



MERRIVALE PREHISTORIC SETTLEMENT

Audio Guide Transcript

Helen Allen: So Win, we're here at the Four Winds Car Park. I can't immediately see anything that looks like a monument, so what are we actually here to see?

Win Scutt: Well, we're here to see some lovely Bronze Age or even possibly Stone Age, stone rows and stone circle. There's lots of stuff here actually, and from here, you can get a fantastic view. This Four Winds Car Park used to be the village school, would you believe? Amazing thing. So we're going to head off westwards parallel to the road. We're going to walk about 500 metres.

Helen: So down the hill?

Win: Sort of down the hill, that's right. Not steep down the hill, but following the road, and then we should hit the stone rows and stone circle that way. There's often people visiting, so you will see people looking. So that's one marker. If you see people standing around, you're probably heading in the right direction. And as we walk you'll see in front of us Cornwall, and there's an obelisk on the top of a hill, that's Kit Hill just above Callington. It's just a spectacular view. And beyond it you can see Bodmin Moor on a clear day.

Helen: Okay. But in any case, there's a few key locations which people will be able to follow using the downloadable PDF map from the English Heritage website.

Win: Indeed. Some of the key sites to see are the stone circle, the stone rows and possibly if you've got time to also look at the settlement, there's a Bronze Age settlement there, too.

Helen: Okay. I guess people could listen to this on their way here or just from home?

Win: Yeah, swot up now, and then they'll be able to explore the landscape with full knowledge.

Helen: Okay, let's give them a good idea of what we're going to look at.

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Helen: So Win, we've walked down from the car park and it's amazing, we just came over that little lip of land and suddenly you see this row of stones in front of you with another one by the side. What are we looking at here?

Win: Well, there are actually two stone rows. They're double stone rows, and running off one at a sort of 45-degree angle, is a single stone row. And there's also a burial box – what's called a cist. And also, we'll look at a little cairn circle, a little burial cairn that is in the middle of one of the stone rows.



Helen: Fantastic. Really it's a hugely open landscape – I know we keep saying that about Dartmoor, but here it's really striking. So what other monuments can we see here?

Win: It's incredibly open here. Well, I'll be taking you over to a stone circle as well. And over the other side, towards the road, there's actually a settlement of round houses which we'll have a look at. But I mean, if you go back 3,000 years or 4,000 years, which is more like the date of this, maybe even 5,000 years, the moor probably would have been quite different. They were really starting to clear the woodland, the forest off it. But by the end of the Bronze Age, by around about 700 or 800 BC, it had become moorland, what we're familiar with today.

Helen: Would they have been using the timber mostly to make the round houses, make the roofs, or what else might they have been using that timber for?

Win: Well, burning fire, you know when you think how important fuel is nowadays, all they had was timber. And maybe in the latter days they might have had a bit of turf to grow, but there was no turf growing on the moor when they first came here. Because when I say turf I mean peat, because blanket peat starts to grow in that later phase. So yeah, the moorland we see today is very much a sort of ancient creation created about 3,000 years ago. But there are little spaces where they've actually tried to bring it back into agriculture and for example, up on the hill there you can see an enclosure there, rectangular enclosure where they've broken in the moor to create a little farm in the 18th or 19th century.

Helen: Okay, but the settlement over here that we can see, the people that lived there, they were mostly farming here?

Win: Yeah. All these people that we're looking at are farming; those people may have been a lot later than the stone rows. The stone rows would be roughly the same time as Stonehenge – we're talking sort of 2500 BC, so 4,500 years old to 5,000. Those settlements tend to be later Bronze Age, so they tend to be about 3,000 years ago. But I daresay the people in that settlement were still revering this as a ritual monument. We'll say a bit more about that later, how this might have been used.

Helen: Okay. So should we walk a bit further down the row and get a feeling of what it's like to be actually walk between those stones?

Win: Absolutely. Yes, they are a metre, about a metre apart and lovely, too. I mean, I think that's what they were designed to do, to lead people along. But I'll show you the stone box, the cist, and the cairn on the way.

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Helen: So Win, you've walked me down from the start of the row, it's actually the longer of the rows that we've walked along and we've come across this area where there seem to be a circle of stones embedded in the ground. What is this?

