People of the Heath

Understanding and Conserving Petersfield's Prehistoric Barrows

Bulletin no 7

November 2015

This Bulletin covers the third season of excavations in September 2015 and the ensuing geophysical survey in October. In August we also held the first of the 'behind-the-scenes' museum visits, this one to the stores of Chichester Museum at Fishbourne Roman Palace. Each of the three barrows excavated this September proved to be informative and enlightening, but in very varied respects. As reported in Bulletin No 6, the sites concerned were a bowl barrow, Barrow 13, and two so-called 'saucer barrows', Barrows 12 and 14.

The classification of barrow forms is both complicated and fuzzy for a variety of reasons, not least the demonstration from many excavated barrows that their form might be altered at intervals by enlargement and re-modelling. There is also of course the problem of later damage frequently modifying outward form. One broad distinction, however, can be relied upon – that between *mound barrows* and *enclosure barrows*. These are two quite distinct, yet contemporaneous concepts, the one emphasising physical presence – monumentality, if you like – the other emphasising the need to enclose and demarcate sacred space. Both traditions of course follow the ideologically entrenched circular geometry of the time. One of the aspects of the Petersfield cemetery that stands out is the number of 'enclosure barrows' present; with the addition of Site 24 to the Early Bronze Age complex

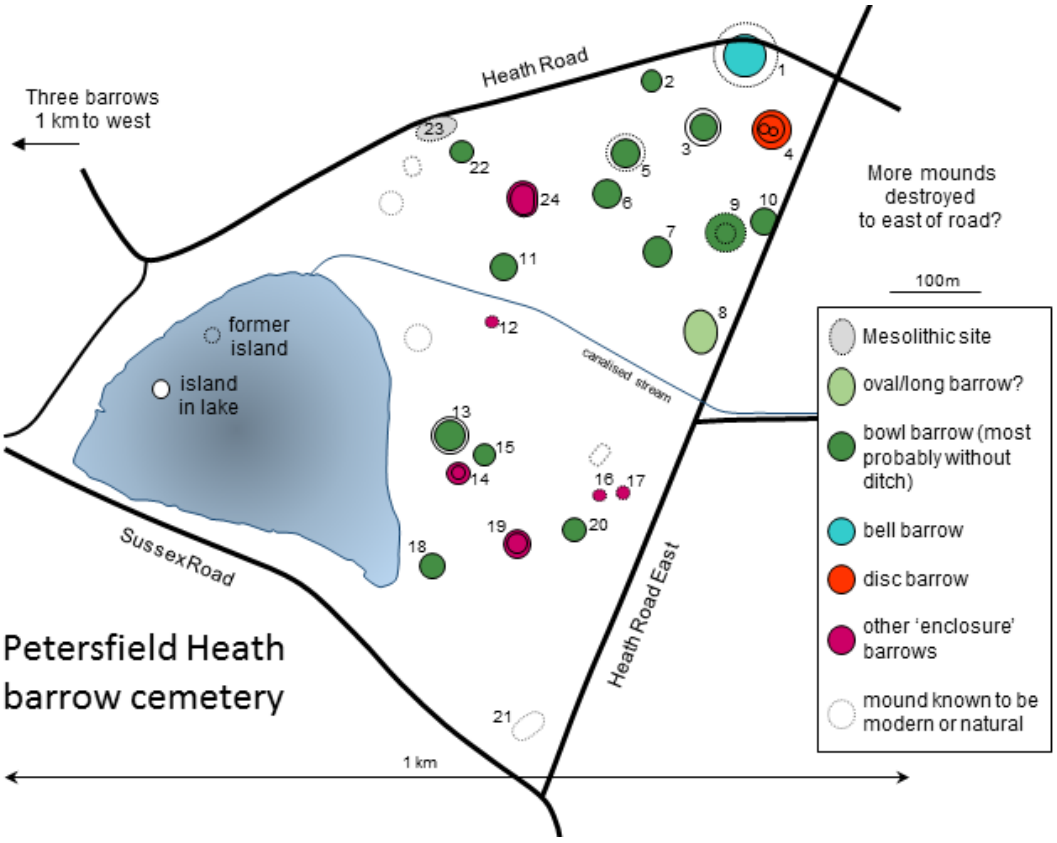

Figure 1 Plan of the monument types in the Petersfield Heath barrow cemetery

(see Bulletin No 2), there may be as many as seven; this is a strong representation by any standards and our excavation strategy is to give a little more emphasis to these sites than the conventional mound barrows (Fig 1). This focus is important for two reasons; firstly, enclosure barrows are not especially common at the national level; secondly, few have been excavated in modern times, so we have rather little evidence from which to assess their function in relation to mound barrows. So, having started with the oval enclosure, Site 24, a year ago, we have now taken in two more.

