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THROWLEIGH COMMON, THROWLEIGH, DEVON

A 'Premier Archaeological Landscape'

within Dartmoor National Park

Phil Newman

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Summary

The settlement and parallel reave system on Throwleigh Common was surveyed by the English Heritage Investigation and Survey team (Exeter) at a scale of 1:2500 between April - May 2007. Although previously investigated by aerial archaeologists, an accurate ground survey was required to understand the full extent of the remains following designation of the area as a Premier Archaeological Landscape (PAL) in 2006, under the Moor Futures, Moorland Vision project. A total of twenty-five hut circles was recorded within the 49ha-reave system, which together make up one of the better preserved, though smaller examples of this type on Dartmoor, and includes some of the finest surviving hut circles. .

Location

Throwleigh Common is on the eastern side of the Dartmoor upland towards the NE corner of the National Park, situated on the edge of the open moorland as it reaches its interface with the enclosed pasture and woodlands of the border country. The western side of the common is formed by gently-sloping ground at the foot of Kennon Hill but the majority of the prehistoric remains sit on a moderate east-facing slope between 300m and 380m AOD, with Shilley Pool to the north and Shilston Tor to the south. To the east, the slope steepens as it approaches the enclosed land and on the SW side there is an area of bog at the head of an un-named tributary of Forder Brook. Geologically the area is securely within the Dartmoor granite mass (GSGB sheet 324), the surface of the southern sector being densely populated with clutter.

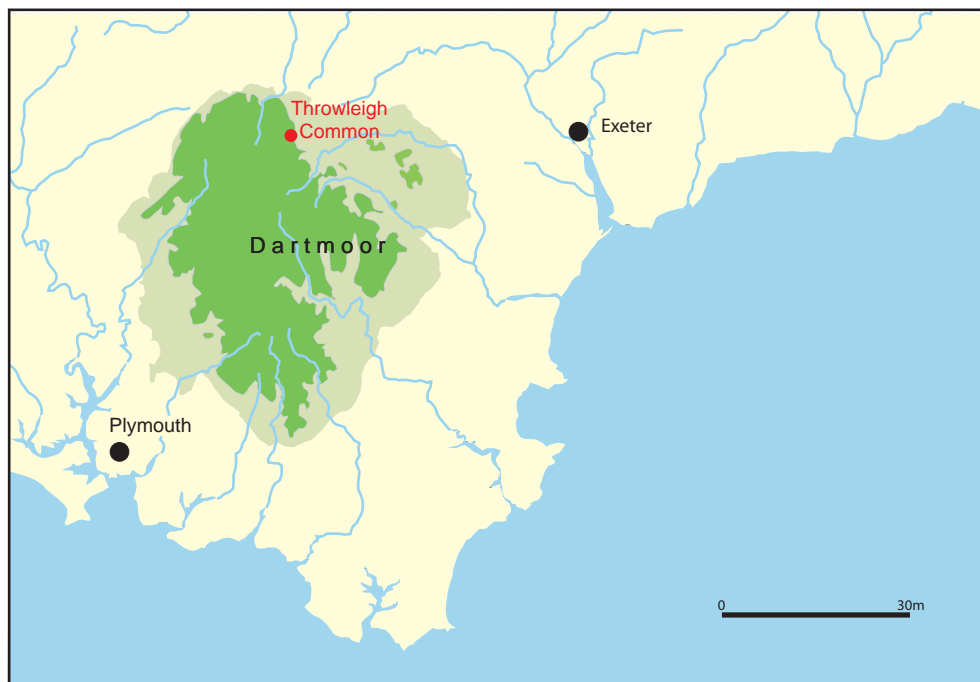


Figure 1. Location map.

Archaeological context

Within the area described lies a small though very well-preserved prehistoric reave system, with 25 associated stone hut circles, or round houses. Although no dating material has ever been recovered from this site, comparison with others on Dartmoor of similar character, would place the origins of the reaves and hut circles within the first half of the second millennium BC (Fleming 1988, 105).

