

PAL 8 Blacktor Downs, St Neot, Historic Environment Action Plan



Dense dead bracken on SW slopes obscures the remarkable roundhouse settlement (Pete Herring, October 2024).

Location, geology and topography

Centred: SX 157736

Extent: 28 ha (68 acres)

Geology

Granite. A small outcrop on higher SW slope, and a few large boulders midslopes; otherwise a scatter of moorstones and some clutter on the southern slopes.

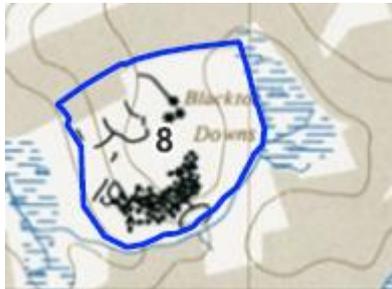
Topography

Rounded hill, with most of the PAL on south-facing slopes, running down towards a small stream on the southern boundary, one of the headwaters of the River Dewy. Highest point towards north of PAL at 268 metres (879 feet), falls to 234 metres (768 feet) beside the Dewy in the SW corner.

The hill was known as Black Tor, alias, Lick Tor in 1870 (Polsue, 1870, 413).

Current management and structures of ownership, commoners, etc:

Common land, part of Redhill Downs, CL158. Appropriated as part of the compensatory common when Colliford Lake reservoir flooded some of Redhill Downs (David Attwell, pers. comm.).



- Prehistoric field and enclosure boundaries
- Stone banks and ramparts
- Hut Circle
- ◄ Long cairn (oriented)
- Cairn/barrow
- Stone Circle
- ⊙ Henge (with stone circle)
- Stone row
- SE Stone Setting
- SI Standing stone

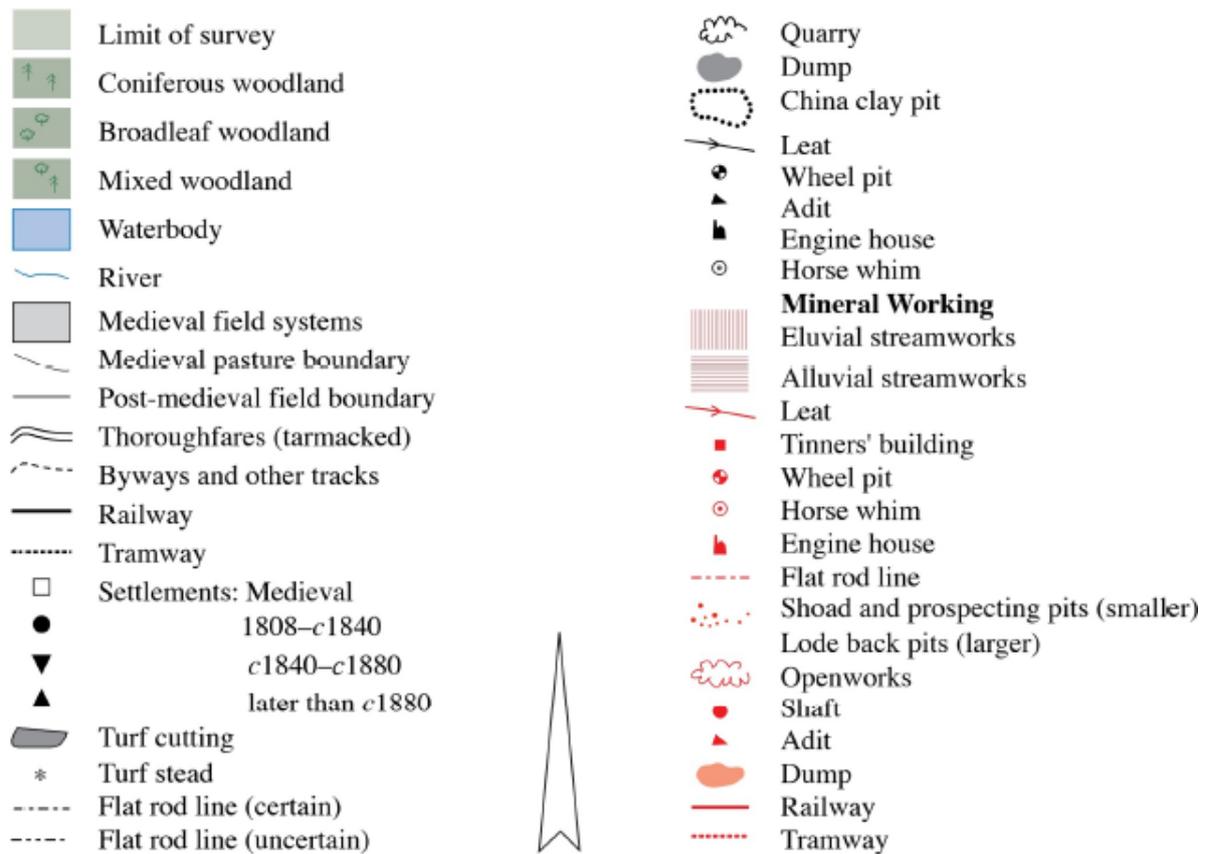
Extract from Prehistoric overview map (Johnson and Rose 1994, Map 1; reproduced with permission of Cornwall Council and Historic England).



