

People of the Heath



Understanding and Conserving Petersfield's Prehistoric Barrows



Bulletin no 9

July 2016

The main focus of this Bulletin will be the fourth season of excavation, but since then we have seen a further museum visit and another geophysical survey.

Fourth season of excavation (26 April – 14 May)

Three long-known barrows were investigated in this season of excavation – Barrows 8, 16 and 17. Long-known they may have been, but Barrows 16 and 17, small ring-bank barrows close to one another on the east side of the Heath, have eluded easy location on the ground for many a year, the one having lain on the line of a golf fairway, the other under a patch of dense scrub. In addition to Stuart Piggott's observations, there is also a contemporary aerial photograph (1925) which shows the two sites clearly, and this gave confidence to their identification in the geophysics plot and, with the eye of faith, on the ground. Excavation trenches were placed diametrically across each of the small circles and permission was also granted to expand this to complete one quadrant of one of them, 17 being the one chosen during the course of excavation.



Figure 1 Mineral-replaced boar's tusk from Barrow 17

Barrow 17

The two small barrows are equally intriguing, but Barrow 17 turned out to yield more informative contexts. This was largely due to the fact that the base of the ditch contained some significant spreads of charcoal. As far as we can know ahead of proper processing, there was little other than the charcoal. However, in immediate juxtaposition was a curious semi-circular and tapering object whose form was patently that of a boar's tusk (Fig 1) and yet made of hardened sand. This of course suggests repetition of the process which had preserved the form of the wooden handle in Barrow 13 (Bulletin no 7); the

bone material of the tusk had been replaced by mineral as it decayed in the acidic soil. We were fully expecting not to encounter any ancient bones unless thoroughly burnt, as in the Barrow 13 cremation; this one boar's tusk was a real surprise and bonus. Further mineral-replaced objects were in store for us later in the season (see below).



Figure 2 South-west quadrant of Barrow 17; charcoal spreads are present in the base of the ditch amongst peaty soil; the upper profile of orange sand is modern; on the right of the slide an animal burrow can be seen filled with dark soil; image George Anelay

The ditch itself was a very shallow affair with a flat bottom (Fig 2), comparable to that seen in the previous season at Barrow 12. Lying outside it were unequivocal, but very low traces of its accompanying bank. The interior (and indeed parts of the ditch fills) had been badly intruded upon by rabbits, a large circular pit and a land-drain. These had generated a convoluted ground profile which had been levelled off with orange sand presumably dumped during the golfing era. More sand had been dumped in the top of the ditch. Despite all these complications, the stripping of a reasonable area of the interior allowed undisturbed parts to be recorded and it became clear that there is no trace of any internal mound. Like Barrows 12 and 14, this is an ‘enclosure barrow’ rather than a ‘mound barrow’.

At two points around the ditch shallow scoops were found to notch its inner edge; these were not even as deep as the ditch, but are clearly related in some fashion because they too contained charcoal deposits which may have ‘spilled out’ into the ditch.

Barrow 16

The ditch of the pair barrow was even more insubstantial but again the remnant of its external bank was traceable. This barrow too had a land-drain running through it, further damage coming from roots. Pre-modern era finds were negligible, but one feature seems to confirm the ‘matching’ nature of these two sites. Just as described for Barrow 17, a notch was excavated on the inner edge of the ditch on its eastern side, again containing charcoal, although due to the limitations of the trench it was not possible to confirm if a matching example is to be found on the opposite side.

The internal platforms of Barrows 16 and 17 are both 4.8m in diameter, their maximum diameters, to the outer edge of the bank, being 10.4m and 11.4m respectively. When Piggott first noticed them he thought they were hut circles – an idea worthy of consideration for such small circles. He later re-identified them as ‘saucer barrows’, and certainly the lack of post and stake holes and the lack of entrances favours a ritual/ceremonial function over a domestic one. We have little specific evidence from which to judge the particular role of these small enclosures, but the abundant charcoal may give us interesting results regarding the wood species being used.

