

UPPER PLYM VALLEY

Audio Guide Transcript

Helen: So, Win, we're here at the Upper Plym Valley today. What are we – whereabouts are we exactly?

Win: Well, I've brought you to Cadover Bridge, which is quite easy to find on the map. And there's lots of parking here. We've actually ventured up the little lane next to Cadover Bridge to a car park called Trowlesworthy Car Park.

Helen: That track was a bit bumpy, wasn't it.

Win: It was a bit bumpy. If your suspension isn't brilliant, then park a bit further back. And we're going to set out across the biggest site in English Heritage's care. It covers a huge area of the Upper Plym Valley. This river we're standing next to, the river Plym, goes all the way down to Plymouth. But the Upper Plym has been designated as this guardianship site under English Heritage's care, and it's absolutely packed with all sorts of monuments, many of them prehistoric: things like roundhouses, settlements, stone rows, stone circle. We've even got medieval things like pillow mounds. Well, you'll find out all about this when I take you around, but it's a vast open site, and there aren't many landmarks.

Helen: So the downloadable PDF map on the English Heritage website – that's got a few key locations, so we'll be following that, will we?

Win: Yeah, I think it's essential to download and print that and bring it with you or bring a good Ordnance Survey map just so you know where you are; and also if it's going to be bad weather, you know, be sensible. And you know, if it's misty, you could get lost up there. So come on a nice day.

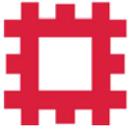
Helen: And how far are we going to be walking this morning?

Win: Well, I say it's a huge site, but the walk we've designed today is only maximum 2½ kilometres. But you can sample it ...

Helen: That's to the furthest point.

Win: That's to the furthest point that we're going. But you can do this in pieces. You can just do the easy version and just come to the first site with us. And that's a prehistoric settlement. So, you know, fantastic.

Helen: So people get a fantastic taste of what there is to see up here.



Win: Yeah, we're stepping back 3,000 years, but we'll also be looking at periods earlier than that and and later than that. I mean, it's just extraordinary landscape. I love looking at it on Google Earth because you can see all these little circles and enclosures and things as well. But the map's good and of course our PDF.

Helen: Okay, so where are we headed from here?

Win: Well, from here we're going to be following up the track from this Trowlesworthy Car Park and it heads up the hill to that big clump of trees. That's the key landmark we're going for. And we're going to the left of it, round the back of it, and then head off up into the valley.

Helen: Okay. Shall we go?

Win: Yes, let's go.

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Well, just before we get to the farm and the trees, let me show you something here on the left. And in front of us is a roundhouse. Can you make it out?

Helen: Just about. It does look like a jumble of stones to me.

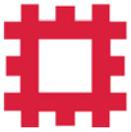
Win: Yeah, well, so it's in a circle, so we'll be seeing quite a few of these on our walk now. And they are Bronze Age roundhouses, so they like 3,000 years old. And they would originally have been thatched, you know, a roundhouse with a conical roof. And there are lots of these across the moor. And we'll be looking at those and also some enclosure banks. There's one around this particular site as well.

Helen: So would the landscape have looked much like this in the Bronze Age, Win?

Win: Well, very different, I think, in lots of ways. So sort of early in the Bronze Age, there was still quite a lot of woodland cover and it was those Bronze Age people that actually cleared a lot of the land here. So it depends what part of the Bronze Age, but by the end of the Bronze Age. So 700, 800 BC, the soil had become so degraded it had become moorland. And actually, most of these people didn't find it economic to work up here any more. And they moved down into the lowlands or perhaps the population just died off. But we see pretty extensive abandonment at the end of the Bronze Age on Dartmoor. They had, in a way, created an ecological disaster.

Helen: That's weird, isn't it? Because we think of an ecological disaster as being very much a modern phenomenon.

Win: Yeah, no ecological disaster has been happening a long time. I mean, it's created a very different but beautiful landscape. But it's important to understand that. So before people got here, it was forested and it's humans that have actually cleared all this forest.



Helen: Well, what other features do we see in the landscape that indicate how these people were working and living?

Win: Well, we'll be seeing farms, and there are field systems from the Bronze Age right across the fringes of Dartmoor. There are all these enclosures, but there are lots of other things, too, from other different periods. We're going to be seeing medieval rabbit warrens. This farm here was a warren, and we're going to be seeing well, in fact, down in the valley in front of us here, you can see it's been scooped out. You can see like river cliffs. And it's all very, very rough ground. You know, best not to try walking across there, but actually that's all the result of medieval tin streaming. And now today we can sometimes hear above this breeze – we can sometimes hear the sound of the quarrying of the china clay works.