- Cultivation ridges
- Medieval and post-medieval field boundaries, based on the O.S. 1808 two-inch MS map, and tithe maps.
- Medieval and post-medieval field boundaries found by air and ground survey.
- Embanked enclosure
- Surviving settlement, recorded before 1540.
- Surviving settlement, recorded between 1540 and 1808.
- Deserted settlement, recorded before 1540.
- ▲ Medieval longhouse
- △ Post-medieval dwelling (abandoned)
- Other medieval structure
- Other post-medieval structure
- LANK 1278 Cornish place name, and earliest recorded date.
- Hulker 1407 English place name, and earliest recorded date.
- ⋯ Parish Boundary c. 1840

Extract from Medieval and later landscape to c1808 overview map (Johnson and Rose 1994, Map 2; reproduced with permission of Cornwall Council and Historic England).





Extract from *Post-medieval and industrial overview map* (Herring et al 2008, Map 1; reproduced with permission of Cornwall Council and Historic England).

Land use history

Pre-1748

This PAL is a rounded south-western spur of the long rounded ridge of Shallow-Water Common and Brockabarrow Common, which together were previously known as Great Down, corrupted by the 16th century to Gratton (Stannary Court Rolls). This ran for 5.75 kilometres from Scribble Hill in the north-west to Menniridden in the south-east. Land use has for much of prehistory and medieval and post-medieval times been rough grazing, probably mainly with livestock running on the great down and its spurs in common. The prehistoric roundhouse group on the southern side of Blacktor has the character of a pastoral settlement, possibly used in the summer months only, by transhumants.

Thomas Martyn's 1748 map.

Shown as open ground with just the headwaters of the streams recorded.

c1810 OS drawing

This shows the dense cluster of Middle Bronze Age roundhouses at the S extremity of the hill.

c1840 Tithe Map

'Black Tor' was shown as a single large plot of land (TA 1905) attached to the south side of the old Temple road on the 1844 St Neot Tithe Map. It was owned by Gordon William Francis Gregor Esq, of Trewarthenick near Tregony, and leased and occupied

by Thomas Mitchell, so had already by then been removed from the common to the north.

c1880 OS map

In the later 19th century the northern part of the hill was enclosed and turned into a small farm, but the southern slope, the main part of the PAL was still open rough ground, shown as a mix of rough grassland and furze on the 1882 and 1906 OS 1:2500 maps, though the 1906 map shows a marked reduction of furze in the area to the west of the roundhouse settlement.

c1906 OS map

Little change, though less furze was shown in the SW quarter of the PAL.

Modern

China-clay works were established at Colquite straddling the eastern edge of the PAL in the early 20th century. It was a short-lived works (see below) and the land use continued as rough grazing, as it still does, now as a common since the arrangement to swap Black Tor the common at Redhill Downs lost when Colliford Lake flooded it.

