



People of the Heath

Understanding and Conserving Petersfield's Prehistoric Barrows

Bulletin no 6

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Archaeology is about building up knowledge of the past. Spectacular or at least newsworthy discoveries are nice for all of us, professional and lay-interest alike. But they do not drive our quest for understanding, they only put 'icing on the cake'. One of the joys of archaeology is the unpredictability of its outcomes. It may have seemed a disappointing result to establish that one of our excavation targets in the second season, Barrow 21, was not a manmade mound, but that should not be allowed to detract from the real value of showing that it is not a 'barrow' and that other, probably natural processes in these sandy environments can lead to the formation of deceptively similar mounds. The removal of site 21 from the inventory of barrows has implications for future management of the archaeology of the Heath and it also alters our understanding of the composition and distribution of the cemetery. These are valuable results in their own right.

Excavation season 2 (2-20 June)

Our second excavation season set out to explore parts of two sites, the second being Barrow 18, the one closest to the lake. The weather was again relatively kind to us and the objectives set out at the beginning of the season were achieved in full, thanks to the assiduous efforts of the excavation team.

Barrow 18 is not a particularly impressive monument, but its low altitude and proximity to the (modern-day) lake offered the prospect of encountering waterlogged deposits (Fig 1). In the event, no features were found to go below the water-table, although it was not far beneath as was graphically demonstrated by flooding of the trench ends after the one deluge of the season. A single 2m-wide trench was cut to form an L-shape, meeting in a right angle near the centre of the mound. Its two arms, pointing roughly north and east, were extended far enough to check for an encircling ditch. Yet despite signs of a depression around this side of the mound, no ditch was present and the feature may



Figure 1: Barrow 18 from the south-east after the clearance team had cleared it of thick scrub; image Stuart Needham

instead have been the result of a former footpath skirting the mound here. The mound itself, although not large by many barrow standards, proved interesting. As for Barrow 11 excavated last year (Bulletin no 2), the mound appears to have been entirely or very largely constructed of turves, but there the similarity ends, for unlike the striking 'zebra' of Barrow 11 with its innumerable lenses of white sand, Barrow 18 was a much more dominated by dark humic matter. In fact the turves seemed rather peaty and we look forward eagerly to the results of palaeoenvironmental analysis on the samples taken to Reading University hoping that they might shed some light on the presence of wet environments on the Heath in the Early Bronze Age.



Figure 2: The block of ferruginous sandstone at the centre of Barrow 18; the dark turf structure of the mound can be seen in the section behind; the hole is from a modern root; image Stuart Needham

Finds within the mound material were relatively few, but the most interesting object lay at around the centre of the mound, not far above the buried land surface (Fig 2). It was a block of ferruginous cemented sandstone (or ironstone) some 25cm across, an intriguing parallel to the two much smaller blocks of similar material used to cover the pile of flintwork under Barrow 11. Again we can be sure that this is an intentional, placed deposit, not only from its position but also from the fact that ironstone does not appear to be present on Petersfield Heath, so this must have been brought in from another sandstone area though not necessarily from far away. Its significance will be more difficult to determine, since no objects or features were found beneath it or nearby. Nor is there any certain shaping of the block itself.

A bonus at Barrow 18 came from the deposits buried beneath the Bronze Age mound. These comprised a buried soil horizon covering intermittent pale sand which occupied hollows in the slightly convoluted surface of a compacted dark sand. At the base of the buried soil was a scatter of flintwork of Mesolithic

character and including two microliths (very small deliberately retouched flints). There is little doubt that these flints had remained undisturbed almost since they were dropped. Lying amongst them was an entirely different object, a fossil bivalve. This needs to be fully examined, but geologist David Bone provisionally suspects it is of Upper Cretaceous age. Just as for the ironstone block, the close association with traces of human activity is strongly suggestive of this having been brought in by Mesolithic people. It is not hard to imagine fossils being viewed as curiosities, perhaps with strange properties and powers, by humans of almost any period. Indeed, paradoxically, fossils have been found associated with Early Bronze Age burials on a number of occasions.

