

Sheet 2

Goonhilly

FARMING



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Old hedge and meadow at Croft Noweth

The Goonhilly Downs may look like a windswept wild haven for The Lizard’s famous flora and fauna, but heathland is in fact a habitat created by people over thousands of years, first by clearing trees and then maintained by cattle grazing, turf and furze cutting and other farming practices.

A long history of farming: The Downs have been worked since at least the Bronze Age, when people began to settle the more fertile lands around Goonhilly, while using the more barren heath for pasturing. This pattern continued into the Middle Ages when the heathland would have provided common grazing areas, until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the land began to be divided into smallholdings and crofts.

The Bronze Age barrow of Cruc Draenoc [H] was used to mark where the boundaries of five parishes – established in the Anglo-Saxon period – meet (Cury, Ruan Major, St. Keverne, St. Martin-in-Meneage and Mawgan-in-Meneage). The pasture of Goonhilly would have therefore been divided between the parishes for summer grazing.

Croft Noweth: The smallholding of Croft Noweth [E] dates back to the early nineteenth century, and it’s worth scrambling through the vegetation to explore. In the summer you’ll find orchids and Speckled Wood butterflies round the ruined farmhouse. The corrugated tin roofing is not of course original, but go inside and you can see the remains of the hearth, or look out through the small window at the greenery outside. You can also find the remains of cattle sheds and, as you walk away from the cottage, you’ll find old Cornish hedges among the trees marking out the field boundaries.

Another croft used to lie just to the northeast of the Dry Tree menhir [H]: Dry Tree Croft, probably also dating to the early nineteenth century. Its fields, and those of Croft Noweth, are illustrated on the 1839 tithe award map for the parish of Ruan Major (tithe surveys recorded the tithable value of

Turf cutting

They are difficult to spot, but near Croft Noweth you can see shallow raised platforms. On the 1880 maps of the area these are marked as old huts, but we now know they are turf ‘steads’ on which the turfs would have been stacked to dry after cutting. Settlers on Goonhilly would have cut turf since at least the mediaeval period. It was a valuable source of fuel for warmth and cooking. The last turf was probably cut on Goonhilly in the early twentieth

properties and land for the church). Other placenames are evidence of other smallholdings, Croft Pascoe, for example.

Life would have been tough for the crofting community on Goonhilly. Much of the land is poor and infertile, and it was only the economic downturns of the nineteenth century that drove people to create smallholdings here.

What is a croft?



Inside the ruins of Croft Noweth

A croft smallholding is an area of enclosed land that was once part of a larger area of land held in common. The underlying serpentine geology of Goonhilly means the Downs are not fertile enough to grow agricultural crops, so smallholdings would have been based on cattle grazing, and crofts were established here for grazing and for cutting turf for fuel. Landowners around the Downs encouraged the creation of crofts: they could not claim rent for use of common land, but it was a different story for enclosed land. There were benefits for the smallholders as well, as they could keep their cattle separate and have sole access to turf cutting. The man-made pools, such as Croft Pascoe Pool, were probably either flooded turf cuttings or dew pools for watering cattle.