Historic Environment

Summary of main heritage assets

Prehistoric ceremonial and ritual

Four platform cairns, a small **kerbed cairn**, and a small **simple cairn** on the top of the hill. The four platform cairns were recorded as 'Barrows' on the 1882 OS map; the other two were recorded during the assessment of the Moor for Scheduling in 1991.

The northern one (MCO 4173, PRN 1769.04) is the largest, a **platform cairn**, 13m in diameter and 0.6m high.

The eastern **platform cairn** (MCO4172, PRN 1769.03) is 9m in diameter and 0.3m high.

The southern **platform cairn** (MCO4171, PRN 1769.02) is 7m in diameter and 0.4m high.

The western **platform cairn** (MCO4170, PRN 1769.01) is 6m in diameter and 0.3m high.

A small **low cairn** was recorded at SX 15728 73589 when Scheduled in 1991. It is 7m in diameter, 0.5m high and has a convex form.

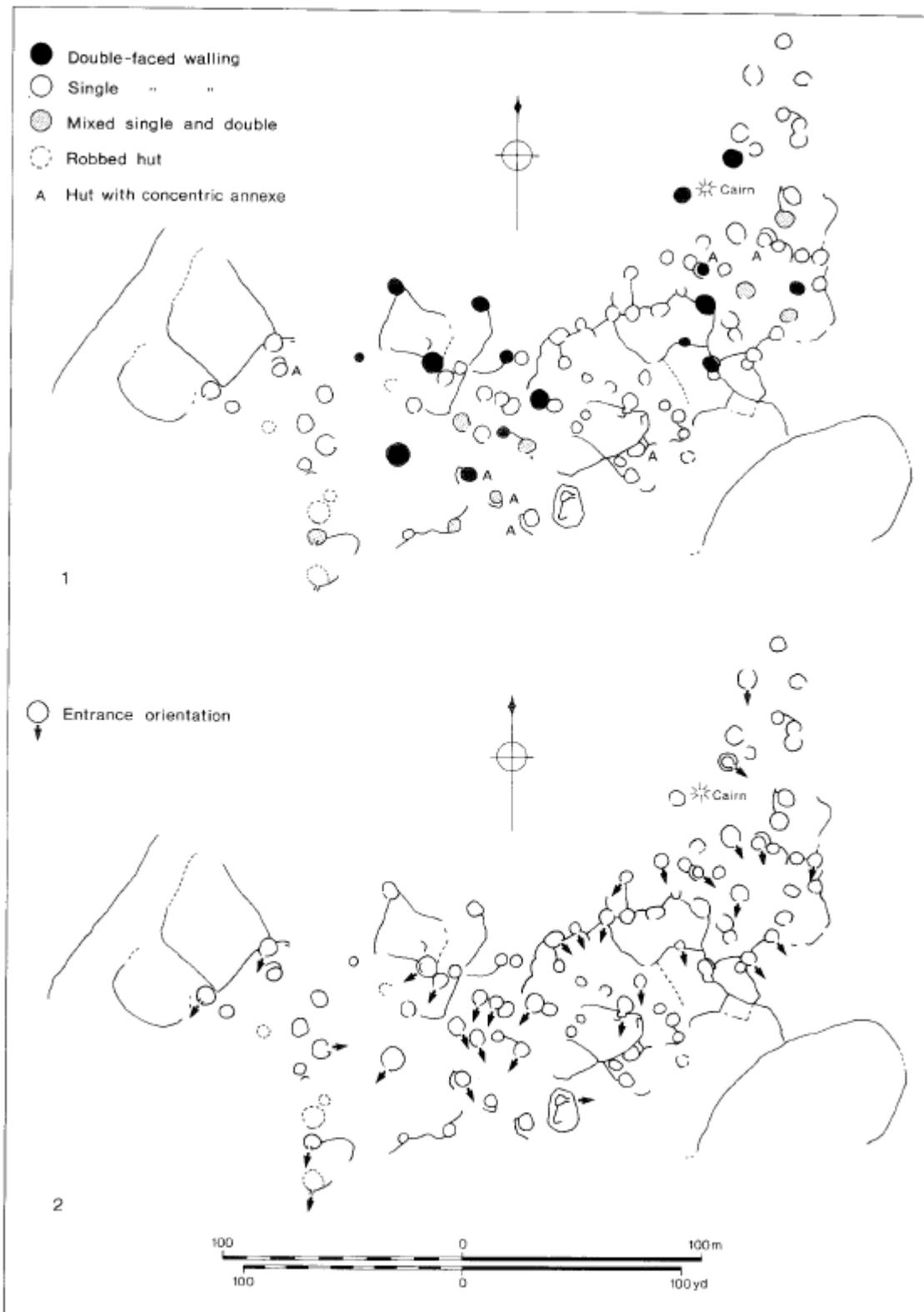
A small **kerbed cairn** (MCO4174, PRN 1769.05) on the higher western slope, 4.5m in diameter and 0.5m high with kerb stones to 0.7m high. Interpreted as a roundhouse in the Scheduling document.