Fourteen out of the total of 25 hut circles are depicted on the 1st-edition 25-inch Ordnance Survey (OS) map of the 1880s, but they appear to have been overlooked by 19th-century antiquaries, with no recorded excavations having taken place. This is surprising considering their size and ease of access. The small self-contained reave system has also, surprisingly, been discussed only briefly by more recent researchers, when compared with those at Dartmeet, Kestor, Rippon Tor and the Plym valley. Andrew Fleming's investigation was limited to a short description, probably based on available aerial photographs. His discussion is a little vague but interestingly he considered that the outer intake of the Throwleigh Common system was later attached to the Kennon Hill reave, which joins it from the west, making it earlier than the more irregular enclosures on the east slope of Kennon Hill (Fleming 1983, 236). In the 1980s the area was plotted from air photos by RCHME as an early project in the National Mapping Programme. Although a high proportion of the relevant features were recorded, the plan is somewhat inaccurate with errors of up to 46m in places. It is possible that these early plotters had problems with the undulating terrain and the central section of the system is distorted as a result. Butler's more recent AP plot (1991, Fig 39.1) suffers from a similar problem of an unacceptable level of accuracy. Although both surveys have proved useful as a reconnaissance aid, neither can be relied upon for accurate information on the true layout of the system.

Throwleigh Common is currently affected by blanket vegetation cover, especially bracken and gorse. Survey of any kind is therefore limited to a short window in the late winter. The present GPS survey was undertaken in March-April 2007, when exceptionally good weather provided an opportunity to explore the area while the bracken was down and the light was good. However, some areas covered by impenetrable gorse, could not be investigated as thoroughly as others. The survey was undertaken in response to the area having been designated a Premier Archaeological Landscape (PAL) under the multi-agency *Moor Futures, Moorland Vision* project, and the resulting need for accurate information to aid future management of the resource.

The parallel reave system

The reaves comprise linear banks which form the boundaries of rectilinear plots, varying in size. The majority of the reaves are of a subtle appearance and survive as low turf covered stone banks of up to 0.5m high on average and between 1.5 and 3m wide. In some places orthostatic stones are visible. Where reaves run along the contour, especially on the steeper slopes, soil creep has caused the banks to form into lynchets, some up to 1m high. Excavation of reaves elsewhere on Dartmoor (Fleming 1988 figs 42, 49, 50, 52) has revealed them to have once been well-built stone walls; some were double-faced banks which may have supported hedges, while other, less substantial, examples were simple dry-stone walls.

The extent of the system is defined by two reaves; the dominant of these is first traceable at SX 6565 9110, just SW of the modern enclosed land from where it runs on an approximately straight, though in places wavy, NE to SW course in the direction of Kennon Hill. At SX 6524 9074 this reave acts as the terminal for a second reave which meets it at right angles then runs SSE, roughly in the direction of Shilstone

Tor, for approximately 600m, before fading from view in a lower lying area, which has been disturbed by medieval tinnerns. The co-axial field system is contained within an area of approximately 49ha for which this junction forms the western corner. Although within the system, adjacent reaves run approximately parallel, giving plots a regular appearance, overall the system is not as tidy as some others on Dartmoor such as Horridge Common or Kestor; the alignments of the sub-divisions do not relate precisely at right angles to the terminal reaves and some of the reaves run on a serpentine course. A lane, consisting of two reaves on a close parallel course between 5 and 6m apart, forms a straight SW – NE transect across the outer plots to the west but deviates NNE at an obtuse angle as it enters the central area.