Helen: Yeah, it's very visible on the horizon there, isn't it.

Win: Big white waste tips. And behind them there are these massive quarries and scoops into the moor where they've been extracting this china clay, which is exported all over the world. But that has had a massive impact on the landscape from the 19th century onwards. So what we're seeing as we go around the Upper Plym Valley today, we're going to be seeing sites even from as long ago as 5,000 years ago – stone circle, stone row, settlements, from 3,000 to 3,500 years ago; tin mining from five, six, seven, 800 years ago, and even the china clay, which is just a couple of hundred years.

Helen: Okay, well, come on, let's go and take a look.

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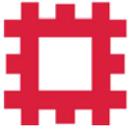
Win: Well, I've stopped you here, and we're looking at this thing in front of us. What would you say it might be?

Helen: Okay, I'm going to take a guess. It's an earth mound. I'm going to guess it's somewhere between 20 and 30 metres long, maybe about 10 metres wide, and comes up to about my waist at the top. My guess would be something like a long barrow. I've seen those elsewhere.

Win: Yeah, it does look like one of those Neolithic burial mounds.

Helen: Yes, exactly.

Win: And often they have chambers in them, but yeah, it does look like it, but it's not! It's much more recent, and it's probably about four or 500 years old, this one. It's called a pillow mound. And you'll see them marked on the map. There are quite a few. And the other clue on the map is that we're in Trowlesworthy Warren. So one of the things that happened in the post-medieval period, but also in the medieval period, was they constructed these warrens because they liked eating rabbits and they're basically containing the rabbits. There are traps around here to trap vermin so that the rabbits aren't eaten by local animals. And we've got the warrener's house nearby where he (usually a he) would live. And these pillow mounds are where you encourage the rabbits, because if they dig into the ground here, they're going to be blunting their little noses on



the granite. So if you construct a lovely earthen mound for them like this one, then they can tunnel away to their hearts' content. They're all contained in one location, and they can bring in ferrets to flush them out. And of course, they net the mound so you can so, you know, when the warrener comes over to get a harvest of rabbits, just nets it, puts the ferrets in, and out come the rabbits and jump into the net.

Helen: So this feels like a medieval butcher's then?

Win: Yeah, it is. It's like all farming, you know? Well, a lot of farming is meat-based. And it's a very important, lovely food source for people.

Helen: And I'm going to guess this isn't the only one that you could see in this area.

Win: No, there are lots here. And there are other warrens around Dartmoor where you can see similar clusters of pillow mounds and a warrener's house and vermin traps. So these are all the key things to look out for. And it's a really good example, this particular one.

Helen: Okay. So before they had the roundhouses we were looking at, they were from which period, remind me?

Win: They were going right back to the Bronze Age.

Helen: So why was it that this area then came back into use in medieval times?

Win: Well, there were lots of attempts to bring Dartmoor back into useful use, if you like. There was Prince Charles's predecessor tried to break in the moor with things like Dartmoor prison and constructing new takes – breaking up the ground to create farms that hadn't been here since the Bronze Age. So there have been lots of attempts over the years, you know, not just during the age of agricultural improvement, but also way back in medieval and post-medieval times. So always these attempts to try to get back onto the moor and bring it into useful production.

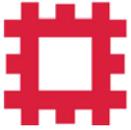
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Helen: Right, from Trowlesworthy Warren House we headed up that rough track, didn't we, Win, that was kind of parallel to the wall, sort of heading towards the Trowlesworthy Tor, isn't it?

Win: Yeah. The big stack of rocks on the top of the hill.

Helen: That's right. And then we got to a kind of rough concrete bridge that crossed a little stream. And then we turned right, didn't we, at that point.

Win: Yeah, that's an old leat carrying water along the hillside and just follow the leat. I find it useful to count the bridges, but some people might want to use the map, but there are five little crossing points, just little granite beams that cross the thing. And when you get to the fifth one, then you head up towards Trowlesworthy Tor about 100 metres.



Helen: Yeah, here we are. So actually, where are we now?