Possible kerbed cairn or roundhouse (MCO4174) (photographed August 2006, Pete Herring)

Prehistoric domestic and agricultural

On the steep southern slopes, among the natural clutter, is a remarkably densely packed **roundhouse settlement** of at least 96 circular and ovoid houses (MCO18815, PRN 1756). From the HER record: 'The ninety-six huts cover only 3.0 hectares and are densely packed... the huts are frequently arranged in curving lines, the lines being sometimes linked by walls (usually single in-line blocks with a few upright slabs and occasionally some rubble). Linked or not, the lines of huts appear to form enclosures within the settlement. Excluding a score of dispersed huts to the north east and west, the core of the settlement can be somewhat arbitrarily divided, by linking huts, into 18 to 20 enclosures of 90-300 square metres. Diameters of huts range from 3.0m to 7.5m. Most have walling of single slabs or blocks of granite (59) but some (15) have double walling – an inner and outer facing of slabs with a rubble infill – and a few (7) have a mixture of both types. Entrances face in all directions between west and south east. There are six or seven instances where houses of varied structural type, have an annexe, usually a single stone wall concentric with one third to half the hut, and open at one end.'



Analyses of the roundhouses at Blacktor, showing variety in form (above) and in orientation of entrances (below) (from Johnson and Rose 1994, fig 39).

There are three small fields towards the western end of the settlement which appear to be integrated with the roundhouses and are presumed to be contemporary.

The impression is that the fields and enclosures were at best small gardens, if cultivated and are perhaps more likely to have been associated with pastoral activity, serving as pens (Johnson and Rose 1994, 59 and fig 39; Herring and Rose 2001).



The roundhouse settlement with a few small enclosures on the southern slopes, overgrown by bracken. The finger dumps of the Colquite china-clay works to the NE (to right). (Image courtesy and copyright 2025 Airbus, via Google Earth Pro.)

A larger **ovoid enclosure** (MCO21405, PRN 1756.58) lies on the lower slopes to the south-east of the settlement. It was interpreted as 'Possibly a pound for the animals of the settlement (HER record).

On the western slopes of the hill are the fragmentary remains of a **curvilinear field system** (MCO20571, PRN 1757), its form suggesting a Middle Bronze Age date. It is likely to have extended further to the north but has been disturbed by the creation of post-medieval fields. A single stone clearance cairn recorded within the fields suggest it may have been used, in part at least, for cultivation.

Medieval

The western enclosures of the prehistoric settlement (MCO18815, PRN 1756) may have been adapted in the medieval or later period, perhaps by those engaged in tin working nearby (noted in the description of the Scheduled Monument, Historic England, NLHE 1011701).

