

CORNWALL AND ISLES OF SCILLY LANDSCAPE CHARACTER STUDY



Landscape Character Area Description

LCA - West Penwith - North and West Coastal Strip

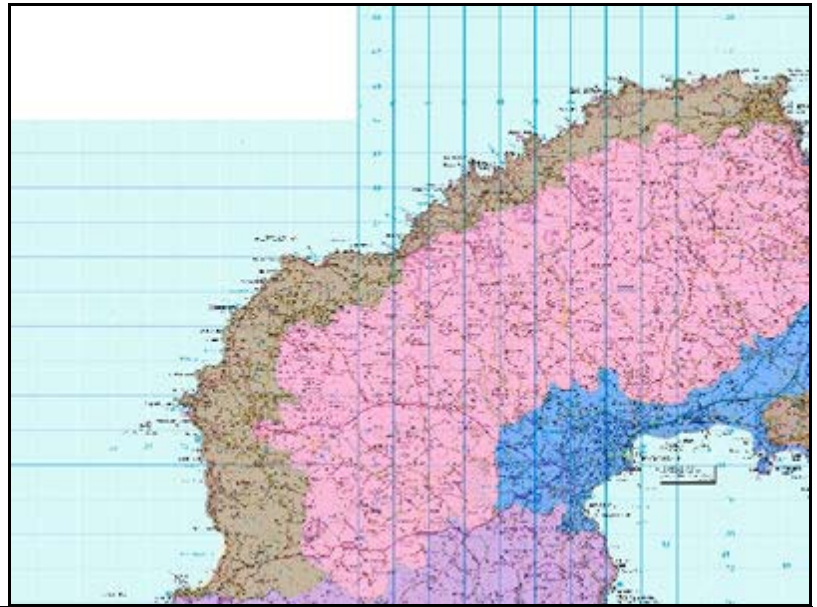
LCA No

CA02

JCA

Constituent LDUs

Total 7: Nos 18, 19, 135, 278, 179U,
280U, 283*



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Location This area comprises the northern coast of the most westerly part of the Cornish peninsula.

Designations The majority of the area is covered by AONB [LDUs 278, 280 and 283 excluding only the urban part of St Ives and the most South easterly tip of the area]. LDU 283 has WHS; Heritage Coast; LDUs 18, 278 and 283 have SSSIs; 3 LDUs have SMS and 1 LDU has a CGS.

Description

This Landscape Character Area is the coastal shelf wrapped around the far western tip of Cornwall. It is windswept and exposed, open to the full force of the Atlantic Ocean. The land is a plateau gently sloping from the hills of LCA03 (Penwith Central Hills) towards the coast where it falls as impressive vertical jointed granite cliffs to the sea. On the plateau small fields surrounded by ancient granite hedges create a strong distinctive feature. These Cornish hedges are hard exposed stone incorporating enormous boulders that can also be seen lying in the open fields. Prehistoric settlements, barrows and a few standing stones or menhirs are also to be seen adding their own distinction to this hard granite landscape. Small shallow valleys incise the landscape creating a textured contrast to the mainly pastoral farmland with their rougher vegetation of willow and bracken. Towards the west these valleys are wider and deeper at Cot, Kenidjack and Tregeseal and have been invaded by Japanese Knotweed springing up amongst the old mine workings. The other contrasts are the coastal heath with its bright seasonal colours mixed with the dark rock of the cliffs and the wide sandy beach backed by dunes at Sennen. This is a settled agrarian landscape with small churchtown villages with distinctive square church towers and isolated farms scattered throughout the area as well as the older signs of occupation, the prehistoric features such as barrows, settlements and cliff castles. However in the west this ancient landscape has been overlain by mining activity. Tin and copper mining, now discontinued, was active around St Just and Pendeen from the medieval period and has left its mark on the landscape with engine houses, miners' cottages, the square fields of miners' smallholdings and other structures. St Ives in the far east of the Landscape Character Area is the largest town. The other main town is St Just while the settlements of Pendeen, Botallack and Tregeseal hug the coastal road.

Key Landscape Characteristics

Exposed coastal shelf.

Sheer cliffs of jointed granite with significant headlands and small rocky coves.

CORNWALL AND ISLES OF SCILLY LANDSCAPE CHARACTER STUDY



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Predominantly pasture and some arable with large extent of coastal Lowland Heathland.

Much scrub and bracken along coast and along small stream valleys with wetland including some Wet Woodland, Fens and Purple Moor Grass and Rush Pastures.

Anciently enclosed land and prehistoric field pattern remains intact with distinctive treeless stone wall and Cornish hedge boundaries and extensive prehistoric remains.

Extensive mining relics to west around St Just and Pendeen.

Isolated villages with distinctive church towers.

Main settlements: St Ives and St Just.

Wide sandy beach backed by Coastal Sand Dunes in west at Sennen.

Little modern clutter although there is tourism around St Ives and Sennen Cove.