Win: Well, Helen, I've brought you now up to a beautiful site, and it's one of very many on this hillside. There are lots of Bronze Age settlements here to show you. And in the next couple of minutes, I'm going to try and train you in reading this, in tuning into the landscape so that you can read this because it just looks like a jumble of rocks.

Helen: I was going to say, you've got your work cut out, because it does just look like a jumble of stones to me.

Win: Yeah. Once you get your eye in, it gets easier, I promise you.

Helen: Okay, so take me through the first stage. What am I trying to identify?

Win: Okay, so there's rocks all over the place, but the first ones we're looking at is this enclosure wall. In other words, there's a circular bank here and inside are a number of roundhouses.

Helen: I think what? There are about half a dozen inside here?

Win: Yeah, yeah, six. Actually, you're right in here that we can see. There may have been actually some that have gone invisible, have become sort of buried. But the roundhouses and the enclosure wall are just basically low banks, aren't they, with stones sticking out of them? And that's what you have to spot, really. It's just that sort of line. And then when you go to the roundhouses themselves – see if you can find a door. There would have been a doorway. I mean, some of them, they're obvious, some of them they're not. They're very tumbled, but they're like little round craters, aren't they.

Helen: They are, and about, what would you say, about 4 or 5 metres across?

Win: Internally, I think; I think it's wider. That's probably 10 metres, you know, to the outsides.

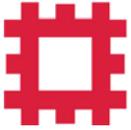
Helen: Okay.

Win: And remember, these would have had thatched roofs, which would arch way outside. So they'd be really quite big. The walls are just – I like to think of them as draught excluding. They're just low walls at the bottom that you can see some stones on the outside and some stones on the inside. And then they packed in between with stones and mud and all sorts of things.

Helen: So that's like the insulation for the house.

Win: It is really. Yeah. It stops the blooming draught.

Helen: Of which there are plenty up here.



Win: Yes. It's a bit breezy today, even though it's lovely and sunny. And inside the house, you've got to imagine a massive timber structure. The roof would have been this heavy thatch. And imagine what it's like on a cold day in winter when that is covered in snow and it's wet as well. Just think of the phenomenal white of the thatched roof. So inside you've got to have a really strong timber structure. And what they tended to use was a ring-beam structure – in other words, a circle of posts in the middle which supported a ring of posts on the top. And then that's like a table, and the whole of that roof rests on it: really substantial structures. I excavated some of these a few years ago nearby on Shaugh Moor. And when we dated them, we found they actually stood for about two or 300 years.

Helen: Oh, so this wasn't just like a passing community. They actually lived here for a long time.

Win: For a long time. This is generations. I mean, I'm sure the house was repaired and, you know, rebuilt, re-thatched and all the rest of it over the years. But a lot of people – in fact the map, where you can see lots of these enclosed systems, refers to them as hut circles. It's a bit naughty calling them hut circles because they are houses. These are permanent houses that people lived in. Imagine them with the fire and all the equipment hanging up in the rafters.

Helen: I was going to ask you, what would it have looked like inside? And I guess it's pretty dark as well?

Win: Oh, yeah, no windows at all. And there's no chimney either. So the smoke just filters through the roof. If you have a hole in the roof, it creates a vortex and it sets the thing alight. So that's what experimental archaeology has shown us anyway, that the smoke just filtered. So if you didn't control your fire right, the smoke might actually come down to sort of eye level.

Helen: Oh, goodness.

Win: And sometimes lower, but often it's higher. But you would smell like a kipper, living in one of these.

Helen: So how many people roughly would live inside each?

Win: It's such a guess. I mean there are some of these houses – some on Bodmin, Moor which we can actually see across from here ...

Helen: We certainly can today because it's pretty clear.

Win: It's a clear day, yes. You can actually see the hill of Kit Hill with its obelisk on it, and behind there is Bodmin Moor. There were some excavations done there on Stannon Down many years ago where they actually found the postholes for the furniture inside. So there were beds and things like that. So, you know, houses like this, you can't fit a lot of people in, but it could be certainly a couple and maybe the kids as well. Or maybe they put the kids in another building. And thinking of kids, you know, that might be why they've put this in an enclosure, because what we found on that excavation over at Shaugh Moor near here was that there was no gateway, no entrance to the enclosure at all, just a stile. So the whole thing was clearly to keep the animals out. And if you've got children, you don't really want them to be squashed by cows.



Helen: So what – I was thinking cows, but what other livestock might they have raised?