Industrial

A fine early 20th century **china-clay works** is on the lower eastern slopes of the hill (MCO23814, PRN 12105), with an inclined tramway leading up to a pattern of six finger dumps of gravelly waste; trucks were hauled by cable on a winch in the winding shed whose ruins survive to the south west (PRN 12105.02). Lack of pan kilns or clay drying tanks suggest the working, called Coldquite or Colquite from the farm in whose land most of the pit lay, was not a success. The pit is now water filled, with willows and rushes around its edges.

A wide **drainage channel** runs away to the south, down the valley. Polsue recorded in 1870 that 'recently deposits of China-clay, of good quality, have been found in the locality of Black Tor' (Polsue 1870, 414). The pit was opened in 1873 by the Gazeland Clay Co. and a small pond shown on the 1882 OS 1:2500 map at SX 1597 7364 is likely to be the exploratory pit. The venture was unsuccessful because kaolinization was incomplete. It was re-opened briefly after World War One, and that is the period of the major working (as the pit and finger dumps were not shown on the 2nd edition OS map of 1906). Again no clay was produced and the equipment, including much haulage machinery and cable, was for sale in July 1922 (*Western Morning News*, 29 July 1922, 1).

Post-medieval and modern

A **small farm** with rectilinear fields was established on the western and northern slopes in the later 19th century. Some of the northern fields, beyond the PAL, were in place by 1882 and the remainder, including a small farmstead at SX 155 736 was in place by 1906 (OS maps). The site (MCO13409, PRN 1888) was expanded in the later 20th century but is now abandoned. It was a challehouse, with the dwelling under the same long roof as the principal cowhouse and hayloft. The fields have dead straight sides and are bounded with either Cornish hedges or drystone walls, the latter serving as consumption dykes for stone cleared from the fields. The principal fields were on the northern side of the hill, and a larger enclosure that takes in the summit was probably used as a croft with the stonier southern slopes an area of summer rough grazing.

There is a line of six low **granite boundstones** curving around the southern edge of Blacktor, alongside the stream. Each has the letter R on the side facing the hill, and A on the other, indicating the families of Rodd and Agar, or Agar Robartes (Moore 2024, 10-12).

Significance of landscape visibility

The platform cairns on the summit of the down are placed where there are spectacular views to the north across the Great Down (now Brockabarrow Common) towards Rough Tor and Brown Willy, which are the dominant features in the panorama.

The roundhouses and the small irregular enclosures are densely packed together in an area with many natural boulders. People today can experience how they were tucked into the shallow valley, out of the prevailing winds and at the head of the Dewy River.

The ruins of the 19th century farmstead are a poignant reminder of the marginality of the land here and the effort taken to construct the strong stock-proof hedges and walls that define its fields vividly indicate the effort taken to improve the land here, sadly only for a few decades.

The finger dumps and pit of the Colquite china-clay works on the eastern side of the PAL are also poignant, a short-lived industrial venture that apparently produced no financial returns but left an increasingly picturesque permanent mark on the landscape.

Designations

Historic Environment

Scheduled Monuments

NHLE 1011701 **Unenclosed hut circle settlement, field boundaries, enclosure and cairn on Blacktor Downs**, first scheduled in 1955, amended in 1991.

NHLE 1011725 **Blacktor Downs irregular aggregate field system and clearance cairn.**

NHLE 1011782 **Stone hut circle** 525m WSW of Colquite Farm. [This is the feature interpreted above as a small kerbed cairn on the western side of the hill's summit.]

NHLE 1011789 **Cairn** 485m WSW of Colquite Farm

NHLE 1011788 **Platform cairn** 450m WSW of Colquite Farm

NHLE 1011710 **Platform cairn** 460m SW of Colquite Farm

NHLE 1011711 **Two platform cairns** centred 485m SW of Colquite Farm

Natural environment designations:

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

No.

Special Areas of Conservation

No.

County Wildlife Sites

Yes, whole of PAL is in NC/CN7/S3, Blacktor Downs

Cornwall Conservation Areas

NA

Other designations

Common Land

Part of Redhill Downs Common, CL158.

CROW Access Land

Yes, whole PAL.

Registered rights of way.