Enclosure Barrow 12

Barrow 12 needed to be tackled for another reason as well – having been apparent on aerial photographs during the early to mid-20th century, it simply vanished from ground view subsequently. Our geophysics team located a semi-circular resistivity signal in the correct area (Bulletin No 5), but their plot also alerted us to a broad swathe of destruction that had passed right through the middle of the monument. This turned out to be a sewer-main trench, dug through after 1969; an aerial photograph of that date shows the barrow, which was and remains a Scheduled Ancient Monument, to be intact. Clearly a central slice of the site had been destroyed. But what would survive to either side? The scenario of heavy soil-moving machinery first digging out the large trench, then scraping the spoil heaps back into it after pipe laying, did not bode well for a site that only ever had subtle relief. The fear was that all the upstanding part of the site would have been levelled; however, excavation showed otherwise.

Excavation proceeded along the backfill of the sewer trench, never needing to reach the sewer pipe itself which lay at some depth. On carefully cleaning back the walls of the trench, we were rewarded with intact and interesting stratigraphy on both sides (Fig 2). In these sections could be seen not only the ditch as it crossed both to the east and west, but also signs of an outer bank and a deposit in the centre which seemed to tie in with Grinsell's description of a 6-inch high mound. It was clear that the surface of the barrow, as seen by Piggott and Grinsell in the 1920s and 30s, was more or less intact; instead of having been scraped level, it had ended up being masked by a thin deposit of deliberately laid soil. We suspect this material was brought in by the golf club to level up uneven ground after the pipe had gone through.

Figure 2 North section of the sewer pipe trench cutting through Barrow 12. The ditches of the barrow are arrowed; the dark-filled feature at the extreme left is probably modern

Comprehending the section features was not entirely straightforward, however. The ditch may have been identified, but it was curiously shallow. Despite this shallowness, made yet shallower by silting over the centuries, it had survived as a recognisable circular ditch well into the 20th century AD – testimony to the durability of even low earthworks if the ground is never disturbed. The internal mound proved to be even more ephemeral. What at first sight looked like a perfect 6-inch high mound overlying a buried turf line turned out to be the standard soil profile in this part of the Heath – it stretched away from the barrow as far as our trench extended to east and west. Our soil specialist, Matt Canti, agreed that there *was* a buried soil, but close examination of the stratigraphy made it abundantly clear that it dated to well before the Bronze Age monument was constructed. Support for this came from the discovery of a flint core, probably Mesolithic, from this very horizon. The implication then is that there was an early land surface that came to be buried by blown sand and that later a new turf horizon developed on top; it was this slightly higher horizon that was walked upon and used by Bronze Age people. We cannot explain why Grinsell thought he saw a mound in the centre, except perhaps by assuming that there was some kind of optical illusion at work. He was visiting and recording large numbers of barrows during his fieldwork and it is unlikely he set up any sophisticated surveying gear to check the height of the interior relative to that of the surrounding land.

One thing we were looking for as we cleared out the backfill of the sewer trench was chalk blocks. One of Stuart Piggott's early observations was of 'chalk blocks from the centre', although he didn't say how these had become exposed. Another conundrum is that chalk would have been attacked by the acidic soil of the Heath and it is debatable how much could have survived over the course of three or four millennia. We found no chalk, but there were a couple of large-ish blocks of Upper Greensand; this rock is in fact a non-calcareous siltstone and is off-white in colour such that it is often mistaken for chalk. One block was in the backfill, and another in a feature dug on the western periphery of the barrow probably in more modern times. We are still of course no wiser about the original context of these blocks, but it is possible that they were associated with barrow construction or use.