The most likely construction sequence is that the section on the lower and mid slopes, associated with most of the houses, was in place first and that the larger elongated sub-divisions to the west were added later as a programme of expansion. The lanes may also have formed part of the expansion. It is by no means certain where the houses fit in this sequence but it may be relevant that the lane deviates to cut obliquely across the prevailing axis of the system. This may have been done to provide pre-existing huts (4-8) close access to the lane. However, it is equally plausible that the huts were so positioned to be close to a pre-existing lane. Fleming's fieldwork and excavations (1988) on Holne Moor revealed that huts apparently associated with reaves, could pre-date or post-date them as the development of the settlement and the reave system evolved in parallel. More recently, Johnston has argued conversely that many elements of the field system at Kestor, 4.5km to the south of Throwleigh Common, were deliberately laid out to incorporate existing structures (Johnston 2005, 13-14). The existence of timber structures and earlier stone phases for individual huts as excavated at Holne Moor is a further consideration in the sequence but cannot be resolved through field survey.

Possibly the latest addition to the reave system was the quadrant shaped, curving enclosure, together with its sub-divisions and hut circles, which utilises the junction of two existing reaves forming an acute angle, near the centre of the system; one of these pre-existing boundaries forms the south side of the lane discussed above. The curving outer wall of this later enclosure is the most substantial stony bank in the system, currently spread to over 3m wide in places, and quite different in character to other elements of the complex, containing a massive quantity of stone. This may indicate a chronologically different style of construction adding weight to its possible later origin.

Beyond the northern terminal reave a series of fragmentary stony banks extends towards Shilley Pool. Although connected to the terminal reave they do not wholly conform to the alignment or morphology of the main system. The first section is attached at right angles to the terminal, but after 50m deviates at a sharp angle into a curving bank which gradually peters out. A little further NW is an irregular and incomplete enclosure and another straight reave which runs down the moderately sloping valley of Shilley Pool. The incompleteness makes it extremely difficult to interpret these remains, but its likely they may represent a separate phase of activity.

Hut circles

The hut circles are mostly very large and, in some cases, substantial structures which compare with examples elsewhere on Dartmoor at Kestor, Holne Moor and Birch Tor. All the huts have been terraced into the eastern slope of the common where circular platforms have been cut, onto which the structures were built. Nearly all the huts therefore have a crescentic scarp on the western side defining one half of a circular platform and all have level interiors. Surviving fabric suggests that the majority of the huts had walls constructed with both inner and outer facings, comprising granite slabs with flat surfaces set on edge to form concentric rings. The space between was filled with smaller stones and probably some earth. The thickest of these walls is that on hut 22 at 2.3m though some others are much less at 1.2m. Entrances, where surviving, are on the SE circumference of the huts. Several have door jambs surviving, either *in situ* or toppled. These consist of upright posts as at huts 1 and 13, or edge set slabs on huts 17 and 22.



Figure 2. Hut 22.
View looking east.

There is a notable contrast in the quantity of stone surviving in some of the huts compared to others. Huts 5, 6, 13, 19-22 all appear to have the stone of their walls present if not always *in situ*. Huts 7 (the largest), 14, 15, 17, 18, 22-25 all have stone missing. The latter three examples may be explained as a result of robbing by later wall and road builders, but for those at higher altitude, further from the modern enclosures, the same fate is unlikely. There is therefore the possibility that robbing was contemporary with the occupation of the settlement with stone from abandoned houses being used to refurbish or construct others. Hut 22 has indications of having been re-furbished in the post-prehistoric period. The interior is stone free and level and the inner wall face is intact.



Figure 3. Door
jambs *in situ*
Hut 1.