Win: Well, this is what we'd call a cairn. So it's a pile of stones, presumably with a burial inside, but it's got a hole in there. I think that's probably somebody treasure hunting in the 18th or 19th century. They've basically destroyed the primary burial probably in there and we've lost all the information. Luckily, the site is now protected as a scheduled monument and it's in our guardianship so let's hope that that sort of thing never happens again! But this is some kind of burial monument and I think it tells us something very special about these stone rows. This stone row is 263 metres long – it's colossal. And the stones – it's a double stone row, and we've walked down the middle. Each pair of stones is about a metre apart, so it's enough to walk down. But you're blocked, the way is blocked a third of the way down by this cairn. It suggests to me and to many other archaeologists that because it's a burial monument, that the whole monument, stone row and everything, is about ceremony. It's about spirit, spiritual life, the gods, the ancestors. These people back in the late Neolithic, so we're talking sort of 3000 BC right through to the Bronze Age up to about 1000 BC, all these people have a deep religious life. But it's also like people going to church today, go to commune with each other, to share with their community. So a lot of this is about people coming together, you know, maybe in a party sense, but also maybe in a religious sense. And they may be performing some of their key rites of passage through the year: coming of age ceremony, bottom drawer, getting married, dying – all those different life events could be commemorated here.

Helen: Do we have any idea actually how those ceremonies happened? I mean, these days we do dancing and singing – would they have done similar activities?

Win: I mean, I know sometimes I think of maypoles and things like that in medieval England, that was a way that people got together and danced. What it tells you, this stone row, because of the alignment, is that it's almost choreographing our movements, it's channelling us, it's telling us to go from point to point in the landscape. And as we go through the landscape, we're looking outwards at the tors and the hills and looking across the river Tamar over to Cornwall. Yeah, fantastic views here. So in a way they're a piece of movie, you know, they're taking you through the landscape and it changes as you go. So I think they're very creative monuments in that sense, getting you to experience the landscape. And they're doing this 5,000 years ago! It's absolutely wonderful. How they were performing, we just don't know – it's speculation, it's guesswork. I quite like the idea of dancing you know, as I mentioned the maypole. But you could dance your way around this. But you know, someone else might say if I actually spoke to someone, then they might say 'What do you mean dancing? We wouldn't do that. We wouldn't be so disrespectful to the dead. This is an avenue to the ancestors!' or something like that.

Helen: It really does feel like an avenue. It does feel particularly special when you walk down the middle of this row of stones, doesn't it?

Win: Yeah, it leads you on very gracefully and actually I think the pacing of the stones – they're a metre or so apart, and I think that determines your pace. So it's very much controlling movement



in the landscape, humans in the landscape, so really important. And we can sense that today, we can experience that, which is wonderful. Whether we're experiencing the same things they were 5,000 years ago, it's very difficult to say, and we're only speculating that this was a religious site. It may have just been purely for ceremonies, you know, like the changing of the guard sort of ceremonies, things like that that aren't overtly religious. But I think religious was woven in every aspect of their life, so I think everything they did was bound up with that. Like we've got this cairn in front of us, I think this is very much to do with the spirits of their ancestors.

Helen: Is there any significance in the fact – its position in the stone row?

Win: Well, we don't actually know whether it was here first, before the stone row, or whether they've planted it into the stone row later. It's more typical of a Bronze Age monument, whereas the stone row is more typical of a late Neolithic monument, so there may be a big distance between them. But what's lovely about this cairn it's actually got its own little stone circle around it. And there are other cairns on Dartmoor that can be very much larger that will have a kerb around them, you know, just like a kerb on a roadside where all the stones join around the outside. So there are lots of designs of these, and when they're excavated we find there are lots of phases of the monument about how they've revered the dead. You know these were their precious relatives who died and they invested an immense amount of time in honouring them.

Helen: So you mentioned stone circle. There's one just over the hill isn't there – shall we go and have a look?

Win: Yes. The stone circle should be roughly the same date as the stone row. It's a wonderful cluster of these late Neolithic monuments – same date is Stonehenge.

Helen: Let's walk.

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Helen: Okay, Win, so we walked to the end of that longer stone row and then we turned left and we headed towards that rather lovely prominent standing stone just a little bit further down the hill and we're now standing in a stone circle. It's kind of not what I was expecting – it's not exactly Stonehenge, is it?