Historic England (previously part of English Heritage), gave us permission to excavate two small areas of undisturbed deposits behind the cleaned-up sewer-trench walls. One focussed on a small feature showing in the middle of the north section (seen in Fig 2). Excavation of its remaining half suggested it was a post hole or pit and it appears to have been dug from the later land surface, though need not necessarily be contemporary with the barrow. A second, longer extension was dug to examine a part of the ditch fill and the adjacent external feature mentioned above (left side of Fig 2). Other than showing that the latter was probably modern, no closer dating evidence was obtained.

Enclosure Barrow 14

With the clearance of the thick scrub that had concealed it for some decades early in 2015, Barrow 14 was suddenly clearly visible on the ground – a neat embanked circle with no obvious entrance. The ditch and external bank were then mapped nicely by the detailed topographic survey (Bulletin No 5). We sought and obtained permission to run a 2m-wide trench right across the enclosure from north to south, thus running directly down the slope on which it lies. There was also permission to expand into more of the interior; we took the opportunity to run a cross-trench towards the lip of the ditch in the east and also open a few more square metres around the centre because there was something intriguing happening there.

Figure 3 Section through the ditch and bank (right) of Enclosure Barrow 14 on the upslope (N) side

The ditch and bank of this barrow were more substantial than those of no 12. The section through the ditch shows a changing fill over time with alternations between in-washes of sand and stable turf horizons (Fig 3). The bank survives up to 0.22m high and sealed a well preserved buried soil, samples from which could be instructive about the pre-barrow environment. The interior, as had been suspected from the topographic survey, was level with the sloping ground surface – there was no added mound, however shallow. A hump in the north-east quadrant turned out to be due to a tree throw, probably in the recent past. A second, even slighter hump, was found in the middle of the enclosure, but as excavation proceeded it became clear that this was not a dump of soil but instead a slight rise in the underlying subsoil. We suspect the hump near the centre is coincidental, but there were two cut features alongside which most likely belong with the barrow. One was a post hole and the other, 0.45m away, was a pit containing a significant amount of charcoal, but nothing else. These may not seem to be particularly illuminating traces of what went on inside this enclosure, but there are parallels for the charcoal-filled pit on two or three similar sites elsewhere.

The excavated area yielded few finds, but noteworthy were some pieces of stone. One is probably intrusive to the area, but remains to be identified, and the others were lumps of ironstone such as we keep encountering. For the first time, however, we found there to be a well-developed iron-pan within the subsoil profile and this could easily be the source of the lumps found nearby.

Between barrows

The trench through Barrow 14 was deliberately continued up to the top of the slope to join that taken into Barrow 13; the latter was on a different alignment and the meeting point lay on a platform that we suspected had been landscaped during the golfing era. Landscaping, to form a more horizontal terrace, quickly became evident, yet just beneath the surface layers we encountered a dense spread of Mesolithic flintwork. Refitting flakes identified by our on-site flint expert, Anthony Haskins, made it clear that this material was essentially in situ and it is yet another important addition to the Heath's evidence for early human use. In addition to the major site on the

northern ridge (23), we now have significant groups of Mesolithic flintwork from Barrow 18, Site 21 and alongside Barrow 13, and possibly amongst the Site 24 assemblage too.

Mound Barrow 13

We come now to Barrow 13 standing atop 'Music Hill'. This is one of the most prominent locations on the Heath – not only elevated, but also directly overlooking the lake to the west. Although the lake itself would not have been present in the Bronze Age, we suspect it was already boggy ground fed by springs. Barrow 13 is reasonably substantial, but its original form and size was difficult to ascertain due to severe disturbance of the top, or alternatively the later dumping of additional material perhaps during landscaping operations around its base. Understanding what had happened to this mound was one of our key questions and the excavations certainly gave us a clear answer.

Although the top had a substantial depression, usually a sign of an antiquarian excavation, it was curious that the up-cast spoil only went around about half of the barrow's rim. Nevertheless, it was discovered that these features were indeed due to a well-planned and thoroughly executed intrusion into the mound, its size being accounted for by the digging of two trenches at right angles. If the first trench had been driven in from the west, this might account for the lack of a spoil rim on that side. Not only had the trenches gone down through the mound, but the excavators had also taken it some 50cm into the underlying soil and bedrock. The sides of the trenches were strongly battered, partly due to later erosion, for the hole had evidently been left open to fill naturally. A considerable body of the mound had thus been dug out or later eroded. Whether anything was found by these early excavators we cannot know since the perpetrators have left us no account. However, they narrowly missed what turned out to be a burial of considerable importance.