Geology and soils

The geology is dominated by intrusive igneous rocks with granite forming the main bulk of the peninsula. Small patches of dolerite, basalt and 'Greenstone' occur on the northern coastal shelf. Middle and Undifferentiated Devonian slates, greywackes and siltstones are associated with these small areas, some metamorphosed. The soils are shallow hard rock soils.

Topography and drainage

The area is a coastal shelf falling from around 120m AOD where backed by the hills to the south and east in the adjacent Landscape Character Area 03 (Penwith Central Hills) to around 100m AOD on the coast. Short narrow valleys punctuate the coastal shelf in a series of notches. In the extreme west and on sections of the north coast, these cliffs are almost sheer and formed of characteristic jointed granite. Along the north coast, intrusions of more resistant fine grained dolerite, and the remains of the metamorphosed Devonian rocks have formed headlands as at Cape Cornwall to Pendeen Watch and Bosigran, and eastwards to the Island at St Ives. Elsewhere the cliffs take on a more chamfered profile, and throughout the coastlines are indented with numerous small rocky coves and boulder beaches, with the broad sandy sweep of Whitesand Bay at Sennen in the west backed by a small area of dunes.

Biodiversity

The majority of the area is improved grassland with arable (mostly in the southern part of the LCA) with many small or large fragmented areas of scrub and bracken along the small stream valleys and adjoining the Lowland Heathland on the rising ground to the south into LCA 03 (Penwith Central Hills). The narrow coastal strip has a significant area of almost continuous Lowland Heathland with scrub, neutral grassland, maritime cliff and bracken, almost all within SSSI. At Sennen and Gwynver, Coastal Sand Dunes are a feature. The stream valleys have narrow areas of Wet Woodland and wetland with small areas of Fens, Purple Moor Grass and Rush Pastures habitat in the valley bottoms. Treeless or exposed Cornish hedges around the small fields form a localised network of ecological corridors.

Land Cover

The landcover is mainly farmland with very limited tree cover. The area is defined along the coast by a sloping cliff clothed with coastal heath which falls to a rocky and much-indented wild coastline. The small valleys running down to the cliffs are typically vegetated with scrub, bracken and rough pasture. Boulders and rock outcrops are a feature of the landscape in and around fields. Mining remains are evident in the area around Pendeen and St Just.

CORNWALL AND ISLES OF SCILLY LANDSCAPE CHARACTER STUDY



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Land Use

The area is predominantly pasture, (around 50% improved grassland, 25% rough grassland), for dairy and beef cattle, with arable (13%) land use increasing. The coastal heath had been used for summer grazing as part of the farming system that goes back to the Iron Age and before. Between St Just and Pendeen there has been extensive mining for tin since at least the later medieval period, leaving a wealth of now redundant mine buildings, engine houses, pitheads, chimneys, shafts, 19th century smallholders' rectangular fields and rows of terraced miners' cottages. Fishing has also been important especially in the west at Sennen where the lifeboat is still housed. Tourism uses focus on the coast especially around Whitesand Bay. The pastures are still grazed by sheep and cattle, and horse-keeping is apparent.

Field and woodland pattern

Small, irregularly shaped fields of pasture are enclosed by a network of stone walls and Cornish hedges. This is internationally important Anciently Enclosed Land, with the underlying field pattern dating back to the Iron Age and Bronze Age; that is, up to 3,500 years, with a well-preserved pattern of subsequent modification and adaptation. The distinctive granite-faced hedgebanks, often with regular coursing and large 'grounders' or foundation boulders, and drystone walls form a complex net over the enclosed land of the area. Some are of Bronze Age origin; the prehistoric fields are smaller and more irregular than the 20th C pattern, which has resulted from piecemeal boundary removal. Woodland is limited mainly to small areas of willow carr. Hedges are generally without trees in this very exposed landscape.

Settlement pattern

The settlement pattern is dispersed with medieval hamlets or small farm settlements, with some isolated farms, many demonstrably the successors to late prehistoric settlements. Here, to a greater extent than anywhere else in Cornwall the present boundaries of farm holdings can be seen to preserve estates established in the early medieval (Dark Ages) period, which themselves part-fossilised farm holdings first established in the Middle Bronze Age. Granite farmsteads, with mainly prehistoric or early medieval origins, are at fairly regular intervals, marked by small tree groups. On the north coast there are two churchtown settlements; Zennor and Morvah, each with a square towered granite church and small cluster of houses and farmsteads, and hamlets such as Rosemergy, Trevega and Treen. Granite and slate roofing are the traditional building materials. There are two towns in the area, St Ives to the east, St Just to the west. St Just is another medieval churchtown settlement, which expanded very substantially in the early nineteenth century with the development of mining in the area. The extensive development of 19th century terraced cottages and more recently council houses have overlaid the former pattern of evenly-spaced former farmsteads and cottages. In the east, St Ives is focussed on and slopes eastwards towards St Ives Bay. It once supported a large fishing fleet but is now largely dependent on the seasonal tourist trade, and is popular for its fine beaches, picturesque narrow streets and attractive harbour. Much of the present form of the settlement relates to the development of mining and associated settlement in the nineteenth century, together with its development as a 'railway resort' of villas, hotels and guesthouses in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. Along the coastal road a linear pattern has developed including Pendeen, and Botallack. Caravan and campsites are evident, mainly focussing on the west coast or close to St Ives.