Some associations between individual huts and the field



*Figure 4. Hut 13.
View looking east*

system are apparent. Several huts are associated with sections of reave including hut 3, which is at the junction of two reaves, and huts 9 and 11 which are built against reaves. A cluster of 5 huts (4-8) appear to be deliberately sited in the vicinity of the walled lane which runs across the reave system. At least five examples (6, 7, 14, 17, 22) have attached small enclosure plots, none of which appear to conform to the coaxial scheme of the reave system, though often parts of it were utilized, suggesting the plots at least were later additions. Hut 6 for example utilizes a corner where two reaves join and hut 22 sits within a D shape enclosure where a straight reave has been adapted to form its long side. Short sections of walling suggest further such arrangements at huts 1, 13-15, 19 and 20. A further six huts (8, 10, 16, 18, 21, 24 and 25) are associated with the reave system only in that they are contained within it and are not attached to any surviving wall although timber fences, as recorded by Fleming's excavations on Holne Moor (1988, Fig 56), may have existed. Hut 23 however, at the far south of the area is detached from the entire field system. The existence of this hut and of huts 24 and 25, also near the road may indicate that the field system once extended further down the slope into the enclosed land. This area, east of the modern road, is believed to be as yet unexplored archaeologically.

Other archaeological evidence

A number of mounds exist within the reave system. Some, such as those in the vicinity of house 22, are probably the result of clearance in this very stony terrain. Butler (1991, 198) has suggested that a series of irregular turf mounds to the west of the site are prehistoric cairns. However, the only strong candidate is the example at SX 6542 9067. This is a circular mound of 7.5m diameter. It is almost flat at less than 0.5m high and contains some but very little, visible stone.

Post-prehistoric evidence on Throwleigh Common is mostly of an industrial nature.

The medieval longhouse depicted by Butler (1991, Fig 39.1) at SX 6592 9075 is an unlikely example which on investigation appears to be an uneven hollow, containing no evidence of a building.

The Bradford Pool leat, dug in the 16th century (Costello 1981) traverses the site from south to north. To the south it emerges from the boggy area on the unnamed tributary then follows the contour for most of its course, though occasionally dipping in height. North of the common it dips suddenly to disappear into the enclosed land. The leat consists of a dry channel of up to 1m wide with a substantial upcast bank on the downslope side. It cuts through several reaves as it transects the reave system, and though miraculously avoiding hut circles, it has come very close in two places (huts 13 & 17).

Perhaps the earliest evidence for the extraction of stone on Throwleigh Common is a series of small pits in the vicinity of Shilston Tor (not recorded) but a much larger quarry at SX 6586 9104 appears to have been a major source of stone. Its absence on early edition 1:2500 scale maps strongly suggests it has origins in the early 20th century. The quarry is currently inaccessible having been fenced off for safety but a very large spoil heap is present to the east.

A number of sunken trackways running across Throwleigh Common, are recorded on 1st-edition OS maps. Vestiges of these tracks survive in places as sunken channels. The clearest of these is just south of the large quarry and ascends the hill to the south west. Near the modern road parts of this track are currently obscured by gorse, but further up the slope it still serves as an E – W route through the tall bracken in the summer months.

Conclusion

The Throwleigh Common parallel reave system and associated hut circles is one of the best-preserved of the smaller examples on Dartmoor. Although its altitude, between 300-380m, places it on the higher moors, its location near the edge of the open moorland may provide some indication of how Dartmoor's eastern escarpment appeared before the dense patchwork of medieval enclosures came to dominate the area at only a slightly lower altitude. Immediately to the NE of the common the coaxial layout appears to be fossilized into the fields of Moor Farm and Clannaborough, but to the north and south a completely different layout has been adopted, where post-medieval dry-stone walls suggest more recent intakes. While it is not yet possible to be certain of the sequential details for huts and reaves, their clear associations would at least make them approximately contemporary. The size, and in some cases the state of preservation of the hut circles, makes this one of the most impressive hut groups on Dartmoor, comparable with huts at Kestor and in a very similar topographical context, typical of the eastern edge of the upland.

This survey has focussed only on the area currently designated as a Premier Archaeological Landscape. Further survey of reaves and settlements to the west, on Kennon Hill, and to the south, at Buttern, if combined with existing material for Kestor, Shovel Down and Thornworthy, would contribute greatly in establishing

additional understanding of the context of Throwleigh Common and would offer an opportunity for a re-assessment of prehistoric eastern Dartmoor in general. Further survey should therefore be considered a priority.

