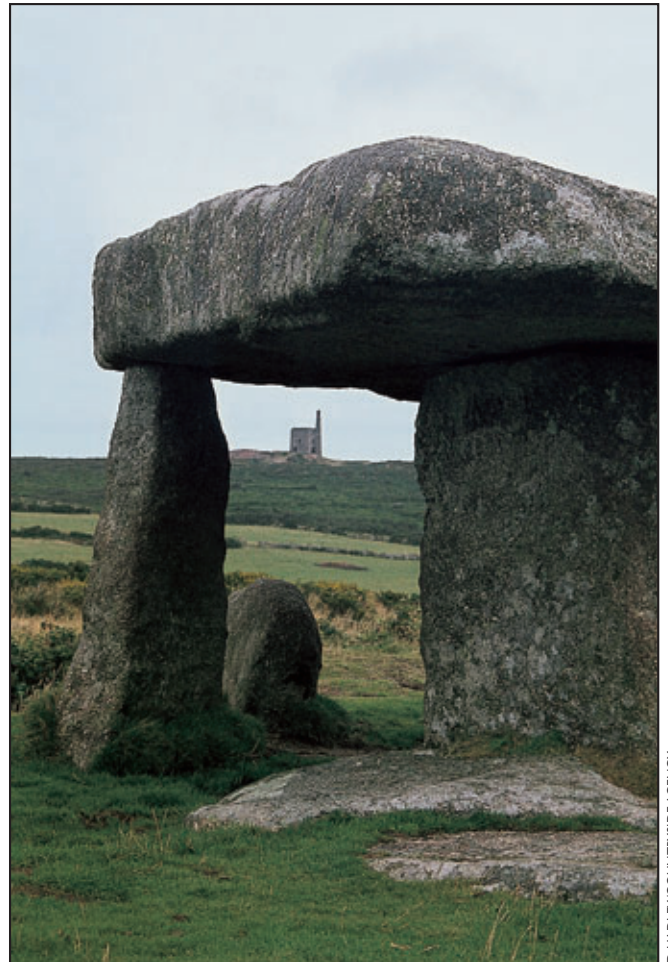
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## Glossary

ESA: Environmentally Sensitive Area



Monuments dominate the West Penwith moorland: Lanyon Quoit and Ding Dong Mine Engine House.

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