Win: It's not Stonehenge, but it dates to the same period. So it's going to be round about 3000 to 2500 BC, a period we call the late Neolithic, in other words, the end of the Stone Age, so before bronze is used. A lot of the monuments on Dartmoor of course are Bronze Age, but it starts quite gradually and is basically the same people. You know the difference between the Stone Age and the Bronze Age is just that they started using metals and farming carried on as ever, the same people. So a stone circle like this does look tiny compared with Stonehenge. But so are a lot of the monuments on Dartmoor. I think they probably existed right across the countryside.

Helen: Are they very common? Can you see a lot of them?



Win: Well, there are 70 stone rows at least on Dartmoor, and there's quite a few stone circles. I can't remember exactly how many but there aren't very many, not as many as there are stone rows. I think there were probably a lot more once upon a time and a lot have been lost, but not as many as have been lost down in the lowlands because I think the lowlands had loads of these monuments. But of course they've all been swept away by agriculture and the unique thing about Dartmoor is that it's this preserved landscape that hasn't been ruined by later agriculture. That's why it's so amazing. A lot of people say, 'Oh, did they come up here to live?', and they shunned the lowlands. No, they were living everywhere and they sort of inhabited the edges of Dartmoor. And eventually, because of the ecological disaster that is Dartmoor that they created by cutting down all the forests, they had to move off the moors. So all these wonderful monuments, sometimes tiny, survive. You know, sometimes you can get a stone in a stone row that is hardly bigger than a tennis ball and you think, oh my goodness, that has sat there for four or five thousand years. So yeah, it's quite a diddy stone circle. It's 12 stones roughly, and not very much more to it, apart from the menhir outside – the standing stone.

Helen: And I'm going to ask you to speculate again – what do you think the circle was for? How was it used?

Win: Well, very much like the stone rows, I think. They are to do with ceremonies to do, with the community that lived here, the local community. And so they're coming here for key events in their calendar, and that might be their personal calendars you know, births, marriages, deaths, etc, but it might also be the community calendar. There may be specific days in the year which you had to celebrate. You know just like in the Christian calendar, you celebrate Easter and Christmas and things like that. They would have celebrated, and some people have suggested that this stone circle has an alignment on the notch on Staple Tor that you can see ahead of us, at midsummer. So there are alignments, there's lots of speculation about different possible alignments here. Whether they were all followed is controversial.

Helen: And is there any significance in the positioning of the standing stone that's just behind us?

Win: Well, I'm not sure. Probably someone will find some kind of alignment on a star or a solar alignment or something like that. As I say, we can't be certain that they were actually following all of these. We can outline possibilities on these but you've got so many things you can line up in the landscape, like the notches in the tor, as well as all the stones in the circle and all the stones in the stone row. So there are lots of permutations that you can use, and they may have been using that, but they might not have needed that accuracy. They certainly needed to know when it was spring, when it was time to sow crops, and when to harvest. But I think they had a very good sense and you don't have to construct stone monuments to record the calendar or to tell you about the seasons. You can do that by looking at when the first leaves come out on the tree or something like that. So they don't need that. This must be for sort of what we'd call ritual reasons really, isn't it? So lots of people talk of these as religious. I think it is always a bit religious, everything they do. But a lot of this might be dancing, parties, celebrations, coming of age rituals, justice as well, I think might have been really important. This might be the place where the community met to decide on things like who was guilty, for example, of a particular offence, or how they're going to deal with a boundary dispute or something like that. There's lots of things that we could plant in our



speculative imaginations on these sites and some or all of them might have been actually used on these sites.

Helen: You're right, Win, and actually I've been here on a number of occasions and seen people still using the monuments to celebrate their own occasions. So here we are several thousand years later and people are still using the monument, in their own way.

Win: It's nice, they're putting their own sort of interpretations on them. But they're not necessarily the ones that were done in prehistory. We just don't know. There are clues, you know, like the cairn, the burials just near the cairn. I should have pointed out earlier, there's a big stone box, which was a burial chamber. But this whole landscape is clearly one that's set aside for these very special celebrations. And it is lovely that people are still coming here today.

Helen: Absolutely. People still think it's special and worth visiting. Yeah, it's great.

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Helen: So Win, we've walked over from the standing stone over towards the road, kind of in the direction of that tor up on the hill there, and we've come to a big ring of really large stones here. What is this?

Win: Well, it's a settlement. It's a Bronze Age settlement. And it's really nice to have it so close to the stone rows and the stone circle and everything, but it's something completely different. And we're actually standing here in the middle of a round house, and there are over 50 round houses spread across the hillside here. Some of them are actually inside a stony bank. You can see a kind of thing running around us here. But this stone house inside it, or it's actually a foundation of a house, is really quite large. And some of these houses are about 8 metres across, so I never call them hut circles like they call them on the map. I always like to call them houses because some of them stood for a very long time.

