



People of the Heath

Understanding and Conserving Petersfield's Prehistoric Barrows

Bulletin no 5

May 2015



Project progress during the early months of 2015

We are poised for the second season of excavation on the Heath, starting 2 June, and shortly this will consume all attention for a while. We have a full complement of diggers ready to go and the school workshops have been booked out since last year! But the calm before the storm offers a moment to reflect on some of the other activity and research over the past few months.

From the very beginning of the New Year until April, a small team ventured out one day a week to begin the process of visiting and re-assessing other prehistoric barrows in the region. This is directed towards the project's aim of putting the Petersfield Heath cemetery into its broader landscape and period context – how does the composition, spacing, topographic siting of our focal barrows compare with other groups? It will also help us, we hope, to make some deductions about the settlement pattern and social territories of the time.

Our initial objective is to review all known barrows in the Rother Valley between Petersfield and the confluence of the Rother with the River Arun near Stopham. There are as many as eight main barrow groups dotted along this valley, mainly surviving on the sand hills – on heathlands and in woods. This is an impressive barrow landscape, although none of the other cemeteries is as tightly clustered as that on Petersfield Heath. Our work involves systematically re-measuring barrows, checking form and condition, and considering their topographic aspect and proximity to wetlands and other landscape features. In the process, we have actually cast doubt on a few humps previously regarded as barrows, but have compensated by finding several more that are judged either to be good (short of excavation) or possible. Some of these have appeared through the study of Lidar images using the Environment Agency's data (the coverage of the Secrets of the High Woods project did not extend into the Rother Valley), others have been drawn to our attention by field officers and archaeologists responsible for nature conservancy sites. A number of interesting observations have been made and we will reflect on these on a future occasion.

Figure 1: a modest but well-formed barrow in light woodland near a stream on Heyshott Common, previously unrecorded; image Stuart Needham



Progress in this first winter/spring season was good, over half of the Rother Valley sites having been visited, and we will resume this coming autumn. After completing the ‘Valley’ we will move into the surrounding landscapes, notably the high chalk downs to south and west. However, in the meantime, we will be recording the barrows on the Heath itself in the same fashion for consistency. An important aid here will be the detailed topographic survey which has been commissioned for the People of the Heath project. Although not yet complete (a few barrows are still too thick with scrub to allow detailed surveying), we are already obtaining an exceptionally nuanced view of the barrows and the landscape in which they sit. Few barrow cemeteries countrywide have been surveyed to this fine degree and the final product will allow three-dimensional modelling of the complex – a great asset for visualisation and learning. The image of Barrows 13 to 15 below (Fig 3) gives a preview of what can be done at any scale desired.

Important archaeological discoveries do not come from work in the field alone. The Documentary Research Group has been beavering away steadily, amassing information on all known historic maps, accounts and photographic images of the Heath. This will be of value to later historians of the Petersfield environs as well as helping us to understand the later evolution of the Heath’s landscape and how this may have affected the prehistoric remains. Perhaps one of the most promising new pieces of information relates to the lake. Even before the project had been formalised, we had begun to wonder whether the island in the lake might be a submerged barrow. Undoubtedly it has been consolidated and modified, but its consistent presence on aerial photographs back to the 1920s as well as in earlier photographs and maps gives it a respectable longevity. It became an aim to investigate this island at some stage during the project. Completely unsuspected however was the possibility of a second drowned mound (Fig 2). This came to light very recently with the discovery of an estate map of about 1752 in Somerset Archives and Local Studies Service; the additional mound (the more northerly) corresponds to a rise in the lake’s bottom recorded in a depth survey of 1971 despite intervening episodes of dredging!

