People of the Heath

Understanding and Conserving Petersfield's Prehistoric Barrows

Bulletin no 10

February 2017

The fifth excavation season on the Heath saw as many as six sites being investigated, three of them being return visits to sites first looked at in the first season in September 2014. The main season ran between 6 and 24 September, but two sites were opened a week earlier in order to have some active archaeology underway for the Secrets of the Heath event organised by the South Downs National Park Authority. This bulletin focuses on the excavation results, but we are now able to add something on the fascinating micro-excavation of the Barrow 8 urn last summer.

Barrow 9

Two of the three new barrows tackled lie close together between the cricket ground and Heath Road East. Our ambitions with Barrow 9 were modest. A gentle rise in the edge of the cricket ground alongside begged the question as to whether the mound was originally larger than appears at present, to some extent perhaps spread in order to partially level the outfield (Fig 1). A half-profile of the monument, such as we are seeking for most mound barrows, would have been difficult due to the mature tree on its highest point. We therefore settled for an oblique trench free of tree-roots which would nevertheless clarify the limit of the original built mound. Checking for a ditch could be done in the same long trench.

Figure 1 North-west side of Barrow 9 alongside the cricket pitch; the gentle rise in the outfield here proved to be part of a natural rise rather than the edge of the barrow. Image: Stuart Needham

The results of excavation may have been unexciting, but were perfect in answering our questions. The edge of a deposit of orangey silt-loam was found at the southern end of the trench (Fig 2). It overlay a buried soil profile and rapidly tapered north-westwards. Its edge was located within the trench and conformed to surface indications in other directions for the small-barrow option, one of about 15m

Figure 2 Southern end of Barrow 9 trench; the foreground is the natural sequence; the orangey-brown deposit beyond the ranging rod is the edge of the mound, which can be seen becoming thicker in the left-hand section. Image: Stuart Needham

diameter. The larger swelling in the ground around it is evidently a natural rise in the base geology which in this part of the Heath comprises *Marehill Mudstone*. A sticky and compact silt was encountered beneath the barrow mound and continued along the length of the trench.

The material seen at the edge of the mound may not continue right through; our trench did not penetrate far enough to see whether the silt-loam is merely the capping for an inner turf stack. Such composite constructions are well known and have been seen on the Heath in Barrow 13 where an outer capping comprised orange sand provided by digging an encircling ditch. No ditch however was found around Barrow 9 and the orange silt-loam would have to have been won from a much broader patch of ground. This zone would first have needed to be stripped of turf and the underlying weathered silt, so it is not an unreasonable assumption that the barrow does indeed contain a turf stack at its heart.

Barrow 10

Barrow 10 appeared on the surface to have been somewhat mutilated and modified, but we could not have imagined the extent to which it had suffered past disturbances. The excavation revealed a Jarlsberg cheese of original mound penetrated by both craters dug from the top and a network of animal burrows running in from the sides (Fig 3). The former animal occupants were of larger mammal size, such as badgers. One of the humanly dug pits, a rectangular dug-out, was recent enough that chipboard linings had not yet disintegrated – a distinct lack of appreciation of this ancient, and theoretically protected monument.

Figure 3 Barrow 10: the difficulty of excavating a riddled mound (left) and the final sections (right) showing the homogeneous pale grey fill of an antiquarian crater and animal holes; the turf and silt structure is best preserved in the left-hand corner. Images: Stuart Needham

The residual islands of undamaged mound showed unequivocally the classic ‘turf-and-sand’ make-up with which we are becoming familiar. But actually, it was not quite the same in that the very pale lenses that looked at first sight like sand were in fact made of a very fine material, like plaster-dust. This is in fact silt which can provisionally be identified as the weathered soil deriving from the

underlying Marehill Mudstone already mentioned in relation to neighbouring Barrow 9. We are hoping that analysis by Matt Canti will confirm or reject this economical explanation.

Again, there was no sign of an encircling ditch around this mound. The trench extended well off the mound taking in a marked step on the western side. On the surface this looked potentially like a step carved into the slope of the mound, but excavation showed it instead to lie directly over natural geology and to be level with the foot of the mound (Fig 4). Possible wheel ruts suggest this terrace of 5m width was once an unmade roadway running approximately north-south – likely a predecessor course of Heath Road East, which was only formalised in the mid-19th century. This early road had cut back into the barrow, but it is unlikely that truncation has been more than a few metres. West of the roadway the land fell away gently towards the cricket ground.

