

Tregonning Hill

Time: Allow 1½ - 2 hours.

Going: Moderate climb to the top of the hill. Easy walking on top.

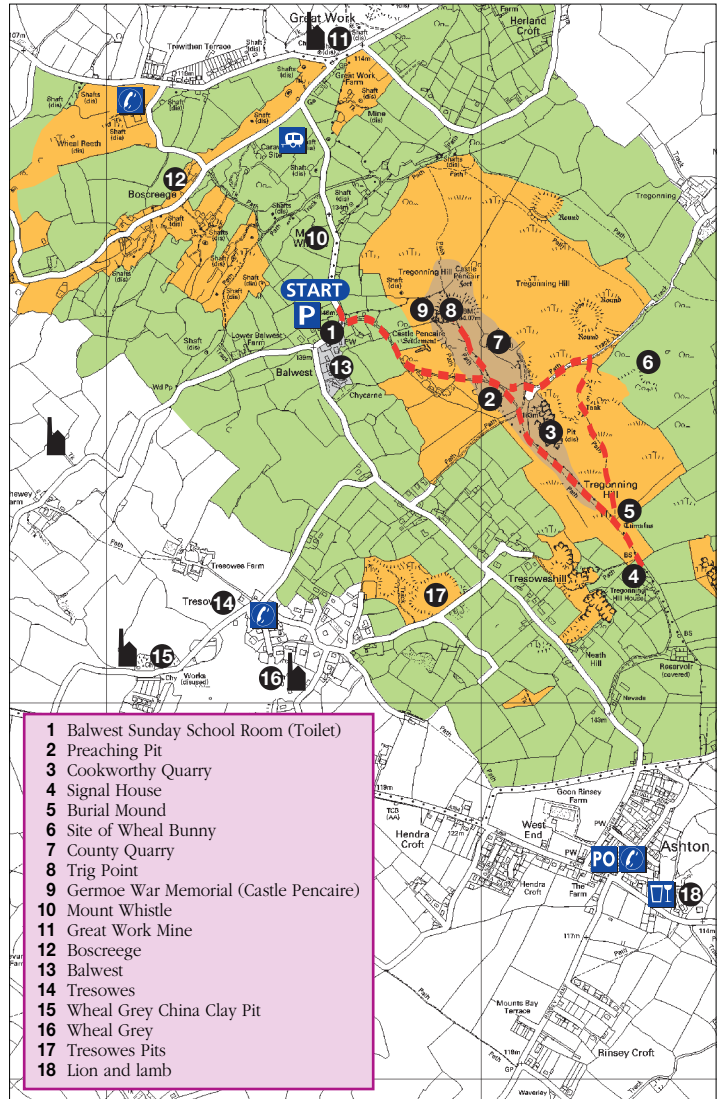
Length: 3 miles.

Location: Take the A394 Penzance-Helston Road. At Ashton, take the Balwest road next to the Post Office. Balwest is about 1 mile up the road.

Parking: Roadside parking is difficult. There is a small car park behind Balwest Sunday School Room and adjoining cemetery.

Time: Outside the main entrance to Balwest Sunday School Room.

Refreshments: The nearest shops and pubs are at Godolphin and Ashton.



Choose your day well for your climb up Tregonning Hill and you'll be rewarded with stunning views over Mounts Bay, the Lizard and beyond. It's the highest summit in the area and from the Bronze Age has been an important feature shaped by man. Old meets new on this walk, from Castle Pencaire to modern communication. Located in the centre of a once thriving mining area, the hill was an important resource too, with its china clay pits and stone quarries. Now nature is taking over once more and part of the hill is designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Start your walk at the hamlet of Balwest. From the car park entrance, cross the road and go right. Almost immediately turn left onto a grassy mound before the corner.

In Cornish *bal* or *ball* means a group of mines working in close proximity. Balwest derived its name from the treasure house of the Godolphins, which as early as 1540 was employing 300 persons. In the Godolphin *bal* group were Great Work, Wheal Reeth, Wheal Breage, Bal an Dreath and Balwest, the most westerly of the group.

An application to the mineral lord in 1690 to drive a deep drainage tunnel (*adit*) at 160 feet into the Wheal Breage workings suggests that Balwest had been working for some time before this date. The mine was worked jointly by two local families, the Richards and the Polglases. In the early days of mining it was very common for small groups to work *pitches* such as Balwest independently. There is little visible evidence of mining here today, although the main shaft of the Balwest workings made a dramatic reappearance when the cap fell away a few years ago, just to the south of the lane leading to the hill. After much excavation, the shaft was recapped with concrete.

A long standing Balwest resident maintained that Balwest had once been called Barwest and called his house by this old name. The name comes from an elvan bar that runs through the hamlet and right up over the back of Tregonning Hill, where it was quarried for road stone.

The only Methodist Chapel in Germoe Parish is the Grade II listed chapel at Balwest, which was built in 1829 to accommodate the growing population of miners and their families. It replaced the smaller 1798 chapel thought to have been sited close by. One of the original trustees was Francis Carter, a brother to the notorious smuggler and privateer Harry Carter, the self styled *King of Prussia*.