Win: Yeah, well, the trouble is that we don't actually know because the soil on Dartmoor is so acidic with granite soil that when we excavate we never find any bones. But there was this lovely site that we found on Shaugh Moor, quite near here, a few years ago, where we actually found a ditch with hoof prints and paw prints in it. And there were horses. So this was early horses. And in those days, horses hadn't been in Britain for very long. So I guess they were keeping horses.

Helen: So not like the Dartmoor ponies that we see out here today.

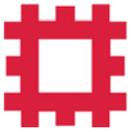
Win: Well, actually, they would have been a similar size. They're quite diddy things. You know, we think of horses, but they're very highly bred these days, you know. But they're actually quite small. They'd be about our height, you know. And there were badgers, there were cattle, and there were sheep, as you'd expect. So I guess that the people who were living here were farmers farming this whole hillside with stock. Perhaps they may have had large numbers of cattle and sheep, for all we know. They may have brought them into these enclosures for milking, or they might have built them outside, you know, actually out in the pastures.

Helen: And do we know whether they lived here all year round? I'm just thinking of the stock that generally people take down in the winter. But would they have lived here all year round?

Win: Well, some areas of Dartmoor, we've got whole patterns of fields, field systems, and we can see that they're probably there pretty well all year. But these are outliers. These are outside those field systems. And it may well be that they were following a system of what's called transhumance, where they move up in the summer to pasture lands on the high lands. And we know even in the medieval period that all the parishes of Devon had access to Dartmoor for their summer grazing. It was a right, and that may well go back to the Bronze Age. And so these could be timeshares. These could be places that people just came up to in the summer with their stock to take advantage of the lovely green grass.

Helen: So I've noticed that there are some roundhouses that actually sit outside this enclosure. What would be your explanation for that?

Win: Well, it's a good question, because I wrestle with this one myself, because some of these roundhouses are built right up against the enclosure wall, which doesn't make a lot of sense. Some are outside, so it's quite possible the enclosure wall is a different date. They may not be contemporary with the houses, so they might have constructed the wall later and just encircled a few houses. And some of those houses may already have been defunct – out of action. So we're seeing a palimpsest here of landscape of different periods. We've seen medieval things. We've got Bronze Age, and the Bronze Age for these houses could be anything, possibly from 1500 BC to 700 BC. So we've got seven, eight or more centuries to contend with. So there are people coming and going, living here, houses getting demolished, falling out of use, new houses being built over centuries. Think of that length of time from now, calculating. You know, this is taking 21st century minus seven: what's that 14th century? It's a colossal length of time and the more you tune in, the more you'll see.



Helen: What else? What are we going to see next?

Win: Well, there are some other monuments that I've got to show you which are right at the end of our walk. It's a bit of a distance now to go, but there's a stone circle. And there we're going back even earlier. Stone circles like Stonehenge and these enigmatic stone rows and stone circles that you get on Dartmoor date right back to 2500, 3000 BC. So they're much earlier than what we're looking at, than what we're sitting in here with these roundhouses.

Helen: Okay, let's get going and go and have a look.

Win: Cool.

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Helen: So Win, we followed the leat, for how long would you say that was, that stretch?

Win: The water course? I think we're going about 800 metres along it – 700, 800 metres. And then if you haven't noticed the stone circle that we're now standing next to, then you're sure to see when you cross a double row of stones. But this stone circle appears as you're walking along either side of the leat.

Helen: It's really visually impressive, isn't it? And then leading off it, this incredible row of double stones going down the hillside, it looks amazing.

Win: Well, it does. It's not quite on the scale of Stonehenge, but it's about the same date. And a lot of the stone rows and stone circles on Dartmoor are quite small. This is on the large side, actually.

Helen: Is it?

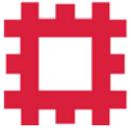
Win: So what are these stones? Waist height?

Helen: Something like that.

Win: One goes up to about head height. So there are eight stones in a small circle. And leading out from them, which I think is even more dramatic, is this wonderful double stone row running down the slope. It crosses the leat – well the leat's cut through it, because it's a much more modern thing, the leat, and it's cut through the stone row. But the stone row continues downhill beyond. I just did a quick count: about 70, 60–70 pairs of stones. So it's really long.

Helen: That's quite some effort that somebody has gone to, to put them here. Do you want to speculate about what it was for?

