

Barrow cemeteries and burial practices of the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Ages

Dr Stuart Needham



Dr Needham described several phases of barrow building ranging from about 2500 BCE to the end of the Early Bronze Age (EBA) 1500 BCE. In England this was a localised activity; there are over 400 barrows on the Isle of Thanet whilst there are only about 60 known in the whole of Lancashire. The current estimate is about 60,000 Bronze Age barrows across Britain containing perhaps as many as 10 burials each. Construction ceases with the end of the Early Bronze Age.

The first phase burials in the Chalcolithic period (2500-2200), such as the Amesbury Companion, contain copper implements and distinctive beaker pots. This is the dawn of the use of metal in Britain and, as well as copper knives, some gold ornaments are also found. These are rare.

The second period was marked by the introduction of bronze weapons and some cremation burials in cinerary urns. There is a greater range of grave goods including the first food vessels. Rare studded daggers are seen, including one from the Racton Park farm dig. This is the era when mounds start appearing over the burials.

During the final phase (2000 – 1500 BCE) cremations dominate and 'cemeteries' (ie groups of barrows) occur with multiple burials within a barrow. Barrows become more common. Most burials have just a pot and/or a flint tool as grave goods. Cremation burials become more common than inhumations and barrows contain multiple burials spread over a considerable number of years. EBA inhumations are usually articulated bodies but sometimes disarticulated bones are found as well. There is evidence for articulated bodies being buried with a bag of much earlier disarticulated bones. A good example of this is Mount Pleasant in Kent. This may reflect a desire to maintain proximity with the Ancestors.

Stuart described the barrow cemetery on Petersfield Heath and outlined the project to understand and protect this for future generations. The intention of the project is to confirm the presence of these barrows, to carry out limited excavations, to investigate any possible additional barrows and to explore the uses of the Heath since then, including recent use as a golf course and recreation ground. There are seven distinct types of barrow on the Heath. Some, such as barrow 4, are rare and associated with a west country rather than a south eastern tradition of barrow building. The relationship of Petersfield Heath barrows in the wider landscape will also be studied.



Stuart finished his talk by showing the recent Lidar survey which shows more clearly the barrows to be investigated during the project. However some of the apparent 'barrows' near the lake are known to be modern – they do not appear on some early aerial photos.

*Dr Stuart Needham gained his first degree and PhD at the University in Cardiff in the 1970s then served for thirty years as the curator of the Bronze Age collection at the British Museum
April 2014*