Barrow 8

Barrow 8 presented no difficulties of visibility, but it did have another burning question attached to it. Was the whole of the fairly large oval mound man-made, or had our Bronze Age forbears merely added height to a pre-existing natural ridge? There were arguments in favour of either and, on this occasion, the geophysics results if anything backed the wrong horse. The plot showed a fairly similar resistivity signature over the larger entity, but this was to prove not to be the barrow which was instead confined to a low mound about 0.7m high and 15.5m across. We had previously discovered that the builders of Barrow 11 had exploited a low ridge to enhance the grandeur of that mound – here was a more extreme case of capitalising on the topography to give ‘false’ grandeur.

Once the root-disturbed and heavily leached upper profile of Barrow 8 had been removed, it became clear that, yet again, the mound had been constructed of turves. These only survived clearly in the lower part of the sections where there was least disturbance. Both the main trench (W-E) and a subsidiary trench to the north cut through the edge of the mound; in neither was a ditch in evidence and we can be fairly sure that this was a ditchless ‘bowl’ barrow.



Figure 3 One of the two burnt timbers under Barrow 8, apparently a burnt plank; one end has been removed as a sample for identification and ring-counting; image George Anelay

Finds in and under this mound were relatively few. Even the Mesolithic flints that at times seem to be ubiquitous across the Heath were scarce. Nevertheless, two important contexts emerged at the base of the mound. First to emerge were various patches of dense charcoal or, in part, charred wood. Two of the concentrations were in fact heavily burnt individual timbers, one having a flat profile much wider than it is thick – this seems to be a burnt plank sitting on or barely above the old ground surface (Fig 3). This zone of

heavy burning lay along the northern edge of the main trench and extended beyond the baulk.

The second important context came from just a metre south of the plank. As the buried Bronze Age ground surface was reached, a distinct oval soil mark emerged (Fig 4): a ring of dense charcoal surrounded a pale sandy patch, itself of two colours. This looked promising from the start as the top of a pit containing a pottery vessel which in this context would likely be a burial urn. Four and a half days of intensive recording and excavation did indeed reveal an urn and enough was exposed to show it was a Collared Urn (*circa* 2000 – 1500 BC), a form frequently used to contain cremations.



Figure 4 The oval soil mark under Barrow 8; the charcoal-rich ring is the top of the pit, whereas the pale inner circle represents part of the overlying mound that has slumped into the top of the pot; the patchy coloration of the surrounding surface shows the last vestiges of the turf mound; image George Anelay

Excavating and lifting the urn

Why does it take so long to get a pot out of the ground? Well, for various reasons. Firstly, it will undoubtedly be very fragile. Early Bronze Age pottery is not renowned for its hard firing. Millennia in the ground make it soft as damp biscuit and, moreover, there may be other damage from the weight of overlying soil and roots – and so proved to be the case.

Secondly, there is an immediate ‘conflict of interests’. If the vessel is not to be damaged, it may need in-situ consolidation. However, nowadays we wish to micro-excavate the contents of a burial urn in laboratory conditions, so the aim is to lift pot and all its weighty contents intact; and we do not want to risk impregnating any of the contents with chemicals. In order to lift it we have to dig right down to the bottom of the pot, undermining it and giving adequate space all round – in the process we may damage the context in which it sits. This was very much the case for this urn since it turned out that the pit in which the pot was buried was barely bigger than the pot itself. The excavation strategy therefore has to find a reasonable compromise between keeping the object intact, not contaminating the contents, and obtaining a good record of the form of the pit in which it sat.

The method chosen in this case was to dig out the pit around the pot in octants, at first choosing opposing octants to create cross-sections through the whole feature (Fig 5). By degrees, as more and more segments are removed, there is a danger of the heavy pot having little or no support. This is countered by continually backfilling excavated segments with bags of soft soil, thereby temporarily putting back the support.



Figure 5 The urn with five surrounding octants fully excavated and the remaining three partially excavated; image Stuart Needham

The octant method also meant we had a good control over the distribution of material taken from the pit – all of it was

bagged up for future sifting and analysis. But of course we are not only interested in recording in the horizontal dimension, so the material from each segment was removed in vertical spits of either 5 or 10 centimetres. The base of the pit was 48cm deep, some 45cm being taken up by the large urn. Eventually, some 35-40kg of pot and soil, swathed in cushioning and vet-wrap (Fig 6), was lifted into a bespoke box for transportation.

Another object?