Helen: So from a distance they'd look like really significant structures?

Win: Oh, they would. So imagine this as a great big timber structure with wooden posts in the middle supporting a massive thatched roof, a conical thatched roof, which you could see for miles. And that thatched roof goes out beyond that stone wall, usually into a drip gully that surrounds the house, takes all the water away. Inside all lovely and cosy, you know, a hearth with a fire going, and the smoke would filter up through the roof. But there'd be beds and there'd be even perhaps wardrobes and things like that. There would be textiles. There would perhaps be hams and things hanging in the roof, smoking in the smoke from the fire: everything you'd expect more or less in a sort of primitive farming house, if you like. I hesitate to use the word primitive because they were very sophisticated, these Bronze Age people, even though it's 3,000 years ago. But yes, so this would have been a lovely house to live in actually, and I guess for a family. And they're living in a community with lots of other houses here and they're farming. I suspect this far up on the moor they're probably mainly keeping stock, they're keeping sheep and cattle mainly, I would have thought. They may have some places for pigs here too, but we don't see much evidence of fields,



you know large fields for agriculture, for ploughing and arable. But they've probably got little garden plots around them as well, around the houses.

Helen: Do you think there's any significance that the settlement developed here in such close proximity to the stone rows?

Win: Well, that's a great question actually, because it can't be a coincidence. And maybe people have been living on this site for thousands of years because those stone rows date back to the time of Stonehenge, sort of 3000, 2500 BC. And here's me saying that this house that we're in is more like 1000 BC, centuries and centuries and centuries later. But it's possible that these houses are built on top of earlier houses, you know, or they've been demolished, the earlier houses. So there might be a continuity of settlement for a very long time. And I suspect the people living in this thing, they didn't tear up the stone rows – they're very fragile. So they were probably revering it as well. The stone circle and the stone rows were probably very much their monuments and they still probably did all their ceremonies and everything down there just very close to this site. So although the construction dates are very different, there is continuity in the landscape here that the same families, the same ancestors and everybody right through for centuries and centuries from the end of the Stone Age, right through the Bronze Age, are living here, an everyday, peaceful farming life.

Helen: So I can see evidence behind me, Win, of something which looks like a much more modern piece of stone. What's that all about?

Win: It's a piece of granite that's actually been very carefully shaped. All the boulders and granite that we've been seeing so far are just natural lumps, aren't they, albeit put into nice circles or whatever. But this extraordinary piece of work is actually – looks like a millstone. But actually it's the vertical stone that goes round and round in an apple crusher. It turns around in a groove and crushes all the apples to make cider.

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Helen: So Win, we're back to the car park and just about to finish our visit to Merrivale. I must say that I feel really I feel really impressed by this site. There's something really beautiful about the symmetry of the stone rows, and I can really understand why it meant so much to the people who used and worshipped and conducted their community activities here.

Win: Yeah, they are inspiring aren't they? I think it's something about the way they sit in the landscape. It's this vast open landscape with great views, it's not closed in. So you've always got that sort of spiritual sense of the heavens, the ground meeting the heavens in that sort of sense. And that's probably why they put it there. It's called Merrivale, because it was a merry field. And, you know that sort of merriness you still feel today.

Helen: I definitely did.



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Win: I mean I suppose what I get out of it, is that challenge where as an archaeologist I'm always trying to people that landscape. And in my mind I'm building the houses on the settlement, and I'm thinking about how men, women and their little children are using that landscape, how they're using the stone row, for example, annual celebrations. How do they do it? I bet they dressed up for this and it was a lot of people getting together. And I love the idea also of how the houses were being used, how they're being used as everyday places where people died, where they were born – imagine a mother giving birth in one of those houses. Well, it's horrific to us isn't it! But all the paraphernalia that doesn't survive: we just see a few stones, but we have to add to all that all the organics, all the textiles, the baskets, the rugs, the furs and everything else that was part of their everyday lives. They would be horrified to see: 'Is that all that's left of my life? 99% of my life has gone in that hut circle. You've just got a little circle of stones left and you're trying to find everything about me from my stones, from this little ring of stones?' Yeah, it's a tough ask.

Helen: Well, it is Win, but at least we have that and we can see where they were.