The main finding of our trench into 'Barrow 21' has already been reported above, but some further account is still worthwhile. Allowing for the obvious impingement of golfing features at either end, the mound appeared from the topographical survey to be of a fairly regular sub-rectangular shape; hence, despite its low elevation (Fig 3), we were encouraged to believe it was artificial. It is also known that the feature has been present from at least the 19th century, well before the golf-course expanded to this part of the Heath. The excavation comprised a 3m-wide east-west trench through the middle and a spur at right angles, and from the outset it was clear there was considerable tree-root

disturbance; this greatly complicated the stratigraphy and delayed the eventual realisation that this mound was not made of piled up turves.



Figure 3: 'Barrow 21' during clearance looking north; image Stuart Needham

The core of the mound proved in fact to be a natural rise in the ground surface, part of a slight ridge running through the southern end of the Heath as far as 'Music Hill'. Lying against this rise mainly on the south-east side were some alternating 'layers' of sand and organic horizons, probably turf-lines (Fig 4). Preliminary interpretation sees these as having resulted from some kind of intermittent dune-like formation. If so, phases of sand blow must have been interrupted by long phases of stasis to allow soils to develop. As always, we will be reliant on palaeoenvironmental studies to confirm or modify our initial thinking. It will naturally be of interest to establish, if possible, when these layers formed since that might tell us about local conditions at a particular phase of the Heath's history. Even site 21 was not, however, entirely without evidence for ancient human activity. At the eastern end of the



Figure 4: Part of the section through 'Barrow 21' showing dark layers alternating with pale sand; image Stuart Needham

trench, on the lowest ground, yet more Mesolithic flints came to light. Human presence on the Heath during the Mesolithic period is appearing to be widespread, but these traces have to be spread over a few thousand years of activity, so do not necessarily imply intensive or continuous use.

Forthcoming excavation season 3 (8-26 September)

Preparations are already well in hand for the next excavation planned for this September. The application to Historic England (formerly English Heritage) has gone in to the regional inspector, David Wilkinson.

The plan is to tackle two of the three barrows on 'Music Hill', as reported in Bulletin no 5, and also look at the levelled monument Barrow 12 down in the basin to the north. Barrows 13 and 14, as two very different 'barrow' forms, make an interesting pair and we aim to lay out a single excavation trench that links them together. The bowl barrow (13) has a strange crescentic rim around part of its top and hopefully we can ascertain its origins as well as establish the constructional character of the main mound beneath. The 'enclosure' barrow (14) lies on a south-facing slope and its flat interior (ignoring hummocks from vegetation) invites speculation that this was a small arena for certain activities relating to the use of the wider cemetery. For this reason we have applied to open a larger area – a quadrant attached to a north-south trench across the whole profile.

We have already noted in Bulletin no 5 the sorry fact that Barrow 12 seems to have been erased at ground surface in fairly recent times. The sewer trench that was cut through the middle sometime after January 1969 was the main culprit, but the remaining parts of the bank and ditch to either side were initially still visible and are now impossible to make out confidently on the ground. Our aims are modest, mainly to re-open the sewer trench and clean back its walls. Thereby we can hopefully confirm the barrow's position and see what sub-surface features remain. Petersfield Heath's pioneering fieldworker, Stuart Piggott, noted in his 1929 notebook that this barrow had yielded 'chalk blocks from the centre', but sadly the centre has probably been destroyed. Leslie Grinsell writing a little later described Barrow 12 as 'A beautiful example [of a saucer barrow], with the central mound 22ft. in diameter and 6in. high with a slight dip in the centre...'

Secrets of the Heath (5-6 September)

If you have not yet come across the Secrets of the Heath event, which Petersfield Heath now hosts on an annual basis, get this date into your diary. It is of course an event that covers a much wider range of interests than just archaeology, but there will be tours of the prehistoric complex and a road-show style desk at the *Petersfield Museum & People of the Heath* marquee. It is an opportunity for you to come and show us objects you have found that you think might be ancient or significant. We would particularly like to see any prehistoric finds from the region since they might contribute to the information base of our project.

Acknowledgements

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