Appendix: Individual hut circle descriptions with dimensions

In the following descriptions, where insufficient stone fabric survives, the diametric measurement of the hut is taken between the centre points of the banks which now form the remains of the walls. Where the fabric of the walls does survive the term 'internal' diameter is used to indicate the measurement across the diameter of the hut between the inner wall faces.

Hut 1 SX 6572 9108

The hut is contained within a small roughly rectangular enclosure. It has a diameter of 8m with walls up to 3m thick and 0.5m high. The entrance survives on the SE of the circumference with two jambs in situ of 0.7m high. The opening is 1.2m wide. The wall remains consist of fairly robust earthen bank containing some, mostly displaced, stone.

Hut 2 SX 6567 9109

A possible, though much smaller hut. It comprises a stony turf covered low mound with a central hollow. The maximum spread of the mound is 6.5m by 0.4m high and the hut may have been 4.5m diameter.

Hut 3 SX 6560 9103

Built into a T junction of two reaves. It is an even ring of earth and stone with a level interior and a diameter of 8m by 3m by 0.5m high. There is a possible entrance gap on the SE of the circumference.

Hut 4 SX 6573 9093

A subtle circular bank within a corner formed by two reaves joining obliquely. It has a level interior and a diameter of 10.4m. There is a slight crescentic scarp forming the upslope side of the hut. Very little stone from the walls is now visible.

Hut 5 SX 6569 9089

A 9m diameter hut with a level interior and crescentic 0.5m scarp on the upslope side. The surviving walls consist of earth and mostly displaced stone though some evidence of the inner face remains in situ. The bank averages 2m thick by 0.4m high.

Hut 6 SX 6569 9085

The hut is built into a corner where two sections of reave connect. An additional short section of wall places the hut into a small enclosure of approximately 20m by 8m. A fine circle of stones survives which represents the inner face of the hut and has an internal diameter of 7.8m. There is some evidence of the outer face in situ and the thickness may have been 1.2m. The highest section of wall stands to 0.5m. The hut has a level interior containing some tumbled stone.

Hut 7 SX 6566 9084

The largest hut in the group is attached to a 0.3ha enclosure on the SE side and a reave on the NW side. Considering the size of the hut it appears to have been robbed of stone; only the eastern side survives to any extent. The diameter of the hut is 11.8m and the scarp on the western, upslope side is 0.8m high. The surviving section of wall is 3m thick and 0.3m high and is a stony, turf covered bank. There is some evidence of an outer face *in situ*. The floor of the hut is level and contains some displaced stone. A probable entrance on the SE side has one jamb surviving.

Hut 8 SX 6570 9080

Levelled into the slope. A subtle stony bank of 3m thick by 0.6m high. There is a shallow scarp on the western upslope side of the platform and the diameter of the hut is approximately 10m. The entrance survives on the SE side with two jambs *in situ*.

Hut 9 SX 6564 9068

Built against a wall on the interior of a rectangular enclosure. The hut is a 6.6m diameter stony ring with a level interior. The bank is 2m thick by 0.3m high though the structure appears disturbed.

Hut 10 SX 6565 9067

Contained within the same enclosure as hut 9. The hut has a diameter of 5.2m with a bank of 2.5m thick by 0.4m high. The hut has a level interior and there is much displaced stone although two very small possible door jambs survive *in situ*.

Hut 11 SX 6573 9063

A possible hut sited at the junction of two reaves. It comprises a 7m diameter stony ring with a 3m wide by 0.4m high bank.

Hut 12 SX 6574 9063

A smaller hut contained within a rectangular enclosure. It has a diameter of 5.8m with a bank of 2.5m thick by 0.5m high. It has a level interior and most of the visible stone has been displaced.

Hut 13 SX 6579 9057

Sited just west of a post-medieval leat which avoids the hut. A substantial hut which has a high proportion of both its inner and outer stone faces of the walls *in situ*. It is constructed from large slabs of granite set on edge to form a wall which still stands to up to 0.8m high by 1.4m thick. The internal diameter of the hut is 7.3m and the floor is level. The two door jambs remain upright on either side of the entrance and consist of 1m high granite posts. The entrance is also lined with granite slabs across the thickness of the walls. A tree is growing from the within the walls on the east side.