None

Neighbourhood Development Plans

No

Change between 2005 and 2025

(Overview derived from comparison of CCC 2005 aerial photography, available as a basemap on the Cornwall and Scilly Historic Environment Record, and the Airbus 2025 satellite imagery as viewed from Google Earth aerial photos.)

- Relatively little change; possibly some increase in bracken cover on the prehistoric roundhouse settlement, which is almost totally obscured in summer, but dies back well in winter.
- Possibly more bracken on china-clay works' finger dumps.

Issues

Spread of bracken.

- Reducing the diversity of the ancient rough grasslands and their flora and fauna, including their invertebrates.
- Obscuring the more ephemeral archaeological remains.
- Rhizomes are known to cause substantial damage to below ground archaeological remains.
- Will begin to cause erosion as vehicles and livestock are confined to ever narrower tracks.
- Encourage tick-borne diseases in livestock and wild fauna.

Opportunities

To better guide grazing levels on the common by closer understanding of the flora and fauna of the ancient semi-natural grasslands.

Recommendations

General approach

Retain open ancient semi-natural grassland with easy movement in all directions.

Specific recommendations

- Address the growth of bracken on the roundhouse settlement.
- Adjust grazing to push back the conversion to furze.
- Further archaeological recording of the round houses.

Adjusting the extent of the PAL:

Extend the E side to include the whole of the early 20th century china-clay works, notably the main pit and the southerly drain.

Other initiatives or suggestions

Further archaeological recording.

- More analysis of the roundhouse settlement; Nicholas Johnson and Peter Rose have demonstrated the potential (1994, 59 and fig 39).

In time, there will be a need for active removal of furze from areas known to have medieval and industrial remains.

References

Moore, P, 2024 *Bodmin Moor's Boundary Markers, a Legacy in Stone*, Peter Moore
Polsue, J, 1870 *Lake's Parochial History of Cornwall*, Truro, Lake

Appendix 1 2007 PAL text

8 Blacktor Downs

Historic Environment

Blacktor Downs contains a remarkable prehistoric round house settlement of ninety six houses densely packed within just 3 hectares, spreading from south west to north east along the end of a spur. Within the group the houses are frequently arranged in curving lines, the lines being sometimes linked by stone boundaries (usually single in - line blocks with a few upright slabs and occasionally some rubble) appearing to form enclosures within the settlement. Diameters of houses range from 3m to 7.5m in diameter. Most have walling of single slabs or blocks of granite but some have double walling – an inner and outer facing of slabs with a rubble infill. Six or seven houses have an annexe. Given the small scale of the enclosures, it is generally considered likely that this was a pastoral settlement, its occupants exploiting the extensive grazing available in the heart of the Moor.

A group of five cairns is situated above the settlement in reclaimed pasture on the summit of the hill. The four larger cairns appear to be simple platforms but the smallest to the west survives as just a grassy mound. Nearby is a well-defined kerb of stone slabs which may be a further cairn, although it has been Scheduled as a hut circle.

An inclined tramway and the finger dumps it leads to, all elements of the late 19th century Colquite china clay works, are also included in this PAL.

