

“Tintagel Castle Archaeological Research Project”

Talk by Winn Scutt, English Heritage, January 2026



2026 kicked off with a Zoom talk by Winn Scutt on recent archaeological work on the headland at Tintagel. Winn is the curator of English Heritage properties in the West of England (some 80 sites) and he has had an interest in archaeology since childhood. He explained that the period previously called the “Dark Ages” is now generally referred to as “early medieval” and covers the very long period of 410 to 1066 AD.

Tintagel is located on a headland off the north Cornish coast and is connected to the mainland by a new bridge linking the inner and outer walls of the castle, offering spectacular views. The castle has long been associated with the legendary “King Arthur”.

English Heritage rarely conduct research work but Winn wanted to improve the interpretation of Tintagel. The site has been associated with King Arthur since the work of Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 1100s and the existing castle was built by Richard, Earl of Cornwall, in the 1230s. The whole site is a scheduled ancient monument and government consent had to be granted before excavation work could be carried out.

Previous archaeological work at Tintagel was led by Raleigh Radford in the 1930s and he exposed buried castle walls. Radford found a lot of high status pottery and glass, some from Greece, Turkey and Northern Africa. Unfortunately, his notes were destroyed by enemy action in World War 2 and in the 1990s a team from Glasgow University re-excavated the area uncovered by Radford.

In the 1980s a large fire destroyed a lot of vegetation at Tintagel, exposing a lot of rectangular buildings that were subsequently mapped by English Heritage. There were around 100 buildings identified altogether, some on the plateau, some on the slope.

The recent excavations began with trial trenches followed by extensive work on the steep southern terrace of the headland, away from the castle remains. Almost as soon as the turf was removed the tops of 1m thick walls were uncovered and three large buildings separated by a kind of “street” were found. A nearby midden contained masses of bone and organic material. The building stone had been quarried from the nearby cliff face and the finds were mostly late medieval although the discovery of “bar-lug” Cornish pottery from the 7th to 10th centuries AD indicate that Tintagel wasn’t just an early medieval and post 1230 site.

The discovery of nearly 2000 sherds of imported pottery as well as 18 pieces of glass and 77 metallic pieces confirm that the site was high status. There was also a lot of more locally produced ware as well as whetstones and a quern and the discovery of some prehistoric worked flint took the story back many more centuries.

One of the most exciting finds was an inscribed stone which may have been a window ledge. The lettering style seems to be from the 7th century and is difficult to interpret but appears to be Christian in tone.

All excavations at Tintagel, including this one, have uncovered pottery from the Mediterranean with Greek amphorae and fine tableware from Turkey and North Africa. It is believed that this was brought to Tintagel via a down-the-line trade rather than directly. The site is like nowhere else in North-West Europe and was a likely centre of regional power – a place for consumption and display.

Due to a backlog caused by Covid, the report on the excavations has been delayed but is expected to be published in 2026. This should prove to be an interesting read as the finds seem to confirm a lot of Radford’s conclusions of the 1930s but indicate a continuity of purpose throughout the early to later medieval periods.

Alan Sandford

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