Hut 14 SX 6576 9057

A 6.2m stony ring of 2m wide. The hut has a level interior and some orthostats but most of the stone is displaced.

Hut 15 SX 6577 9056

A 7.2m diameter circle of edge set stones, probably represent the inner skin of the hut walls. The level interior contains much displaced stone but several orthostats survive along the wall. An entrance on the SE side has one collapsed granite jamb of 1.1m long.

Hut 16 SX 6577 9078

A substantial stony bank of 8m diameter by 3m thick. The hut is levelled into the slope with a 0.5m crescentic scarp on the western upslope side.

Hut 17 SX 6579 9072

A disturbed hut with partially remaining walls built into the corner of an enclosure. The western side of the hut is visible as a shallow scarp. The walls on the eastern side are also much denuded. There is however a substantial entrance on the SE side with large edge set granite jambs.

Hut 18 SX 6575 9073

The hut is terraced into the slope with a 0.6m scarp on the western side and has a diameter of 5.5m. Some stones of the walls appear to be in situ but on the whole the hut has little fabric surviving suggesting that stone may have been robbed.

Hut 19 SX 6582 9075

The hut has a clear partially surviving inner wall face of granite with an internal diameter of 6.5m. Outside this wall there is a substantial and probably much spread stony bank measuring 5.5m thick by 0.8m high.

Hut 20 SX 6583 9076

The hut is terraced into the slope with a 0.9m scarp on the western side. The diameter of the hut is 8.8m by 3.5m thick and it comprises a stony turf covered bank. There is an entrance on the SE side with two small jambs in situ.

Hut 21 SX 6584 9075

This hut comprises a substantial stony bank of 4.3m thick by 0.8m high. It is terraced into the slope with a scarp of 0.7m on the western side. The interior diameter is 7.7m. Little stone remains visible above the turf covering.

Hut 22 SX 6585 9066

A massively built stone hut built into the corner of a 'D' shape enclosure. The inner wall face is almost intact comprising large edge set slabs of granite while the outer face, though less well preserved, is extant in places. The walls are 2.3m thick and up to 0.8m high. The internal diameter is 10.1m. The entrance survives on the SE side formed by a cutting through the thickness of the wall, lined with slabs. There is very little displaced stone associated with this hut which together with its fine condition suggests it has been re-furbished and re-used at some time in the post-prehistoric period. Evidence of feather and tare granite cutting on one of the wall slabs demonstrates that the wall was partially robbed for stone, probably after c. AD1800. A tree is currently rooted in the wall beside the entrance.

Hut 23 SX 6592 9022

The southernmost hut of the group appears isolated from the main sections of the settlement and field system, sited beside the modern road. The hut is cut into a deep hollow with a steep scarp on the western side of 1.4m high. The diameter is 10.1m and the walls have some edge set slabs and orthostats remaining in situ. The tallest of these is 1.1m high.

Hut 24 SX 6598 9070

Near the modern road. The hut is cut into the slope with a 1m high scarp on the western side. Approximately 30% of the inner wall skin survives in the form of edge set blocks of granite. The diameter is approximately 9.4m and surviving sections of bank are 2.5m thick.

Hut 25 SX 6601 9074

A circular earthen platform of between 10 and 12m diameter with a back scarp of 0.9m high, and a very small quantity of stone is all that is visible of this hut sited just east of the modern road. The site is thickly covered by bracken.

Hut 26 SX 654- 908-

This hut recorded by Butler (1991, 197) could not be found. However, this area is currently covered by dense gorse.