Just inside the north-east angle of the cruciform trench an elongate feature emerged; it was a grave cut into the subsoil. Although not deep, it contained a fabulous burial deposit complete with human

Figure 4 Left: the set of ten flint blanks for making barbed-and-tanged arrowheads; right: large whetstone, pear-shaped stone, burnt flint knife and five further flints

remains and grave offerings. The latter are on a par with the group recovered from Barrow 11 a year earlier (Bulletin No 2). There are also certain intriguing similarities: the emphasis on lithic equipment and the inclusion of a good set of arrowhead blanks and yet totally lacking in finished arrowheads (Fig 4). This is a phenomenon that may as yet be peculiar to the Petersfield Heath complex. The Barrow 13 tally of arrowhead blanks is ten compared to the six from Barrow 11. These blanks were all deposited in a stack, perhaps again in a bag, whereas six more flints, including a core or two, a flake, a blade and a retouched piece, came from elsewhere in the grave fill. The sixth was heavily burnt and had been through the pyre with the body; enough survives to show that it was a finely made knife almost certainly of plano-convex type.

Again continuing the theme set by Barrow 11, the new grave contained one or two 'whetstones' (Fig 4). The first is an impressive and well-shaped rectanguloid block with lightly grooved sides. At about 225mm long it is one of the largest yet encountered in a Bronze Age grave. We will of course be keen to establish what rock it is made from. The second object is much smaller, pear-shaped and very thin; it seems to have been of a coarse-grained stone that was vulnerable to erosion in the acidic soil.

The interred person had been cremated and the remains collected together in a fabric bag, as we are able to deduce from the sharp edges to the burnt bone spread. The spread tapered towards the north and stopped suddenly at another object, or rather a pseudo-object now comprising hardened sand (Fig 5). This is almost certainly the product of mineral replacement as an organic object steadily decayed, the void being taken up faithfully like a cast in a mould. Given its size and shape, the original must have been of wood, a 38cm long gently tapering piece with a more marked contraction at the top end. This end was clearly a hand hold which terminates in a curled knob.

Figure 5 Mineral-replaced wooden object, probably originally wood, at the head of the cremation deposit; most of the cremated bones have already been removed from in front of the small step in the foreground. An antiquarian trench can be seen immediately left of the grave

Being made of sand, this object was clearly highly vulnerable to disintegration and had to be lifted on a block of soil. It was slid onto a firm board for transportation. The top and side surfaces had already been fully revealed whilst in situ and the next critical action was to record their morphology thoroughly. Advances in photogrammetry have made this an extremely reliable and accurate

method for this kind of task and an expert in it, Dr Marta Diaz-Guardamino Uribe from the University of Southampton, willingly agreed to come and do the necessary recording at short notice. It involved taking a large number of photographs all at slightly different angles. Bespoke computer soft-ware is then used to 'stitch together' all the images into a single digital 3D model, but before commencing this stage it was necessary for Marta to come back a second time, after the object had been turned over and the base exposed by excavating the remaining soil (that which had been underneath). In order to turn the object, a plaster cast had to be moulded carefully over the top to keep it from fragmenting or shifting. We now eagerly await the 3D model of this unique 'object' that appears to have been some kind of 'cremation bearer'.

Figure 6 Trench into Barrow 13 from the east; the encircling ditch can be seen in the foreground, whilst the present mound comprises an overlapping sequence of white & black turf stack (furthest from camera), orange sand, and grey sand. The last deposit is spoil dumped by the antiquarian excavators from their hole which can be seen with strongly dipping strata at the far end of the trench

Barrow 13 had one more surprise in store. Neither the geophysical nor the topographic surveys had given any indication of an encircling ditch, a feature we are checking for on every barrow surveyed, but this was hardly surprising given golf landscaping hard up to the foot of the mound on its northern and eastern edges plus spoil from the antiquarian hole spilling down the barrow's sides. The latter turned out to mask a substantial ditch inside a small modern hedge ditch that had already been found. The barrow's ditch has a V-profile and the up-cast of richly coloured orange sand had been thrown onto the outer slope of the turf stack (Fig 6). This is important for understanding the sequence of construction – the majority of the mound (the turf stack) had already been built before the enclosing ditch was dug. Just as importantly, this discovery changes perception of the physical character and limits of this monument and hence future policies in relation to management and preservation.