Figure 4 Platform on the west side of Barrow 10, which is probably part of an old 'road' passing the mound; Image: Stuart Needham

Re-opening Barrow 11

Readers who have followed the project from the beginning will remember Barrow 11. It was the first mound to be trenched and proved to be made of such a stunning alternation of black turves and white sand lenses that it was dubbed the 'zebra'. It also became memorable for its impressive 'grave group' of flintwork, stonework and fragments of a bronze dagger. These were associated with ephemeral traces of a box-like structure that had collapsed under the weight of the mound. However, no human remains or suspected traces thereof were revealed in 2014 and it was a pressing matter to excavate the remaining part of this would-be burial context to be sure that at least we have the complete picture – hence the return this season.

The new areas needing to be opened, one to either side of the 'box' and its contents, were not large but the depth of the mound here at the centre required a sizable platform step to be created around the top for safety. This platform was only taken down a maximum of 0.7m, much of the removed soil being the fills of relatively modern intrusions into the top. However, we discovered that undisturbed turf stack survived in the south-western part of the platform to a surprising height, up to a level just 0.35m below mound top (Fig 5). Even persistent leaching over the intervening millennia had only erased the classic turf-and-sand structure for the first foot or so.

Figure 5 Barrow 11 after completion of the extensions to west and east of the southern end of the 2014 trench; the turf-and-sand structure can be seen extending up to the top of the vertical 2m ranging pole; the whitish sand at the base is leached material below the buried Bronze Age land surface. Image: Stuart Needham

Platform made, we were able proceed downwards examining the detail of the structure on the way. One supplementary question was the exact stratigraphic relationship between the black inner mound dominated by turves, and the enveloping mound with its much higher proportion of sand. The 2014 grave group in its box was butted up to the northern edge of the inner mound and might, perhaps, have been cut in from above. The new evidence did not support this possibility; instead, it became clear that there was stratigraphic inter-leaving of turves belonging to the two main mound types and, moreover, that there was greater variation in mound character than a simple two-fold division (Fig 6). There is now no need to see the inner core as anything other than an initial stage in a broadly single-build process.

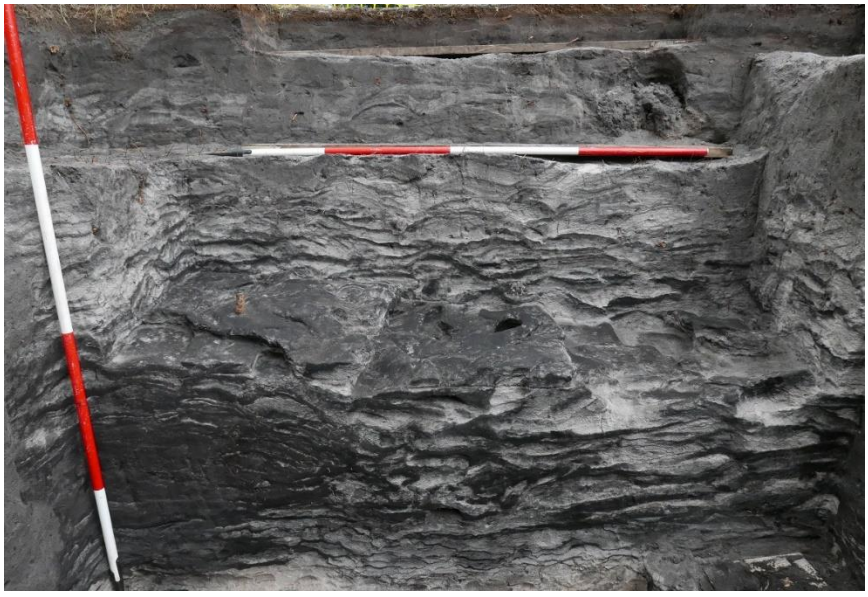

Figure 6 Western extension in Barrow 11 showing the junction between the turf-rich inner mound (left bottom) and the more mixed covering material; edges of some turves have been picked out in the surface between the two ranging poles. Image: Stuart Needham

So what of the 'burial' context? We can now say with assurance that it did not extend further east; here the mound structure continued unbroken down to the buried land surface. To the west, the evidence did not allow any sharp definition of context, but a series of further ephemeral brown traces, probably being the remains of organics, were located at exactly the same level as and in line with those recorded in 2014 (Fig 7). It is not clear whether any of these are traces of the very same structure, but they belong to the same depositional and preservational context and would extend the'burial' context a further 0.45m to the west. No durable artefacts were encountered this time, so we appear to have the whole 'grave group'. And, again, there was no sign of skeletal remains, so possible explanations for an absent body can now be discussed from a more secure evidential base.

