



## **HOUND TOR DESERTED MEDIEVAL VILLAGE**

### **Audio Guide Transcript**

Nick Holder: We've arrived at, what's the car park called?

Helen Allen: Swallerton Gate.

Nick: Swallerton Gate Car Park. Let's get our lovely Ordnance Survey map out and have a look. First of all, we've got to head up from the car park to Hound Tor itself, which is, well, it's a beautiful, craggy rock, that's what a tor means.

Helen: So that's the big pile of rocks I can see up on the land in front of us?

Nick: Yep, it's 500 metres up and away from the car park, looking roughly south-east from the car park, I think – east or south-east.

Helen: But we will be visiting a few key locations which you can follow using the downloadable map from the English Heritage website.

Nick: And you can of course explore at your leisure; you could even listen to this at home, or on your way to or from Hound Tor.

Helen: It looks like quite a nice walk, but it's quite high, isn't it? So that's going to be a reasonable walk up there. How long do you think that's going to take us?

Nick: I guess we've got a five- or ten-minute walk up from the car park. We're going to be aiming towards the right-hand side of the tor, of Hound Tor itself.

Helen: Ok, so that gap between the rocks, roughly.

Nick: That sounds good.

Helen: All right, shall we go?

Nick: Let's go for it.

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Helen: So, Nick, we've made our way up the hill. It was quite a strenuous walk up there, and we've just walked beneath some of these huge rocks behind us. They're really an iconic feature of the Dartmoor landscape, which I recognise, but I don't really know much about them. I know they're called tors – can you tell me why that is?



Nick: Tor is this interesting, well I guess it's old British, it's the 'Brittonic' language. It's a word meaning a crag or an outcrop, something that actually kind of sticks up high in the landscape. So these tors have been left behind by this sort of massive geological erosion millions of years ago that's eroded the rock away around and left these sort of craggy outcrop mini-cliffs that stick up and protrude from the landscape – so they're quite a feature. The stone is granite. There are massive stones, some of them of the sort of size of cars or houses, but they're kind of beautifully soft and eroded by the wind and the rain. And you can't help but – you want to give the names.

Helen: And how did Hound Tor come by its name?

Nick: Well, Hound Tor, when you look from a distance, it does look like there are kind of heads or bodies sticking up. And guess what, Hound Tor, this is a tor that looks like a 'hund' in Anglo-Saxon, looks like a hound or a dog. So it's a rocky outcrop that looks something like a dog. It's in a way, it's quite a charming name. And when you look at these rocks, you do sort of see faces of animals or humans staring back at you. It's something quite sort of amazing about them.

Helen: Quite magical aren't they in the landscape. So, talking of the landscape, we're just standing here, looking down towards the medieval village, and it certainly is, especially on this beautiful day, although it's a little bit windy up here, and it's a really open landscape. I'm just wondering whether it would have looked this way in medieval times?

Nick: Well, it wouldn't have looked that different. I think the village would be easier to see seven or eight hundred years ago because you'd see some smoke coming out of the chimneys. It's actually quite hard to spot. One thing about the landscape is there would definitely be more animals in it at this time, seven or eight hundred years ago. We'd see some sheep, we'd see more cattle, you might even have a few pigs near the village itself, and we'd have men and women and some children working in the fields. That's one perhaps big change about the landscape up here is that we'd have some arable fields growing crops, and nowadays at this height above sea level, you just don't see you don't see wheat or crops being grown at this height, it's just not economically worthwhile.

Helen: Yeah, I understand that. So where are we heading now? Down towards the village?

Nick: Well, let's have a quick look at the map. I can see Haytor right in the distance on the horizon. There's, below Haytor there's a lower set of rocks, which I think are called Greater Rocks. So I guess we can have to go is it east – I suppose it's east-south-east, a few hundred metres, and then hopefully we'll see the deserted medieval village a little bit down the slope from here.

Helen: Okay.

Nick: It's not actually always easy to spot the deserted medieval village, is it, in the landscape.

Helen: No, you're right. I've been here in the autumn where the bracken is really high and it is quite difficult to navigate your way around. But I think you can see the village a bit more clearly



because the land around it is kept clear. But you're right, at the moment it's quite hard to spot here in June, isn't it?

Nick: I think we'll see it as we go down the hill, we'll see the outline of these low stone walls that mark the former village.

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Helen: Well here we are, Nick, standing looking down at the village. I'm beginning to understand why they built it here because it's quite sheltered. I know we've said it before, but it's a beautiful day and there's quite a number of people here enjoying the countryside and just enjoying the peace and quiet here. I can see some low-lying walls, but do you want to explain to me a little bit more about what we're looking at?