Geophysical survey, 23-25 October 2015

The fourth geophysics survey took place not long after the excavation finished (see full report on the website). Two barrows we are hoping to investigate next spring were covered; they are of very different scale and character. In both cases, the resistivity patterns give useful indications.

Mound Barrow 8

This somewhat enigmatic barrow has been impossible to evaluate properly because of thick birch scrub and bramble. It was truly overgrown – that is until the Community Payback Team, under the supervision of Friends of the Heath, did a fabulous job of clearance. Suddenly, it is easy to confirm what we had suspected from beating a path through the jungle: this barrow, regardless of its shape in plan, comprised a single mound with the highest point somewhere near the middle. Past attempts to dismiss its elongate, or oval, shape as being due to the close juxtaposition or overlapping of two round barrows now look invalid. However, this does not mean it is yet obvious what form of monument we have here. There are two main possibilities: firstly, that it is indeed an oval barrow, with all the attendant implications of a potentially Neolithic date; or secondly, that there is an underlying low ridge in the bedrock, upon which a single round barrow has been constructed. We have seen the latter situation at Barrow 11 (Bulletin No 2), whereas we had wondered whether Site 21 was an oval barrow but found it to be a mound of natural creation (Bulletin No 6). Barrow 8 is, however, a much larger mound; moreover, the geophysics suggests a moisture-retentive composition such as created by turves. It is also of note that the low resistivity zone corresponds broadly to the somewhat irregular oval mound discernible on the ground. As always in these cases, only by putting a spade in the ground can the options be reduced to a definitive answer.

Enclosure Barrow 17

To the south of Barrow 8, and well beyond the stream, are two recorded 'barrows' first identified by Stuart Piggott as a 14-year old boy – numbers 16 and 17 (we still use Piggott's numbers for these and all other barrows known at that time). This young lad had found in the heath vegetation two rather slight annular features of small dimensions and he first interpreted them as hut-circles. Later, at the age of 19 or 20, he revised his opinion and placed them in the 'saucer barrow' class, along with Barrows 12 and 14 in the Petersfield Heath complex; Leslie Grinsell concurred in his full published review of Hampshire barrows. These two sites can just about be made out in some early aerial photographs, but they have been almost impossible to locate with confidence on the ground in recent years, one (17) lying within a golf fairway and thus perhaps largely levelled, the other (16) having become overgrown with scrub.

At the time of the geophysical survey only the area around Barrow 17 could be surveyed, but a small ring of high resistivity of about 6m x 6m seems to nicely confirm its suspected position. There is a low resistivity patch inside and the encircling pattern is variable, so it is difficult to relate the plot in detail to the monument described by Piggott and Grinsell: a small low mound encircled by a ditch and an external bank with a total diameter of about 9.5m. Hopefully the exact dimensions and features can be clarified by excavation. Whatever, this seems to be a very small enclosure and there are questions hanging over its date and function.

Visit to Chichester Museum Stores, 12 August 2015

The People of the Heath project was privileged to be able to spend an afternoon in August behind the scenes in the Chichester Museum store, located in the Discovery Centre at Fishbourne Roman Palace. The event was made possible through the generosity of curator Amy Roberts and the administration of The Novium (Chichester Museum). It was timed to coincide with the display in the Discovery Centre of one of the most important Bronze Age hoards to have been found in Britain in recent years, from the other end of the county, near Lewes. This was even more topical because there are a number of similarities with a large hoard in Chichester Museum's collections found in 1989 at West Ashling. Hence we were able to look at both hoards in quick succession. A wide array of further later prehistoric material – flintwork, pottery, worked chalk, bronze and gold –was brought from storage into a study room to allow close inspection and detailed discussion. This included two cremation urns from the West Heath, the next barrow cemetery east of Petersfield. Amy Roberts also led the group around the adjacent stores to explain the storage system and their current programme of work.