Figure 2: the two islands showing in the 1752 plan overlaid on the depth contours of 1971; research and drawing by Rob Banbury



The impending excavations will cut into Barrows 18 and 21, as reported in Bulletin no 3 after their geophysical survey. There is little to add at this stage, except that we began to suspect traces of a very shallow depression around the northern part of 18 and on the eastern side of 21. The subsequent topographic survey has confirmed that depressions exist in these areas and there are even hints of an outer bank around Barrow 18. Associated ditches can be valuable for witnessing the passage of time *after* the construction event as they filled up thus contrasting with the mound material which (save for later intrusions) documents conditions and activities up until the period of construction. Should a ditch encircle Barrow 18, then given its low-lying position near the lake edge, there must be the possibility of some wet deposits bearing good organic remains such as were encountered at the base of the ditch on Site 24 last year. This possibility is in fact the major reason for selecting 18 for excavation and before long we should have a definitive answer about the presence of enclosing ditches on both this and Barrow 21.

Meanwhile, the geophysics team are keeping ahead of us. A few days in April saw the third season of survey undertaken, as reported in more detail in the specialist report (see elsewhere on the website). Their first objective was to survey the barrows we hope to excavate this September, namely two of the cluster of three barrows around Music Hill. The area covered by the survey in fact took in the third barrow as well (Barrow 15), but nothing particular can be interpreted from the patchy resistance values it yielded. Barrow 13 is the most prominent of this group, now seen in all its glory thanks to the recent clearance programme. The geophysics shows a very dark arc around the top of the mound which represents the obvious rim of spoil possibly thrown up from a central crater (Figs 3 & 4). If this was the result of an antiquarian delving, it went unrecorded, but this rim may have other origins entirely. The ground immediately surrounding the mound seems to have been extensively landscaped during the golfing era and this would have removed any surface indications of encircling features. Early maps also show a field boundary running between this and Barrow 15. Near the base of the mound on the east the geophysics plot suggests a more-or-less concentric arc of high-resistance soil (darker), but this is less clear to the north where a larger mainly dark zone may simply indicate the golfing platform.

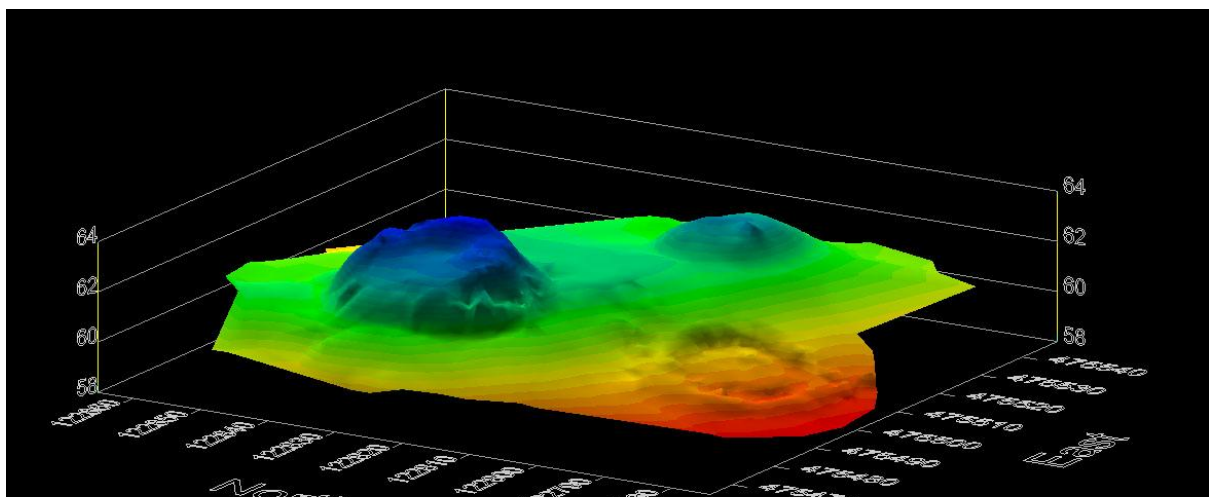


Figure 3: three-dimensional rendering of Barrows 13 to 15 based on the new topographic survey; Barrow 13 is to the left, 14 front right and 15 rear right; not only can the form of the monuments be discerned, but also their position on the ridge top (13 & 15) and the sloping flank (14). Data and image generated by Blackdown Surveys