It was clear from the very top that one side of the pit bulged out, hence the oval plan (Fig 4). As this sector was emptied of charcoal-rich soil a different material soon came to light, a stiff dark brown mud with some sand. It quickly became clear that we had a second object, or even two, pressed up against the upper wall of the urn, one that must originally have been organic and had been replaced with a distinctive soil. The main mineral-replaced object seems to have been a

cup-like or scoop-like form (Fig 7). But there were also the remains of something flatter on top. Part of the 'cup' broke away during excavation, the rest was lifted with the pot and only separated (with some difficulty) in the laboratory. The fragments have now been carefully cleaned of soil comprising the charcoal-rich sandy matrix of the pit fill (Fig 8). We are hopeful that these can be conserved, just as the 'wooden' handle from Barrow 13 was.



Figure 6 Two members of the excavation team support the swathed urn just out of the ground at about 6pm on the last day; image Stuart Needham



Figure 7 Probable pseudomorph of a wooden cup hard up against the upper wall of the urn; part has cleaved away and is being supported by a sand-bag; image Stuart Needham



Figure 8 Sabine Stevenson cleaning fragments of the organic object(s) in Hampshire Cultural Trust's conservation studio; image Stuart Needham

An old Petersfield resident receives a scan at Salisbury Hospital

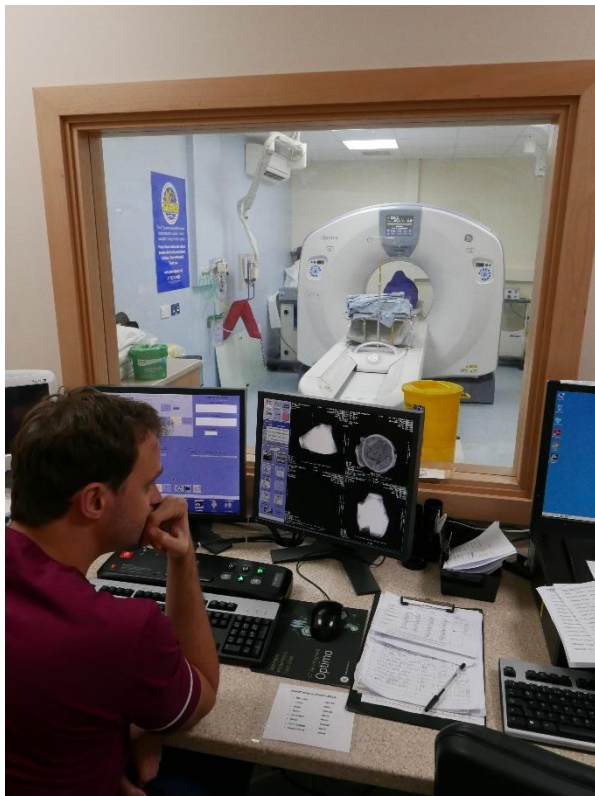


Figure 9 The urn undergoing CT scanning at Salisbury Hospital under the watchful eye of radiographer Craig Jarvis; image Stuart Needham

Excavating the contents of the urn in a controlled environment is of course a tremendous advantage. Even better is to get some foresight of what lies within! To this end, two young radiographers at Salisbury Hospital generously agreed, after a full day of scanning live patients, to put our rather elderly patient through the CT scanner (Fig 9). The outcome is an enormous electronic file which holds a 3D digital image of pot and contents; theoretical slices can be taken through any plane to expose what variations are present. Variations will not be comprehensive descriptions of what lies within, instead relating specifically to their densities.

Even so, this has proved to give a superb preview of an internal stratigraphy comprising different lenses of material (Fig 10). Only excavation can tell us exactly what each layer represents and which, if any, contain burnt bone fragments. At the time of

writing excavation is just beginning (Fig 11), so the concluding parts of the process await the next Bulletin. After the interior has been emptied, attention will turn to some intriguing remains attached to the outside of the pot – these may include further organic pseudomorphs.