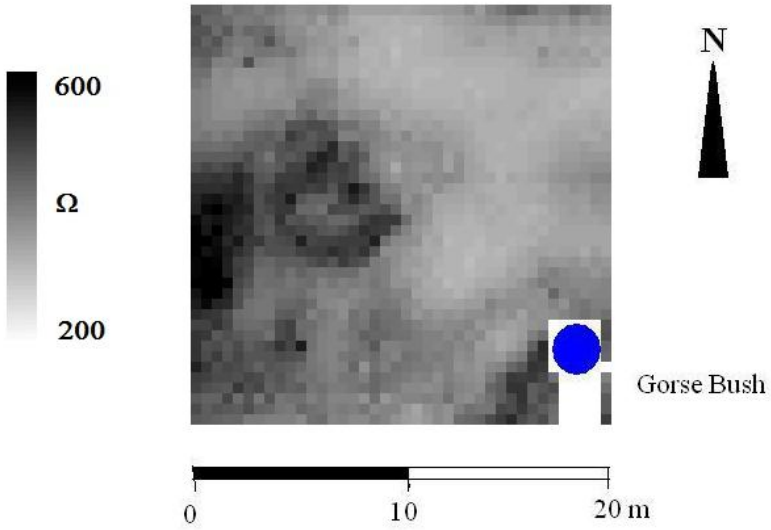

Figure 7 Resistivity plot for Enclosure Barrow 17. The very dark zone on the western edge of the survey grid may represent an old sand-trap from the golfing era, now levelled

Education and Outreach

During the September excavations, 292 local school children took part in interactive workshops at the excavation site and learnt about life in the Bronze Age as well as what it is like to be an archaeologist. Pupils from Herne Juniors, Steep Primary, Dunhurst, Bordon Juniors were welcomed by museum staff and volunteers. They learnt more about the project, toured the site and took part in a variety of 'hands-on' activities such as flint knapping, excavating and object handling.

'*Children and accompanying adults thoroughly enjoyed the fun filled day. We appreciated the support from the volunteers guiding the children as well as speaking knowledgably about specific aspects of the dig. Many children cemented knowledge learnt in class through real life experiences. Thank you for providing such a wonderful experience for the children you really did make the past come to life!'* (Feedback from teacher)

Schools are finding the opportunities provided by the excavations invaluable to their pupils learning and most have asked to come to the next round of excavations in 2016.

Forthcoming events

The next behind-the-scenes viewing of later prehistoric material will be held at the British Museum in February 2016. Details to be announced at the beginning of the New Year.

The next guided tour of the Petersfield Heath barrow complex will take place at 1.30pm Sunday 6 December, meeting at the main car park off Sussex Road. Please book a place on this tour by writing to the Education and Outreach Officer Amanda Harwood on education@petersfieldmuseum.co.uk or by calling her on 01730 260756.

Acknowledgements

Tremendous thanks go to all those who have helped with excavation, survey work and educational activities on the Heath in these last few months. You have contributed to a very successful spell which, added to previous results, is really beginning to establish Petersfield Heath as a barrow cemetery of considerable interest (not to mention the increasingly important Mesolithic evidence). Special thanks go to our steadfast site supervisors, Ken Mordle and Anthony Haskins, and the Geophysics team leaders Nev and Mary Haskins. We are also grateful to our advisors of various kinds – our palaeoenvironmental specialists who turn out each season to listen patiently to our questions and take samples accordingly, and representatives on the advisory panel.

Dr Marta Diaz-Guardmino Uribe's rapid response to a plea for help in recording the cremation-bearer was a generous and vital contribution to obtaining an accurate record of this unique object. In another context entirely, we were similarly thankful to Amy Roberts and The Novium Museum for the chance to see many other prehistoric objects from the region.

Outside the archaeological programme, one of our main debts in recent months has been to the Community Payback Team who have done a great job of clearing more of the overgrown barrows under the watchful eye of Richard Warton, chairman of the Friends of the Heath.

As ever, we are grateful to the Petersfield Town Council for their continued support for our campaign, and to Historic England (formerly part of English Heritage) for scheduled monument consent for our limited intrusions into the barrows and in particular to David Wilkinson, Assistant Inspector of Ancient Monuments, for his advice and support.

Stuart Needham & George Anelay

26 November 2015

'People of the Heath' is supported by

heritage lottery fund
LOTTERY FUNDED

South Downs National Park Authority
Sustainable Communities Fund

East Hampshire DISTRICT COUNCIL