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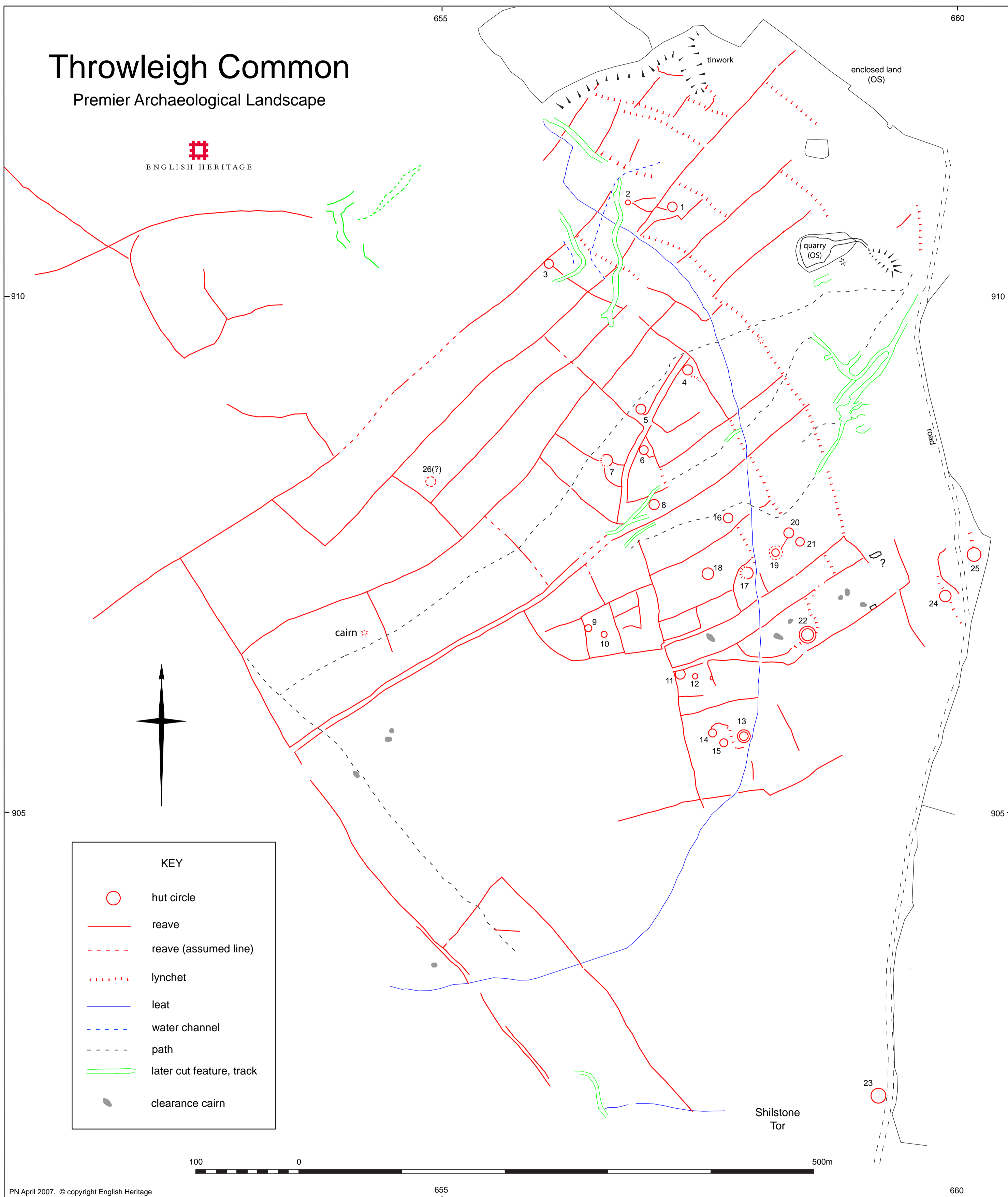
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Throwleigh Common

Premier Archaeological Landscape



KEY

- hut circle
- reave
- reave (assumed line)
- lynchet
- leat
- water channel
- path
- later cut feature, track
- clearance cairn