Figure 7 Ephemeral organic traces uncovered at the west end of the supposed burial context in Barrow 11. Image: Stuart Needham

Barrow 19

Barrow 19 is one of the intriguing enclosure barrows on the Heath; it comprises a ring-bank and an external ditch and is seemingly well preserved. However, evidence for previous disturbance in the centre took the form of a rectangular depression of c. 2.2 x 1.6m. The focus of excavation was the interior, the whole of which was stripped of turf in four quadrants (Fig 8). Two of these rose up the inner edge of the bank to its crest thereby spanning a diameter of 15.5m; the other two stopped at the foot of the bank. In addition narrow sections were cut through bank and ditch on the north and south sides to ascertain something of the character of the enclosing earthwork.

Figure 8 Trowellers clean up the north-east quadrant of Barrow 19; the wiggly dark lines are animal burrows; the urn burial is just beginning to appear in the middle of this quadrant. Image: Stuart Needham

The most pervading set of features in the interior was a network of small animal burrows, probably of rabbits. A land-drain also sliced through the enclosure whilst another clipped the ditch. The central depression proved to mark a pit dug into the centre, probably in the 19th or early 20th century. It was only during final recording that it emerged that there was a larger feature, or pair of intercutting features, beneath; this has only partially been excavated, but at a depth of about a metre the circular form of a pot appeared in the base (Fig 9). It was left in situ under careful protection.

Figure 9 The central features in Barrow 19; the circle of a pot rim can be seen beside the horizontal scale (20cm). Image: Stuart Needham

Excavations over many years all over the country have shown that burials can occur in almost any position in or around a barrow. This was nicely illustrated at Barrow 19 by an oval feature that appeared in the north-east quadrant. Just as a similar soil mark in Barrow 8 last season had proved to be an urn burial, so too it was the case here. The finding of this urn (and keeping in mind the central burial feature) does not suddenly answer all our questions about the relationship of enclosure barrows to mound barrows, but it does show that it was not taboo to place burials in these more 'open' sites whatever other differences of function there may have been.

Figure 10 Barrow 19 inverted urn burial clad with pottery sherds; further sherds have already been excavated from the pit. Image: Stuart Needham

As investigation of the urn context began, what at first sight looked like the rim of a rather small *upright* pot turned out to be the base of a considerably larger *inverted* pot (Fig 10)! In fact, the base itself was absent and it seemed at first reasonable to suppose that it was removed in antiquity given that a separate base portion of a vessel was found beside the inverted urn (Fig 11). However, this was only one of a number of sherds in the pit some of which evidently belonged to a separate vessel. These

sherds were not just thrown in during backfilling, but had evidently been carefully placed. Several were so tight up against the urn that they had to be left in situ for careful removal in the laboratory (Fig 12).

Enough of the vessel could be seen before wrapping to establish that it is a Collared Urn, the same type as found under Barrow 8. Key differences between the two contexts, however, are the orientations of the pots – one upright, one inverted – and the nature of the surrounding objects and fragments, not to mention the very different types of barrow they were placed in. The urn, its contents and some of the closely associated objects were lifted *en masse* after careful wrapping. This will now be given the same VIP treatment accorded to the Barrow 8 urn, although the fact that the urn is inverted will pose new challenges in terms of interior excavation strategy!

Figure 11 The base sherds associated with the urn burial, but from a different pot. Image: Stuart Needham

Figure 12 The sherd-clad urn after removal of soil. Image: Stuart Needham

The enclosing earthworks were only investigated by narrow trenches, but they revealed an impressive ditch around 1.7m deep below modern ground surface (Fig 13). The sides were evidently very steeply cut when first dug and had penetrated alternating geological layers of brown sands and yellow clays, overlain by a white leached sand and a dark peaty topsoil. The diameter from ditch-centre to ditch-centre is 21.25m. The up-cast from the ditch had been placed on the inside to form a continuous bank that still survives up to 0.4m high after weathering; its breadth varies around 4m. The interior is level with the external ground surface except for low humps around the central hollow. This echoes the lack of evidence for internal make-up seen in other enclosure barrows on the Heath.

Figure 13 Southern ditch section of Barrow 19 with the weathered bank beyond. Image: Stuart Needham

Site 23

Another return visit was to the main Mesolithic site, Site 23, again not looked at since 2014. Having established in that first season that the stratigraphy beneath the golf green had been entirely reworked, attention has shifted to the fringes, firstly along the southern edge of the green and, secondly, on its western side to seek undisturbed deposits under the bank thrown up in 1908. Both trenches located in situ Mesolithic material with the potential implication that there will be good spreads of undisturbed deposits along

Figure 14 Stratigraphy preserved beneath the bank enclosing the former golf green (background) at Site 23. Image: Stuart Needham

the ridge wherever there has been no later ground disturbance.