The footpath onto Tregonning Hill is at the back of the grassy mound, away from the road. The first part is steady and firm underfoot, but the path quickly levels out before a second short steep climb. As you reach the top, take the first path on your left, which takes you to Germoe War Memorial. This is the highest point on the hill at 637 feet (194 metres) above sea level. It might not sound very high, but the views are stunning.



Balwest Methodist Church.

View towards Mounts Bay.



Tregonning Hill



Germoe War memorial profiled at sunset.



Castle Pencaire circles.

Centuries of history are laid out before you. To the south-west is the ancient village of Germoe with Mounts Bay spread out behind. St Michael's Mount with its castle is clearly visible near the coast. To the north is Leeds Shaft engine house of Great Work Mine nestling at the base of Godolphin Hill.

Germoe War Memorial is built on top of the great fort of Castle Pencaire, today just a large heap of stones and originally a Celtic stronghold from c.250 BC. A double ditch probably surrounded the fort and evidence of this can be seen on the northern side. Castle Pencaire would have overlooked a number of hut circles, of the two that are still visible, one measures about 70 yards in diameter. Within these circles, there would have been a number of smaller huts where the Celts lived and sheltered their animals from marauding wolves and other predators. The Celts were excellent farmers and field patterns dating back to this time can still be seen on the eastern slopes of the hill.

A Celtic chieftain probably gave his name to the hill, possibly *Conin + 'the homestead of Conin'*, which over the centuries has evolved into *Tregonning*. The nearby village of Carleen means *'the place of the fort'* and the name probably came from the Celtic word *caer* meaning *'fortified homestead'*.

Start to retrace your footsteps from Germoe War Memorial back to rejoin the other path. On your left is a small overgrown quarry known as County Quarry (please don't attempt to go near as the terrain is dangerous). During World War II, a plane crashed here when returning to base in worsening weather and all the crew were killed.

While on patrol at 10.22 hrs on the 26th September 1941, a Hudson spotter plane sighted a merchant vessel about 35 miles south-west of Belle Isle in the Bay of Biscay. Three Beaufort Bombers of 217 Squadron Coastal Command were dispatched at 11.50 hrs to attack what believed to be an enemy vessel. Two of the bombers were unable to find the vessel, the third bomber saw it but didn't attack.

Returning to base they broke formation. One plane landed at RAF Chivenor and another at St Eval. The third plane Beaufort MK1 No.W6483 failed to return. It had crashed on the edge of the County Quarry on Tregonning Hill at 17.05 hrs. A memorial gives their names as Pilot Officer JR Harrison 89822, Pilot Officer PF Opperman 100561, Sgt HL Carter 11622321 and Sgt DA Ryder 1255613.

Rejoin the path up from Balwest and go left towards a white building known as the Signal House. Just before another path joins from the left is a small opening on the right next to the path leading to the Preaching Pit.

For many years on Whit Sundays, Ashton Methodists have congregated here for their Sunday School celebrations. Nowadays Christians of many denominations meet annually for ecumenical services. It is possible that this Preaching Pit was favoured as a smaller version of Gwennap Pit near Redruth, where John Wesley preached on many occasions. It is recorded that John Wesley visited Breage on the 18th August 1750 and again on the 10th September 1765 when he wrote in his diary *"I preached at Breage under a lovely shade of trees."*

Carry straight on towards the Signal House. The quarry on your left is Cookworthy Quarry where Cornwall's first china clay deposit was discovered in 1746.

Round to the south-east are excellent views towards Helston and the Lizard. When the weather is clear enough you should be able to make out the satellite dishes at Goonhilly, Bosahan Wind Farm and Culdrose Naval

Air Station. To the north-east is Carleen, surrounded by the Wheal Vor mining complex. Further round to the north is Godolphin Cross with the television mast at Four Lanes on the distant hills.

William Cookworthy and China Clay

A Plymouth chemist named William Cookworthy had been searching for the right ingredients to perfect a recipe for hard-paste porcelain.

In 1746 Captain Nancarrow from Great Work Mine invited Cookworthy to stay with him at Godolphin. Whilst visiting the mine, Cookworthy saw the men were repairing the furnaces with clay. Enquiring about the source of the clay, he was told it was found on the slopes of Tregonning Hill.

Cookworthy took samples back with him to his laboratory. He found that when either petunse (*aluminium and potassium silicate*) + china stone, or kaolin (*aluminium silicate*) + china clay were fired together to a great heat, both combinations produced porcelain.

Cookworthy took leases on various clay pits on Tregonning Hill and evidence of these can still be seen today. Clay was exported from Porthleven to Plymouth, where Cookworthy had a small factory.

Tregonning Hill's clay contains dark specks of mica and was not of the finest quality. When purer clay was found at St. Austell two years later, the Tregonning clay industry declined but lasted until the early years of the 20th century.



Porthleven harbour today.

About 50 yards before the Signal House is a burial mound or cromlech on your left, now overgrown, but still distinctive.

