Military

Defining attributes

Extensive modern military complexes, securely fenced, including disused Second World War airfields. Some complexes are too limited in extent to be mapped in this Type; others have been considered to be secondary to more dominant historic Landscape Character Types.

Four subtypes have been identified (Herring 1998) and mapped in secondary work in the Lynher Valley HLC and the north Cornish coast HLC undertaken for the Atlantic Coast and Valleys Project (Herring and Tapper 2002: Val Baker 2003).

- Military airfields
- Barracks
- Artillery complexes
- Military communications

Principal historical processes

Apart from military airfields (most of which are of the Second World War), most blocks of land of this Type are in the extreme south-east corner of Cornwall, near Plymouth and its naval dockyard and associated military complexes. This area has a long military history, Plymouth having been an important naval port since the later medieval period, but the present complexes are essentially modern in character, with the exception of Tregantle fort, which reuses a mid-Victorian site, and Pendennis which has remains from all periods since Henry VIII’s time.

Cornwall has had important partly defensive sites since early prehistory. Neolithic hill-top enclosures are found on the granite uplands while Iron Age hillforts and contemporary cliff castles are more widely dispersed. All of these site types are now thought to have been less involved with defence than once assumed. They are seen as places for gathering communities together and for displaying status and symbols. Farming hamlets enclosed by ditch and rampart, known as rounds, are found throughout Anciently Enclosed Land and date from the Iron Age to the Romano-British period, with some being used into the Early Medieval period. Later medieval castles and post-medieval forts survive in towns, on the coast, along strategic routes, and at formerly important residences.

First World War airfields have reverted to agricultural land (HMS Bonython near Mullion; airships) and Crugmeer (near Padstow). Squadrons undertaking coastal defence, shipping protection, reconnaissance and bombing missions flew from the several WW2 airfields on the north coast, Davidstow Moor and the Lizard. Most were maintained for some time after the war, being used for coastal defence and training, before being either abandoned or used for civilian purposes (Davidstow Moor briefly as a car racing track). A few have been maintained by the military: Culdrose, St Mawgan, Predannack (small scale use) and Cleave (reused as the base for GCHQ Bude).

Typical historical and archaeological components

Security concerns mean knowledge of active military sites is limited, but the Military areas plotted in the HLC are principally airfields (with runways, taxiing circuits, hangars, service sheds and secure perimeter fences and guarded gates), or radar and satellite stations, barracks and military fuel depots (near Torpoint).

Principal locations

Military complexes extensive enough to be plotted in HLC are typically former airfields (with a north coast bias in their distribution) or modern barracks and depots in the area associated with Plymouth Docks.

Variability

Each Cornish installation had a particular function and therefore has a particular form.
Past interaction with other Types

Military installations are normally impositions by the State on a landscape for strategic reasons and interaction with other Types is minimal beyond service relationships (victualling, recreation, some accommodation, etc).

Evidential value

As defence installations, the modern components are generally secret, but military features from earlier periods have received considerable attention from military historians.

As products of the nation state reaching down to the local level, military installations have considerable historical importance. The inherently competitive nature of warfare means that features change more rapidly in this sphere of human activity than most others and there is scope for much detailed archaeological research. English Heritage is supporting much archaeological recording and characterisation of later 20th century military remains.

Historical value

Unless reusing earlier military sites (e.g. GCHQ on Cleave airfield) the evidence for time-depth is confined to earlier features (hedges, tracks etc) captured within secure fencing and not obliterated.

Communal value

Although fairly small pockets of land (excepting Culdrose and St Mawgan), the Type dominates both physically and, through security devices like fences, psychologically, the areas where it exists. Bases are accepted as traditionally appropriate features of the Plymouth district. The role of those who built and operated from airfields and other WW2 installations in defeating fascism is increasingly respected.

Aesthetic value

A Type which contributes to landscape character disproportionately to its scale.

Potential for amenity and education

While operational, there will be little or no amenity use, but once decommissioned military sites have considerable potential.

Survival

As working installations, mainly with few earlier features or components, they survive well.

Vulnerability

As noted above, earlier features are vulnerable to alteration or removal by changes in current installations. The armed forces take their responsibilities to historic buildings seriously.

Forces for change

Defence cuts at government level threaten the existence of current installations. Decommissioning may involve the removal of dangerous or sensitive features. Perceptions of recent military landscape are changing rapidly as time elapsed from their currency increases and the fears surrounding their need are replaced by new sentiments.

Safeguarding the Type

The MoD landscape managers should be informed of the historic importance of the bases and there should be close consultations on decommissioning to ensure the most thoughtful and imaginative reuse of these important complexes.

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