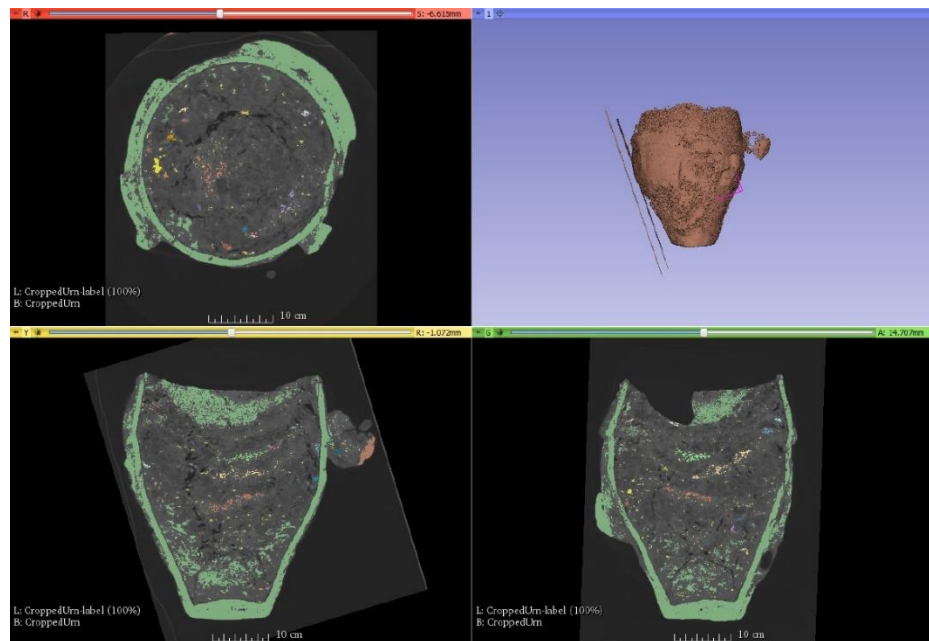


Figure 10 False-colour enhanced images generated by Garrard Cole from the primary scan data to emphasise the density variations in the contents. The scan suggests that the pot itself may be in poor condition in places, having suffered root damage. On the outside of the pot, in addition to the 'cup' there are various areas of hardened sand yet to be investigated; image Garrard Cole



Figure 11 Having opened the top of the wrapping, Jane King does final cleaning before embarking on the excavation of the interior; image Sabine Stevenson

And all the while the conservator will be needing to monitor and if necessary treat the pot to ensure it does not disintegrate...

Learning and Outreach

During the April/May excavations we had some fantastic feedback about the educational workshops on the Heath from all the schools that attended. 240 local school children took part in learning about life in the Bronze Age, as well as what it is like to be an archaeologist and we continued with the activities of flint knapping, excavating, 'finding the barrows' and object handling. There were pupils from Herne Juniors, Greatham Primary School and Liss Junior School. The schools were impressed with the activities, the way the volunteers delivered them and George's talk, which they felt was very informative and really brought the dig to life for the children.

Sixth geophysical survey (30 June – 1 July 2016)

Two days of geophysical survey covered Barrows 9 and 10 and the land in between. Patches of high resistance were found on top of both barrows. There was a particularly strong association for Barrow 10, where the signature corresponded with the main remaining mound, presumed to be truncated on two sides. Interestingly, the marked terrace on the western side of the mound has, in contrast, a very low resistance and does not distinguish itself from the adjacent land. It is hoped that excavation into this barrow in September will reveal the extent of past disturbance and whether the original mound has indeed been truncated.

On Barrow 9 resistance was less high and confined to a smaller area which the geophysics team leaders are inclined to attribute to the root system of a tree on the highest point. There is considerable uncertainty as to whether this started as a small barrow broadly conforming to the extant mound, or whether that mound is merely a remnant of a larger barrow, largely remodelled when the cricket ground was first formalised. Similar levels of resistance, albeit patchy, were also encountered to the east in an area not thought to have been within the barrow. It is hoped that a trench into this mound this autumn will likewise resolve some of these uncertainties. The opportunity will also be taken to cut a section through the linear feature running between the two barrows which currently appears on the ground as a slight depression.

Behind the scenes at the Hampshire Cultural Trust – the third museum visit (30 June 2016)



Figure 12 A fine early comb-decorated Beaker in Hampshire Cultural Trust collections; image Stuart Needham



Figure 13 Cylindrical loom-weights from Bursledon, a type datable to the Middle Bronze Age; image Sabine Stevenson

Our third museum visit to study regional collections of Bronze Age and prehistoric material was generously hosted by the Hampshire Cultural Trust, a recent amalgamation of Hampshire Museums Service and Winchester City Museums. Our day split into two sessions according to that historical divide and we were provided for by Dave Allen and Helen Rees respectively with assistance from Jane King and Sarah Gould.

