

Identifying the 1924 excavator of Petersfield Heath Barrow 4

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When Rob Banbury trawled the British Newspaper Archive for articles relating to the *People of the Heath* project, we were surprised to find one mentioning the opening of a 'disc barrow' on Petersfield Heath in 1924 (*Portsmouth Evening News* (PEN), 9 Oct 1925) since there is no other record of such an excavation. However, the account was good enough to identify the barrow as no 4 with its two internal tumps and, moreover, was specific about what was found – namely a cremation deposit without any associated artefacts. It did not specify which tump had been tackled and the PotH excavations into that barrow showed that both had been dug into in the past (Needham & Anelay 2021, 87–97).

The PEN newspaper article was entitled '2000 years ago. Life in the Iron Age on Petersfield Heath. A reconstruction' and was credited to 'Innominate'. At the time this meant nothing to us; moreover, there was no mention of who conducted the excavation which was only mentioned in passing in a general and largely hypothetical tract about prehistoric occupation of the sandy heaths in the Rother Valley.

Subsequent research into an important but little-known barrow excavated on Portsdown ridge in 1926, Gob's Barrow, has however cast much light on the writer masquerading as 'Innominate'. Gob's Barrow was excavated by the *Portsmouth Geological and Archaeological Society* (1923–30) under the direction of one of its two founders, Lieut.-Col. John H Cooke. That society also came to be known as the 'Innominate Club' because members did not need to be nominated in order to join, and frequent articles about the society's activities in the local press were authored by 'Innominate' (Needham & King 2022). Many such articles also mentioned Cooke in the text or in captions (as is the case of the Petersfield Heath one) and it became clear from context, style and other factors that 'Innominate' was simply a pen-name used by Cooke. This is confirmed by a small privately printed book which collated a number of the articles previously published in newspapers under the title *Tales of Ancient Wessex: Links with the Past*. The cover and title page give the author 'Innominate' but the foreword by Portsmouth Evening News editor William Gates makes clear that this is all Cooke's work (Cooke 1926). The book had a very limited print-run and appears rarely to have been encountered or consulted by archaeologists.

Cooke and his co-founder Dr L S Palmer are seen to have excavated several sites in the Portsmouth area under the auspices of PGAS and, prior to its formation, the Archaeology section of the Portsmouth Philosophical and Literary Society. There are also records of 'excavations' or the recovery of finds from the surface being activities associated with their regular motor-coach excursions. For example it was billed in an excursion notice of 12 May 1922 that 'On May 27th the Society are visiting the British camp and Tumuli at Butser, and under the direction of Dr L S Palmer MSc, a tumulus will be opened.' (there is no record that this actually happened; Needham & King 2022).

It can therefore be accepted that Cooke was the author of 'Life in the Iron Age on Petersfield Heath', not least because it appears (with minor rewording) in *Tales of Ancient Wessex*. After a preamble concerning the success of the PGAS excursions ('... [which] continue to attract large numbers of members') and the promise of a new programme at the completion of the current one, Cooke, as often, refers to himself in the third person: 'The members were met at Petersfield by their President (Col. J. H. Cooke), who, before conducting them over the camp, gave a short lecture on its probable origin and uses.' He followed with a description of the surrounding topography and went on to

postulate a string of 'camps' along the 'ridge of green sands'. It is not entirely clear what he meant by 'camps' although for Petersfield Heath he mentions a conjunction of barrows, hut circles, working sites (flint-working), pot-boilers and pottery. Despite stating that 'So little definite evidence concerning the Petersfield Heath Camp is available that it is difficult to assign its age with any degree of accuracy', he goes on to speculate that 'the probabilities are... that... it was founded by the iron-using Brythons, a Celtic race who invaded Britain about 600 BC.' By the following year (1926) to judge from the Gob's Barrow account Cooke seems to have been better versed in prehistoric chronology as understood at that time.

Subsequently he comes to the barrows themselves: 'The tumuli on Petersfield Heath appear to have been rifled... [they] are of two types, viz., the "bowl" and the "disc". Of the former there are 16 examples; of the latter four only. A fine specimen of the "disc" type lies north of the centre of the Heath. Within its circular periphery are two low mounds, one of which was excavated in 1924, and revealed a cremated interment about one foot beneath the surface. No urns, implements, or ornaments were found.' Since this passage does not refer to anyone else having undertaken the excavation and is seemingly authoritative about the findings, the logical conclusion is that it was Cooke and his associates who were the excavators. The only other specific reference to a visit to Petersfield found in the newspaper archive is a brief mention in the 1929 PGAS calendar of events (Jane King – pers. comm.).

Our own excavations into Barrow 4 found a pit [39] to have cut through the extremely low central tump and a linear trench [24] cutting into the middle of the western mound aligned NW-SE. For the most part the excavators had dug the trench down to the buried land surface, but in the middle was a pit [33] cutting down into the pre-mound soil profile; it was 1.4 x 1.0m across and 0.2m deep into the subsoil. The linear trench and its pit seem most likely to have been the result of the 1924 excavation, especially since Stuart Piggott's September 1929 entry states 'Two tumps, larger dug into, smaller v[ery] low' (Piggott 1929–32, 36). Moreover, the December 1925 aerial photograph (Needham & Anelay 2021, 35 fig 1.5) shows the linear feature clearly, whereas the annular feature defining the central tump appears to be a ring of scrub. It is not clear whether Cooke's 'one foot beneath the surface' was in relation to the mound's surface or the underlying old ground surface, but if the latter it is possible that pit [33] held the cremation deposit.

It is intriguing to think that the 1924 excavation was undertaken in the year that teenage Stuart Piggott first surveyed the remains on Petersfield Heath (neither activity has a date within that year; Piggott 1924). There is no indication from either Cooke's account or Piggott's early notebook of a meeting between the two at this date, yet two years later they are recorded to have met during an excursion to Beacon Hill: there was 'a short talk about the early British camp of Beacon Hill and the inspection of some very crude pieces of pottery shown by Mr. Piggott' (PEN, 20 July 1926). The fact that Cooke was aware of 'hut circles' on Petersfield Heath could well suggest that he had tapped into young Piggott's knowledge. Piggott's 1924 survey had identified six 'hut circles', although later he reclassified them as saucer and disc barrows (Needham & Anelay 2021, 51–3 figs 2.6–2.8).

The whereabouts of any finds or field notes made by Cooke and the PGAS are unknown. If they had been deposited in Portsmouth Museum after Cooke's death in 1933 they would almost certainly have been destroyed by bombing during WW2 (Needham & King 2022).

References

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