Nick: Well, we're looking at the remains of the village. Perhaps we should call it a hamlet – a deserted medieval hamlet. The walls we're looking at, I'm just trying to get my eye in: we've got walls surviving about a metre high. They form rectangles, maybe 20 to 30 foot long, so 6, 7, 8 metres long. And you can start to work out that they're the lower parts of some moderately sized, I suppose small by our standards, medieval buildings. There's no roofs surviving. The upper parts of the walls have gone. There's no windows to be seen. But once you get your eye in, we can make out maybe a dozen or so buildings. And there were about five or six main buildings or dwelling houses here, and then half a dozen or so other buildings, including small barns, to store the crops, and some smaller outbuildings. So we're talking about a hamlet of a dozen or so buildings, perhaps 20, 30, maybe even 40 people living here. So it's not huge. But that's actually quite big for a small Dartmoor village, you know. There aren't that many villages this big in medieval Dartmoor.

Helen: Okay. And you say medieval Dartmoor – what date are we looking at for this village roughly?

Nick: The stone walls we're looking at date to the 1200s. The village is actually in Domesday Book, that great tax survey of the 1080s. So we do know that it dates back certainly to the 1080s. It was archaeologically excavated in the 1960s and 70s and the archaeologists who dug the village and exposed it found traces of even earlier buildings. Now they thought that this village might well date back to the 900s, perhaps even the 800s. I think nowadays historians and archaeologists might think that sounds a little bit too early, but we certainly know that it's occupied in around about the year 1050. Certainly in the 1100s, the 1200s, and perhaps just about into the 1300s.

Helen: So I'm amazed that we have evidence to show that this there's been more than one village in this area. As we've said, it's incredibly remote. So why here?

Nick: Well we're on the good side of Dartmoor – we're on the east side, so we're a little bit more sheltered here by Dartmoor itself. So there were several, there were tens of little medieval hamlets and villages on this side of Dartmoor. Nearly all of them deserted in the 1200s and 1300s. And a lot of the other deserted villages and little hamlets of Dartmoor, there were perhaps only one or two buildings clustered together.



Helen: So is this layout, is this typical, then, of the medieval villages?

Nick: Well, this is what we call an irregular layout. So it's a slightly haphazard cluster of buildings. They're sort of nestling into the slope. You know, we're not talking about a kind of classic medieval village of a little high street with houses going off the high street. We do get those in Devon and we do get those on the edge of Dartmoor, but this is more of a kind of – what's the word? A sort of haphazard cluster of buildings nestling around the contours of the slope on this side of Hound Tor.

Helen: And again, we keep referring to it as a deserted medieval village. What brought about the end of the population living here?

Nick: Well in the 1100s and 1200s they were living in a time – it's sometimes called the medieval warm period. So that really means that temperature's up something like late 20th-century levels. So pretty warm. Now this village is about 1100 feet, so 300–350 metres above sea level. And that's about the limit of where you can grow crops successfully. Any higher than that, the crops are just going to fail. So in the 1200s, the weather is pretty good, you've got about the right amount of rainfall, it is kind of worth having a little village here. You can grow crops, you can keep animals and it just about works. It's pretty tough: I think life is pretty harsh here, but it just about works. By about the year 1300, the temperature is dropping slightly, the weather is deteriorating, and in the early 1300s there's a series of crop failures. There's also in the 1310s, there are some nasty animal diseases going round and by 1310 or 1320, well, you've had a few bad harvests, you've had some of your animals dying – basically it's just no longer worth living here. So we would guess that the last residents, the last permanent residents probably left in about 1320, shut the door and probably just walked back down the valley, back to the slightly larger village where the parish church is at Manaton, a couple of miles down the valley.

Helen: Ok, interesting. Should we go down and have a look at some of the houses?

Nick: Let's go and have a look.

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Helen: So Nick, we've decided to come into one of the houses and take a seat. It's rather nice, but it's not like sitting on my sofa at home. I can see walls that are about hip high, it's quite a long house and then a little annexe up at the top. But I'm still kind of finding it hard to imagine what this house might have looked like, what it was made of, what it was like inside. Can you give me a bit of an idea of what that would have been like?

Nick: Okay, well it's a stone house, so the walls probably would originally have been 2, 2½ metres high, so that's about 7 or 8 feet high. There would be a timber roof above that on the inside – there's not much decent building timber near here, but you know, you'd make do with what you could get down in the valleys. The roof would be covered with thatch. So I think it would be quite a dark place. There's probably not many windows, there's certainly no window glass in a rural house like this. So yes, it's a dark place, I mean it's pretty dry. One interesting thing



about these type of houses, we call them longhouses because, well, they're quite long – it's roughly 30 foot, about 9 metres long.

And this type of longhouse is often built on a hill and or at least on a slight slope. The important thing is that you can keep some of your more valuable animals in the house over winter – we call it overwintering. Well, we don't do that very often in modern life, but it does sort of make sense in the Middle Ages because your cattle, your cows, are pretty important and pretty valuable. By keeping them indoors in your house over winter, well you're keeping an eye on them. They're also keeping you a little bit warm. So it sort of makes sense. We can see actually there's a stone drain in the lower part of the house to drain out all the kind of yucky slurry and manure out of the house. And of course, they were clever builders. You put the animals in the 'byre' room, you put that at the lower part of the house downhill, and then we, the humans, live in the upper part of the house uphill. So we're sitting, I guess, in the living room. They've also got a little sort of bedroom in a small annexe room at the upper part of the house. So all in all, it's quite big. I mean, it's bigger than a lot of two-bedroom flats these days. It's not too bad. It is single-storey, so you haven't got a storey above.