Natural Environment

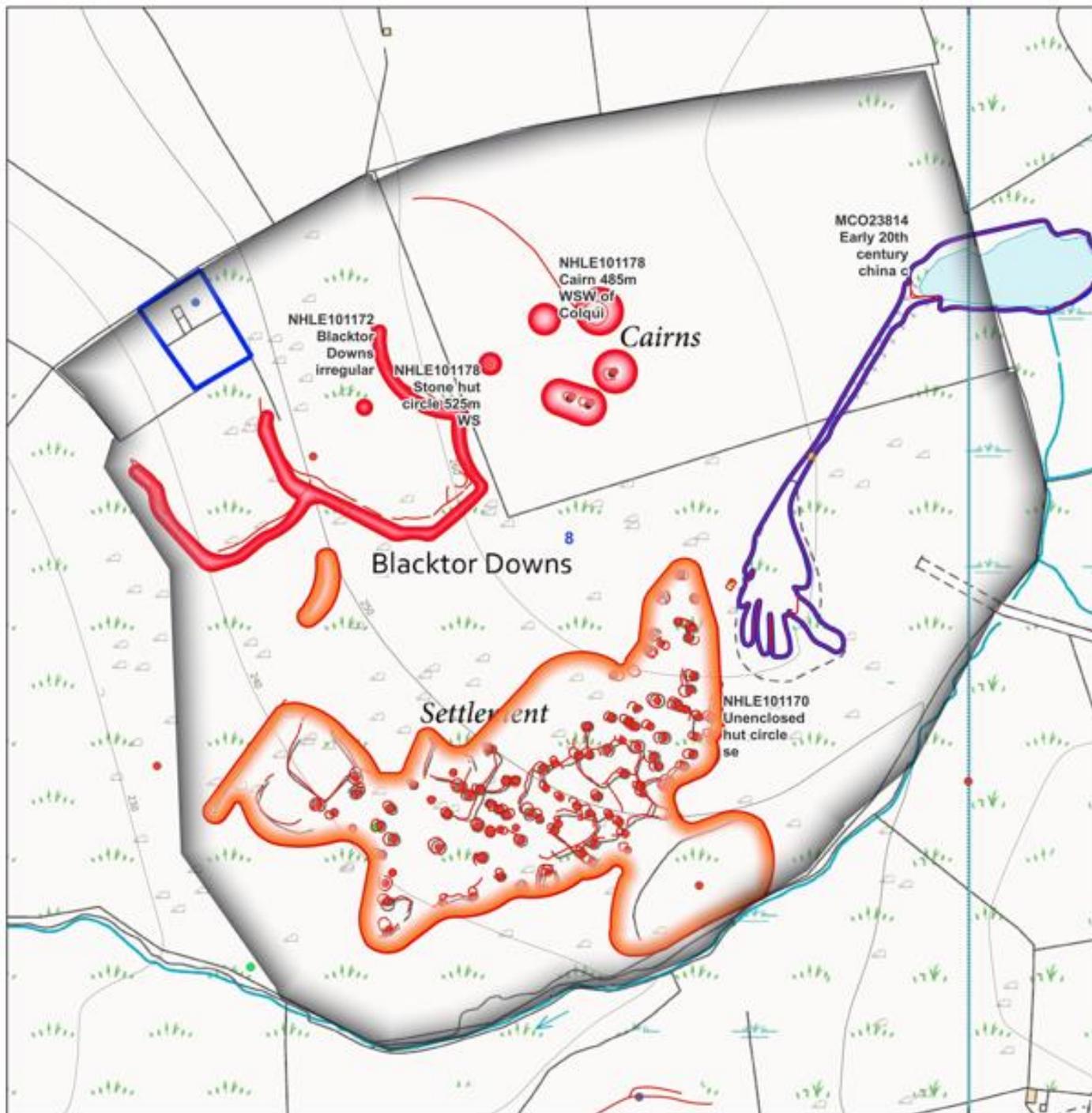
Fragmented Western Heath, Acid Grassland and Mires

Designations

The settlement, cairns and field systems are all Scheduled Monuments (Nos. 15028 – 15031, 15033 - 15035).

No current NE designations.

Vision



- PAL Areas
- Scheduled Monuments
- Scheduled Monuments @ Risk
- Feature Groups
 - Prehistoric
 - Medieval
 - Post Medieval
 - Aerial Mapping Transcriptions
- CSHER point data
 - Prehistoric
 - Early Medieval
 - Romano British
 - Medieval
 - Post Medieval
 - Modern

Dominant Habitat: Dry Acid Grassland with extensive bracken cover

Habitat Change: Little

Notes: Relatively little change; possibly some increase in bracken cover on the prehistoric roundhouse settlement, which is almost totally obscured in summer, but dies back well in winter. Possibly more bracken on china-clay works' finger dumps.

PAL 8 Blacktor

www.statement-heritage.com

Cornwall Council

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AC000817921

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