Win: Well, generally, it's all speculation with these because we can't see the ceremonies that took place here. We can say that there were ceremonies because these aren't habitation sites. Often



they're linked to burial mounds or burial cairns up here made of stones, and they're often away from the settlement. So they are something special. So there's something to do with the community. It could just be a community meeting place where they make decisions like who's going to be punished for this or whatever. This might be a place of justice or it might be a place of worshipping the gods, because often these have solar alignments and things like that. They may be a place for, like, if you think of the maypole and medieval kind of community ceremonies where they come and dance. So, you know, it could be to do with dancing or singing. There are all sorts of ceremonies, but.

Helen: But they're very clearly connected to the communities that would have lived in the enclosures that we were looking at.

Win: Well, that's a good question, because these are older. So if this is, as I think it probably is – we haven't got a lot of good radiocarbon dates for these, or any other dates for these – they are of a type, though, found right across Britain, in fact, Western Europe. You find them in Brittany and places like that – stone alignments and that sort of thing. They belong really to the late Neolithic. So we're talking 3000, 2500 BC. So 5,000 years ago, you know, potentially. So that is about a thousand years before those settlements we were looking at.

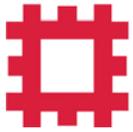
Helen: Like I find it incredible that they've been here for such a long time and yet they're still such a really incredible view in the landscape.

Win: Yeah. And I think the Bronze Age people must have felt this as well, which is why I think they carried on using them. So they were still part of the same religion, I think, as in the late Neolithic, I would guess anyway. So they're revering these places. I mean, I like to think of these stones as being about choreography, about how you connect with your landscape. And when I first started looking at these stone rows, I used to look at them and, you know, just, oh, nice stone, and all the rest of it. But actually something I learned from a field of archaeology that's called phenomenology is: why don't you walk down it and look outwards and look at how the horizon changes and how you get different views across the landscape at different points along that journey. So it is a journey. It's a piece of cinematography, if you like, or it may just be choreography, maybe they're dancing between the stones in certain sort of – rather like country dancing, you know, they're doing well, sort of twisting the willow and things like that. There could be that, or, if they're connected with burial, maybe these pairs of stones are man and wife, you know, as they die. I quite like the idea that every time one of the elders of the community dies, and his wife – or his wife and her husband, I could put it either way around – you know, the stones being put to memorialise them.

Helen: Do you know what? I love that idea of walking down the middle. I'm going to go and give that a try.

Win: Yeah. Beautiful.

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Helen: Well, Win, I don't think you've completely transformed me into an archaeologist, but just going up onto the moor with you at the Upper Plym Valley has really opened my eyes as to what to look for – the incredible monuments that that you can find up there.

Win: It's just such a wonderful landscape, isn't it?

Helen: It really is.

Win: I'm glad you've picked up some of the techniques. I think that is the problem for a lot of people. They go into this vast landscape and think, well, you know, where's the archaeology and how do we spot it? But I think we've picked up a few techniques today, of spotting things.

Helen: We definitely have. And you're right. I mean, it's quite daunting when you come around the corner from the farmhouse and you see these moors just stretching away into the distance. And actually, on a lovely day like today, it's really tempting to get out there and explore what else you can find. It's absolutely spellbinding.

Win: Absolutely. It's a lovely place to be, almost in any weather. But, you know, best to come here in nice weather. But I think what really makes it special is that it is one piece of preserved landscape and of a landscape that is the best-preserved prehistoric landscape in north-western Europe. This is really special. There's quite a lot of it around the edges of Dartmoor well worth seeing. But this bit, which is almost completely a scheduled monument – so it's, you know, number one, solid protection of the landscape, and also in English Heritage guardianship – that is just a brilliant way to preserve it for well, not just for preservation and conservation, but also to open it up to people. It's our biggest site in English Heritage. We really want people to come out and explore it. But as you say, we need those techniques, don't we, to kind of understand all those monuments.

Helen: That's right. Well hopefully other people will pick up on your tips and come out and have a look for themselves.

Win: Well, have a go. And come again and again and bring the family and bring everybody and get the kids to try and sort of work out what's happening. Find the doorway of the house, you know, find the enclosure, what's going on here? Try to imagine what the house was like, paint pictures with your family, you know, and really enjoy it. Because once those pictures grow up out of the monuments, you get such a connection with the landscape and you feel, this is my history. This is my landscape.