Helen: We don't have open fireplaces in our houses now, but I can see one just in front of us – would that have been going most of the time? And is there a chimney or would it have been really smoky here?

Nick: Well, there's no chimney. So the fireplace is a kind of open hearth in the middle of the upper living room area. I mean, one good thing about thatch is that you don't really need a chimney, the smoke just rises up and goes out through the thatch. I would say that it would be a pretty smoky place. The fire would have to be going quite a lot at the time. You haven't got brilliant fuel here because you've got kind of rye, straw, stuff like that, so it is a little bit smoky. Maybe you're burning a bit of turf as well, but to be honest, they're probably coughing all the time when they're indoors because it is pretty smoky. In winter there's probably a little bit of a whiff coming from your animals stored in the lower end of the room, in the 'byre' end. So by modern standards, it's not the height of luxury.

Helen: What would I have seen actually inside in terms of, you know, was there furniture or – I don't imagine there was a widescreen TV, but what else might you have seen inside?

Nick: Well, there's definitely some furniture. The animals have got little wooden stalls or rails – you need posts to attach your animals. So this is just in winter – in the summer, of course, they'd be living outside. We've got a little fireplace in the middle. We'd probably have a couple of chests, small chests in which to store possessions. You might have a couple of basic shelves. We'd have maybe in the sleeping area higher up at the high end of the building, we'd have simple straw mattresses, perhaps made with some bracken and straw, you know, reasonably comfortable, perhaps not quite full modern standards, but still not bad.

Helen: And I have a duvet. What would they have had?

Nick: We'd have some coarse woollen blankets at this time.

Helen: Okay.



Nick: And remember also that Devon, this part of Devon, is a sheep area. So Devon at this time is making quite a lot of money from producing the coarse type of woollen cloth – broadcloths.

Helen: Still think I prefer my duvet, but there we go! And so Nick, do we know anything about the people that lived here?

Nick: We haven't got a list of all the names of those who lived in the village, unfortunately. It would be nice, obviously, to have a kind of census of the 20 or 30 people living here in, I don't know, 1250 when this house was first built. What we do have is we have the name of the, well, he's the lord of the manor. He's 'Richard de Hundetorra' – Richard of Hound Tor. He's well, he's known as the lord of the manor. I mean, I would say that this is quite a small manor and in the scale of kind of medieval houses and important medieval peopled Richard de Hundetorra is not actually that important, but he's the senior man in the village. He'd be living here with his family, maybe his father is still living with him in the house or the next door house. He's married with children, nephews and nieces. And he's the sort of headman of this small village.

Helen: And he would have lived in a house, or in this house because it's the biggest one. Is that right?

Nick: We're pretty sure, well it's pretty likely that he's living in this house because it's the largest one. And remember, it's not just this longhouse. It's a longhouse with two little gardens next door for growing some vegetables. He's got a little small building to one side, perhaps, where a servant lives, and he's got another small building on another side, perhaps his barn where he's keeping some of the crops he harvests in September.

Helen: So do we have any idea about how the community functioned here, the sort of social interactions between the various families?

Nick: Well, it's a pretty small place, isn't it? I mean, it's a hamlet of half a dozen main houses. There's another little farmhouse a couple of hundred metres up the hill, back towards Hound Tor. I think it's pretty clear, you know all your neighbours and your neighbours know what you're getting up to. So there probably aren't that very many secrets here. There's links to the neighbouring villages, so it's pretty likely that they've got relatives down in the village a mile or two down the hill at Manaton. They're walking to Manaton on Sundays to go to church. When they die, they're carried to Manaton, probably in a little cart and the whole village is going to be walking down the track, down the hill for the funeral service. So I think it's quite an intimate place, but people come and go, and there'll be people marrying here, coming in from neighbouring villages and people coming from far afield, the big city of Exeter down the road. So it's not completely cut off, it's remote. We're kind of on the fringes of where we can profitably, successfully do farming in the 1200s. But it's still not a bad place to live.

Helen: Yeah – Especially on a day like today.

Nick: On a day like today, yes. Would you like to be here in January with your cow down at the bottom of the house, pouring with rain outside?



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Helen: So just before we head off back up the hill, Nick, I don't really want to go actually, now I think about it, sitting here in this living room, looking out over this incredible wild landscape. But you've given us a really good sense about how people lived and worked here.

Nick: There is something amazing about this place, isn't there? It is a ghost village, it's sort of left over from, well, about 700 years ago when they finally left and abandoned it and it became deserted. But it's an amazing place to get a real sense of how a rural community in this part of England lived and managed and survived in quite a harsh landscape. Probably it's one of the best places in southern England – there are a lot of deserted medieval villages around, but most of them are kind of humps and bumps in fields or they're marked on maps. This is a place where you can come and you can walk to and you can sit in living rooms and walk into these ruined barns and almost make out the old gardens and little farmyards. And it's one of the best places to get a sense of how ordinary people lived seven, eight hundred ago. There's something very magical about it.