Barrow 14 is one of the specialised barrows that makes Petersfield Heath such an interesting group for the region. It has been classified in the past as a saucer barrow, a type defined by a very low mound – just a slightly raised platform – encircled by a ditch and outer bank. Barrow 14 may not strictly conform however; the new topographic survey suggests there is no internal mound, indeed, the interior may even be slightly dished (Fig 3). What is clear from the surface topography is that the ditch and bank that define the monument are continuous; this is of course quite normal amongst Early Bronze Age enclosure-like ‘barrows’ and the deviation in morphology from a type defined largely on barrows in Wessex may simply reflect regional variations in tradition. The geophysics survey does not present quite such a coherent picture. In the southern half the ditch shows clearly as a low-resistance (pale) semi-circle and the external bank seems to show as dark but intermittent splodges (Fig 4). However, these become diffuse to obscure in the northern half where they blend into a large patch of low-resistance. Hopefully excavation will shed some light on what is causing this distinction in the geophysical response. This site presents an exciting excavation prospect because we may learn something of its function and relationship to the more conventional barrows alongside.

The April survey managed to cover two more areas, both important in their own ways. The first was

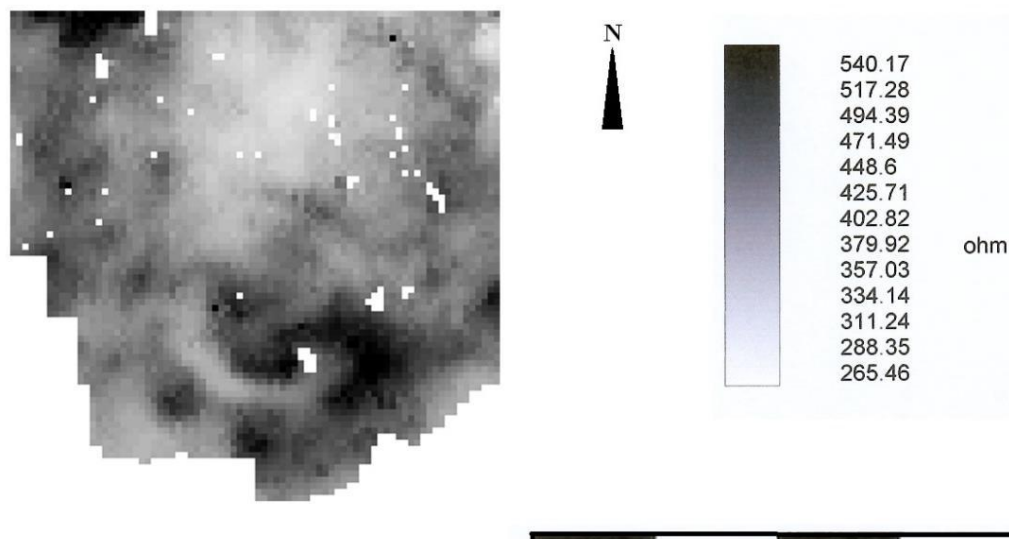


Figure 4: The soil resistivity survey of Barrow 14 generated by the geophysics team under the direction of Nev and Mary Haskins

designed to relocate Barrow 12, another low-profile ‘saucer barrow’ which shows up on aerial photographs up until the 1980s but is no longer visible on the ground. The survey area was set out using measurements based on past aerial photographs and, sure enough, the site reappeared. It shows as a fairly faint annular feature which has been sliced through by a pipe trench (Fig 5). The rather alarming fact that has emerged is that this trench was dug in relatively recent times, during the 1960s or later, long after Barrow 12 was a recognised ancient site! Immediately south-west of the barrow is a more prominent geophysical anomaly which represents the golf bunker still visible on the ground. We hope to look at Barrow 12 in a future excavation season to assess what remains.

The final area surveyed – the cricket pitch – had always been in our sights; there was the tantalising possibility that, given the proximity of barrows all around, others may have been levelled when the cricket pitch was first laid out in the 19th century. The opportunity to conduct this survey now arose because the cricket club are planning to improve the drainage on the pitch and were keen to establish whether or not there was any buried archaeology beforehand. In the event, although the survey shows strong variations in soil resistivity, there are no clear indications of destroyed monuments and perhaps it is instead the case that the pitch was opportunistically placed in a fairly level area between barrows.