The western trench started on the green, cut through the encircling bank and extended into the ground just beyond. This confirmed that beyond the scarp at the edge of the golf green the soil profile was intact (Fig 14) and, furthermore, was prolific in flint finds – around 4kg of struck flints to be precise. Flints were similarly abundant in the southern trench. Despite lying at a shallow depth, the initial indications are that this material is again in-situ, as had been hoped on the basis of the hearth found in one of the children's excavation holes of 2014. The hearth was revealed more fully, but neither this nor the general area was fully excavated this season due to the quantity of finds that had to be recorded. Finds include the usual array of finely flaked flint debitage, more microliths and a small, probably heavily reworked tranchet axe.

Site 24

This enigmatic oval enclosure deserved further attention and a team from Winchester University picked up where the 2014 season had left off. There were underlying features to be excavated and another major objective was to extend the exposure of the ditch in the west. The geophysics survey raised the possibility of an entrance through the ditch on the south-west side. In the event this seemed not to be the case – important evidence for an unbroken annular earthwork such as we expect in enclosure barrows. More flintwork was retrieved and, again, it is consistently of earlier date than the construction of the enclosure.

Micro-excavation of the urn from Barrow 8

Our account of the Barrow 8 urn in Bulletin no 9 took us up to the point at which Jane King was about to begin excavation of the interior. Forty-three days of meticulous work later, she had finally emptied the vessel (Fig 15). (No sooner had this stage been reached than urn number 2 presented itself in Barrow 19, almost to the day!) Jane's achievement has been stunning – a comprehensive and pioneering stratigraphic record of an urn's contents, all the more remarkable for her observation of extremely subtle but meaningful soil variations – 50 shades of black. We cannot go into great detail here, but the major revelation of this micro-excavation was that the pot probably

Figure 15 Partway down the pot; chunks of charcoal were frequent, but no bones were present! Image: Stuart Needham

contained an inner vessel, one made of an organic material. This is a truly significant addition to the known repertoire of urn-burial accompaniments and also, of course, supplements the small organic vessel attached to the outside of the urn (Fig 16). This cup or scoop too has been processed in the meantime, as much extraneous sand as possible having been removed from the fragile remains prior to conservation.

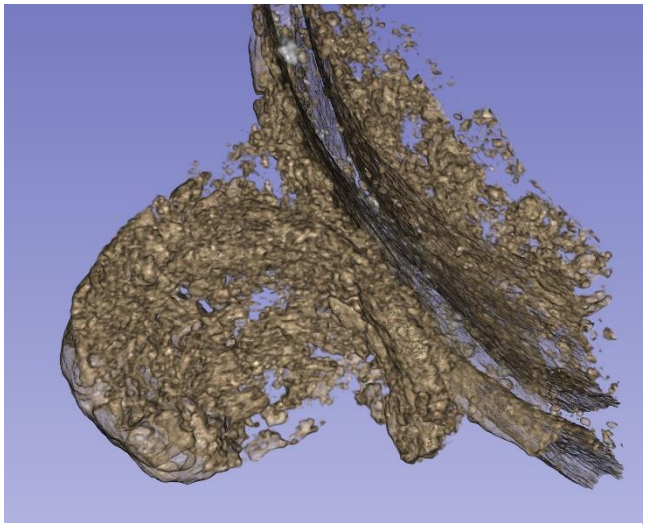

Figure 16 A rendering of the CT-scan data showing the cup attached to the wall of the urn. Image: Garrard Cole

Having emptied the contents, the outside could finally be tackled. With breath held, the firm bandaging that had consolidated the pot for months was cut away. Now the outside of the pot could be cleaned and its character finally revealed. It had become apparent during excavation that various hardened sand forms clung to the pot; these revealed their full form as soil was peeled away (Fig 17). On analogy with other hardened sand objects found during our campaign, these would appear to be mineral-replaced organics, but their shapes do not lend themselves to easy interpretation! One possibility is that they represent parts of a decayed organic cradle which facilitated the lowering of the pot into its tightly fitting pit.

Figure 17 Hardened sand forms clinging to the Barrow 8 urn. Image: Stuart Needham

Acknowledgements

Our grateful thanks go, as always, to Petersfield Town Council and Historic England for permission to allow the excavations and, likewise, to our dedicated band of volunteers. Ken Mordle, Anthony Haskins and Nick Thorpe took charge of four of the sites.

Mary Haskins has been of tremendous service in processing most of the finds to date. Care of the fragile urn from Barrow 8, however, was in the hands of Jane King and Claire Woodhead – we thank Jane for her painstaking work in excavating the interior, Claire for its final stabilisation and Hampshire Cultural Trust for bench-space during the whole process.

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