Transport pattern

The B3306 follows the break of slope adjacent to the high ground 1-2km inland from the coast. It forms the main street in most of the larger settlements. Minor roads run off this to the coast, often ending in dead ends, with few accessing the sea itself. The A30 runs to Lands End just to the south of the area. The South West Coast path runs the length of the coastline.

Historic features

An important aspect of the landscape pattern is the high concentration of ancient sites such as barrows,

CORNWALL AND ISLES OF SCILLY LANDSCAPE CHARACTER STUDY



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later prehistoric settlements and coastal cliff castles. These have a significant visual presence in the landscape and link with the pattern of ancient field enclosures and areas of rough ground, creating a strong identity for the area. The age and thus the importance of the field pattern was one of the factors for this area being designated an Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA). Rocky headlands at Gurnard's Head and Bosigran still bear evidence of fortification as Iron Age cliff castles. The mining heritage around St Just, the Pendeen area, Carn Galver, Rosewall Hill and St Ives is also important and forms distinctive features in the landscape. The importance of this industrial legacy is recognised by the area being included in the World Heritage Site.

Condition

The condition of the area has been maintained by its designation as an Environmentally Sensitive Area through grants made available for habitat and other restoration. However, overall the area is in poor to moderate condition and Cornish hedges are in poor repair in places. Some heath and marginal land still has low management input. Scrub and bracken has invaded coastal heath and pasture. There is recent infill in the villages often with inappropriate modern estate-type development quite out of landscape character with this distinctive, exposed, coastal landscape.

Pressures

Farm intensification and arable conversion could lead to loss of existing field boundaries changing the ancient field pattern.

Reduction and changes in land management could lead to abandoning semi-natural habitats.

Widening of roads to accommodate tourist traffic.

Potential change could come from additional visitors to World Heritage Site, coastal footpath, open access policies.

Pressure for affordable housing in villages.

Change from farming hamlets to holiday homes, farm building conversions, losing link between farmsteads and the land they worked.

Invasive species on abandoned pasture and in stream valleys.

Aesthetic and sensory

This coastal strip is exposed to the full force of the Atlantic Ocean and is very strongly influenced by the sea's character and weather patterns as well as the hard rock nature of the land exhibited by the wild coastline. Balancing nature's strength is evidence of long settlement by man with the intricate pattern of fields and granite buildings which give a strong sense of history and time. Around Pendeen and St Just is a disturbed landscape of contrasts. The now largely redundant mining landscape is left as a record of a previously industrious community. Stark buildings stand against the backdrop of the ocean, sombre and eerie in a fog, but bright and hard in clear weather with distant views to the Isles of Scilly and busy shipping lanes around Land's End. St Ives is important as the home of many important 20th century painters, sculptors and potters, and this has recently been underscored by the opening of the much publicised St Ives Tate Gallery, above Porthmeor Beach. The artists of the area have created images which have become icons of the local landscape, for example, the early works of Ben Nicholson and the seascapes of Alfred Wallis, amongst many others.

CORNWALL AND ISLES OF SCILLY LANDSCAPE CHARACTER STUDY



Landscape Character Area Description

Distinctive features

The distinctive features in this landscape are the large number of prehistoric monuments, the various distinctive prehistoric field patterns and hedges, granite farmsteads, large boulders used in structures and lying in fields, the mining structures and features, the exposed coast and heath. The churches at Zennor, Morvah and St Just form local landmarks, as does Pendeen Watch Lighthouse, the monumental chimney stack on Cape Cornwall and The Crowns engine houses on the cliffs at Botallack. Sennen Cove with its sand dunes contrasts with other parts of the area.

Visions and objectives

This is a very special landscape with a strong sense of identity due mainly to the clearly perceptible historic landscape character. Due to its open and bleak nature any change could ruin the integrity of this Landscape Character Area and therefore the objective should be to conserve as well as seeking to minimise any impact.

Planning and Land Management Guidelines

Prepare settlement plans to manage change and extended development.

Prepare guidelines on design for new buildings, extensions and farm diversification schemes.

Prepare design statements or seek design statements for development sites.

Preserve distinctive prehistoric / historic landscape character by conserving and recording all historic features.

Enhance the WHS by conserving the mining heritage and developing integrated visitor management plans.

Support the objectives of the ESA.

Integrate any proposals with the AONB management plan.

Optimise the biodiversity interest by appropriate land management especially on the coastal heath, the Fen BAP and control of alien species in the valleys.