As with previous study sessions, material was diverse, but it was nice to have a goodly proportion of ceramics on view, especially Beaker (Fig 12) and Deverel-Rimbury pottery, but also comparatively rare artefacts such as the Middle Bronze Age fired clay loomweights from Bursledon (Fig 13). One particular pot which transfixed many of us was the beautiful and subtly furrow-decorated Biconical Urn from Oliver's Battery, Winchester (Figs 14 & 15). Another first for us was an Early Bronze Age flint dagger from Alderholt, one of a fine series sometimes put in graves and running parallel to dagger-graves containing early bronze daggers. Such finds typify a period of florescence in lithic workmanship during the course of the first age of metal; there was no straight substitution of metal for flint and stone.

Other funerary finds included some excellent grooved bronze daggers (two being of the type found in Barrow 11) and the grave group from Crabtree Farm, Froxfield, with its bronze knife and chisel and curious grooved stone fragments (see illustrated in the *Petersfield Heath grave groups preliminary report* elsewhere on this website).

We did not lack for non-funerary metal objects either. An old friend, the Blackmoor hoard, was there in part to greet us – we had previously seen some of it in the British Museum. Similar styles and destruction features were in evidence, but also the curious macehead, almost certainly medieval in date, which had come to be attached to the hoard! The slightly



Figure 14 People of the Heath participants study the detail of the Oliver's Battery urn at Hampshire Cultural Trust; image Stuart Needham



Figure 7 Detail of the decoration on the urn; image Stuart Needham

earlier Bentley hoard presented objects in a different state, many being highly fragmented as if in preparation for the melting pot. In association were good examples of the curious 'plate-scrap' that characterises some hoards of this (Wilburton) metalworking phase alone. Finally, the Badminton hoard (Fawley) of Armorican socketed axes gave scope for a discussion about the several utterly non-functional features of this type and their possible interpretation.

Coming next... (6 – 24 Sept)

After less obvious activity during the summer months, we return in earnest to fieldwork on the Heath in September. The fifth season will be the biggest yet as we have Anthony Haskins returning to explore the Mesolithic site (23) further and in addition a team of students from the University of Winchester led by Dr Nick Thorpe. Their main excavation target (starting 30 August) will be to extend our view of Site 24, the enigmatic oval enclosure first trenched in the first season, but there will be no hard line between their operations and those of *People of the Heath*. The main barrow programme is also full in its own right. Ken Mordle will be overseeing the trenches into Barrows 9 and 10 on the south-east side of the cricket ground and George will be hoping to do some extensive excavation on the fairly well-preserved ring-bank barrow, no 19, at the south end of the Heath. In addition, we are hoping for permission to re-enter the centre of Barrow 11 to complete the excavation of the presumed burial context that yielded our first grave group in September 2014.

A packed programme and plenty of room for all who want to be actively involved – remember to sign up in the normal way through the website. Your opportunities to dig in the People of the Heath campaign are fast diminishing! Only one season more after this.

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to *all* those who put time and effort into the excavation and geophysical surveys reported on here. The collective effort is stupendous and Petersfield Heath is establishing its place on the map of Early Bronze Age Britain as a result. Ken Mordle was, as ever, an anchor

in the excavation team, while Mary and Nev Haskins, Lyn Pease and Carl Raven were the overseers of the latest geophysical survey.

A very specific debt on this occasion is to those instrumental in securing the successful lift of the urn and, later, its CT scanning: Sabine Stevenson, Dom Escott, Ineke Allez, Sarah Holloway and Chris Wilkins worked tirelessly to excavate the urn, often working long days. Craig Jarvis and Orlando Carvalho kindly stayed on after their normal hospital routines to put it under the scanner with superb and informative results. In addition, we thank Garrard Cole for his skilled manipulation of the scan data and help with its interpretation.

Hampshire Cultural Trust ‘pulled out the stops’ for our behind-the-scenes visit to Winchester. For the considerable work in preparing for, contributing to and clearing up after our study session we are extremely grateful to Dave Allen, Helen Rees, Jane King & Sarah Gould. Also in that institution, we continue to be grateful to Claire Woodhead for periodically occupying space in her conservation studio as work on the urn and cup progresses.

Stuart Needham & George Anelay

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