Although the hill has never been excavated, we know from visible evidence that Bronze Age people lived here and were probably responsible for building the great fort of Castle Pencaire. In 1920, the Cornish historian Charles Henderson wrote about two cromlechs he had discovered here, both were constructed from large stones resting on two upright stones and were Bronze Age burial places. Sadly these have since been vandalised.

The Signal House perches on the eastern side of the hill with unbroken views out to sea and is now a private dwelling.

During the Napoleonic Wars, when France was planning to invade England, there was a beacon here. In case of a French landing, the beacon was to be lit as a signal to the British Fleet out beyond the horizon. If this happened, local inhabitants were under orders to burn all their fodder and corn, leave home and drive their cattle inland.

At the gate go over the stile and on the grass verge is a small boundary stone. Roughly shaped from granite. Two letters are incised on the stone, one on each side, denoting the owner of the land. The 'T' stands for Trelawney and the 'L' for the Dukes of Leeds.



Boundary stone, L for the Duke of Leeds on one side.



Boundary stone, T for Trelawney on the other.



Tregonning brick at the Helston Folk Museum.

Tregonning Hill

Return back over the stile and retrace your steps back past the cromlech. Take the next footpath to the right and after about 15 yards where you join another path go right. This takes you down the back of the hillside below the Germoe War Memorial.



Inside Helston Folk Museum.



Part dinner service presented to William Argall in 1893.

View to Godolphin Hill from Mount Whistle.

William Argall and brick making

In 1871, an experienced mine captain from Breage named William Argall, secured financial backing for a new project from two local iron founders William Harvey of Hayle and John Toy of Helston. He realised there was no great future or fortune to be made from exporting clay only, and so proposed switching to brickmaking. Kilns and drying sheds were built on the northern slopes of Tregonning Hill at Wheal Bunny.

The company expanded business in 1875, taking over the Tresowes and Wheal Grey setts, as well as building more kilns and brickmaking works near Tresowes Green. Two kinds of bricks were made, firebricks for hearths and building bricks. Each brick was incised 'Tregonning Hill'.

By 1890, William Argall and Company were controlling the whole area. A large source of clay had also been found in the Leeds pit. Looking down over the hill towards Germoe, the pits still remain, though are now filled with water and are naturally

revegetating with gorse. Also visible are some remains of the brick kilns.

When William Argall retired in 1893, he was presented with a dinner service said to be made from

Tregonning Hill clay. The Asiatic Pheasant pattern dinner service was specially

emblazoned with Argall's monogram WA surrounded by

Tregonning Hill. A few of the remaining pieces of the service are on display in Helston Folk Museum.



In the fields to your right was Wheal Bunny. No trace of the mine remains today, but you can see an old stone kiln – a remnant from the Tregonning Brick & Clay Works where building and fire bricks were made. *Before you reach the bottom of the hill, bear left up a path that takes you back to the Preaching Pit. Part way up stop and look behind you for another view of the kiln and the Lizard beyond. As you reach the brow of the hill, go straight across where the paths cross. Soon you join a hardcore path, here turn right. Follow this path along the ridge of the hill, then take the path back down to Balwest.*

Wildlife on Tregonning Hill

Tregonning Hill is best seen in the late summer or early autumn when the slopes are a blaze of purple heather and yellow gorse. The heather is mostly Ling and Bell heather, two species often confused, but easy to identify. Bell heather flowers first, it has large hanging red-purple blooms from May through to September, whereas Ling produces smaller pale lilac flowers from July that gradually turn brown.

Gorse thrives on the hill. Western gorse tends to grow among the heathers and European gorse around the old clay pits. Look out for *urts* or whortleberries. Better known as the Bilberry its blue-black fruits can be gathered from the wild in autumn.

Another plant to look for on the pathways is the Lawn Chamomile with its aromatic white summer flowers and finely dissected leaves. This plant is now considered Nationally Scarce because it has been rapidly disappearing from the wild in recent years.

Although West Cornwall was deforested in prehistoric times, some woodland plants are still found growing on almost treeless places. Wood-sorrel and Wood Anemone are examples of such plants found on Tregonning and Godolphin Hills, which have adapted to a living amid boulders and beneath the bracken and heather.

The old china clay quarries on the hill provide a less exposed habitat. The softer and more easily weathered granite helps to explain the existence of Western Liverwort, a plant so rare that in Britain it only grows on a few sites in Cornwall including Tregonning Hill. For this reason part of the hill is now designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), the highest European level of Nature Conservation status. The hill is also a Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

The ponds on Tregonning Hill are an important habitat for amphibians and insects, such as the Palmate Newt, Toad, Grass Snake and Adders. A variety of Dragonflies and Damselflies are found here including the Common Blue Damselfly and the Golden-ringed Dragonfly, which is bedecked in the Cornish colours of black and gold.

The hill is a great vantage point for bird watching. Choose your spot and your patience should be rewarded by an insight into the lives of the hunter and the hunted. Predators such as buzzards, kestrels and even hen harriers all hunt here for mice and other creatures.



Ling.



Bell heather.

Adder our only poisonous snake. It will only bite if provoked, but is best left alone.

