

## **Deborah Griffiths**

### **Description of the longhouses at the deserted medieval settlement of Houndtor.**

This is the deserted medieval settlement at Houndtor, which is in Manaton parish, but not very far away from Higher Uppacott and it's a deserted, stone built settlement that was probably constructed around about 1250 AD and then was deserted about 150 years later - so there's a little bit of an overlap with Higher Uppacott, this was just going out of use as Higher Uppacott was really being born. The buildings here are very similar in their form to Higher Uppacott, they are the traditional Dartmoor farmhouse type which is the longhouse, but a much cruder version, and they've got all the essential characteristics of a longhouse: so it's a long rectangular building which is built into a hill slope, so you have a higher end and a lower end and it's essentially divided into two halves by doorways in the long side, which are opposing each other and create a passage across the width of the building. And then in what we call the lower end is the area that's used for accommodating cattle, and then at the higher end is the domestic end, where people were living. This site was excavated by an amateur archaeologist called Mrs Minter from Torquay back in the 1960s and it's thanks to those excavations that first of all we realised how significant longhouses are and secondly that we can actually see how they were when we visit here. So in this particular building and in the other longhouses you can actually see the central drain, which is running down the middle of the lower end, and you can see also in the higher end the flat stone which would have been the hearth stone for an open fire - so again, when it was first built, Higher Uppacott would have had those attributes as well. Where this differs from Higher Uppacott is the scale: it's a much smaller building, but it's also much more crudely constructed, the walls are drystone walls, which means there is no mortar used to hold the stones together...and the walls were probably fairly low with the roof sitting on top of them, so it would have been a single storey structure, no evidence of any windows but they may have been there, but certainly none anywhere recognisable. And so you would have had a low dark building which would have had the smoke from the open hearth billowing around at one end and some cattle aroma billowing around at the other end, so it's probably fairly stuffy in here, but there's a very intimate relationship clearly visible here between people and their animals. Like Higher Uppacott there is this little room at the higher end which is buried deeply into the hillside, which we call an inner room: it's not heated and we're not entirely sure what its purpose is, it's either a kind of retiring room

for members of the family, or else it's a store, but as a store it would be particularly damp: it would [be] pretty horrible as a retiring room for the same reason.

The settlement of Houndtor probably came into existence in the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of land hunger, so the lower lands were filling up so people got pushed onto marginal lands; and it was deserted around about 1400 when the trends reversed. The Black Death which came into Devon in the 1340s undoubtedly reduced the population, and at the same time the climate got worse, it got colder and wetter, which meant that people were able to desert these marginal areas and move back down into the lowlands; so it's only here for about 150 years but it does have, as I said before, this little overlap with Higher Uppacott.

The interesting thing is that when you visit here it's very much a moorland setting, so you've got gorse and heather and bracken and things, and it's quite difficult to believe that in medieval times people were actually ploughing the land just outside the settlement and they were growing cereal crops here, they were growing rye and they were growing oats, and Mrs Minter's excavations actually discovered some remains of some charred oats, so around about here would have been arable fields, each longhouse has its own little garden, so they'd be growing vegetables and things like that, and really quite remarkable to think that was all going on 750 years ago.