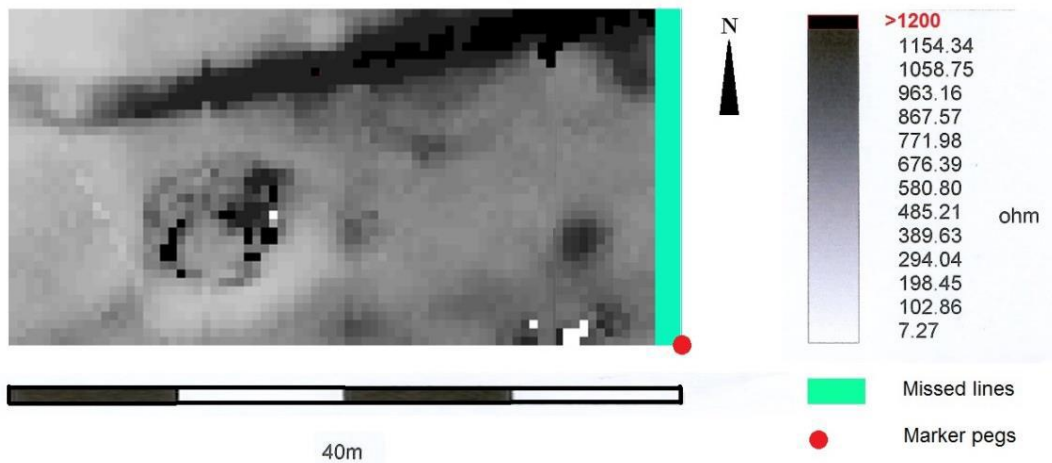


Figure 5: The soil resistivity survey of Barrow 12 generated by the geophysics team under the direction of Nev and Mary Haskins. The remains of the Barrow appear top right, cut through by the dark strip (a modern trench); the near-circular feature to the left is a golf bunker

Finally, if you have not yet had the opportunity to see the finds from the presumed grave at the centre of Barrow 11 (some shown in Fig 6), then do call at the Museum, where they will remain on display until the winter closure (last day of opening Saturday 28 November).



Figure 6: the six flint arrowhead 'pre-forms' from Barrow 11; image Stuart Needham

Acknowledgements

Our acknowledgements on this occasion are many. Our first debt is to the Barrows Survey Team, especially Sabine Stevenson and Chris Healey, but also Scott Chaussée; their dedication regardless of the weather has been appreciated and also well rewarded by the findings. James Kenny is thanked for providing relevant information from the Chichester District Historic Environment Record. Jane Willmott (Sussex Wildlife Trust) and Bruce Middleton (South Downs National Park Authority) are thanked for sharing their knowledge of barrows and potential barrows on their respective patches of landscape; Tom Dommett (National Trust) and the Chichester & District Archaeology Society are thanked for supplying the results of their recent surveys on particular barrow groups. We are also most grateful to the private landowners who allowed us to inspect and record monuments within their grounds.

Rob Banbury is to be applauded for his continued success in tracking down obscure documents relating to the Heath.

The ongoing clearance programme on the Heath again owes much to the Friends of the Heath. However, our need to see all the scheduled monuments progressively cleared of encroaching scrub is a big ask, and this winter it was possible to get considerable additional assistance from a Community Payback Programme, making use of labour from young offenders. The combined results are impressive and, as we have noted before, it is a revelation to see in the full certain monuments that have been largely or partially obscured in recent decades.

The Geophysics Team has now successfully completed three seasons of survey, each time keeping ahead of the game. We continue to be grateful to Nev and Mary Haskins for undertaking this work and also taking full responsibility for organising, recruiting and training participants.

The other major survey contribution this time is that by Charles Fanshawe and Alick Russell from Blackdown Surveys; a major part of the Heath is now surveyed and we are beginning to see the rewards.

Finally, our thanks go to the Cricket Club, and especially James Stratford-Tuke and Carolyn Warne, for their enlightened desire to investigate what traces might lie beneath the pitch prior to any disturbance.

Stuart Needham and George Anelay

26 May 2015

‘People of the Heath’ is supported by

