



PRESS RELEASE

People of the Heath: Understanding and Conserving Petersfield's Prehistoric Barrows



People of the Heath project uncovers new evidence for handling the dead in the Early Bronze Age

The third season of excavations on Petersfield Heath saw the investigation of three of the 21 known monuments in this important Early Bronze Age cemetery on the edge of Petersfield Town, Hampshire. One is Barrow 13 on 'Music Hill', where a town band regularly played in the late 19th century. The mound's unusual shape suggested that it had either been the subject of antiquarian barrow-digging attentions, or received additional contributions from landscaping during the long golfing era on the Heath. In addition to learning about the structure of the mound and recovering palaeo-environmental remains, we hoped to clarify the extent of past disturbance. It proved to be substantial; an unrecorded excavation had dug a deep hole in the centre with at least three arms extending to west, north and east. The hole was dug well into the subsoil beneath the barrow. Given this background, it was with some surprise that an intact grave was discovered.

The grave contained at least fifteen artefacts of flint and stone alongside a confined spread of cremated bone fragments. Two further objects were represented by hardened sand, almost certainly caused by the mineral-replacement of originally organic items, a well-known phenomenon in acidic sand environments. Skilful excavation by one of the volunteers working with the community-participation project allowed the forms of the objects to be documented and the larger one is of particular significance because the cremated remains clearly 'issued' from its broader end.

The object is 38.5cm long and tapers to a narrower, hand-sized rod terminated by an asymmetric knob. This handle-like character and physical contiguity to the clearly demarcated deposit of cremated bones suggests that a bag, perhaps of leather, had contained the bones and had been attached to a long wooden handle.

This is not the first time that it has been possible to deduce that an Early Bronze Age cremation was deposited in an organic bag that has since decayed. However, hitherto there has been no evidence for such bags having been furnished with what appears on the Petersfield Heath evidence to be a rather elaborate wooden 'handle' which seems to go beyond something strictly functional. It suggests a degree of ceremony was involved in the carriage of the individual's remains to the burial site and may imply that the act of cremation took place elsewhere or at an earlier time. The concentration of barrows on Petersfield Heath is noteworthy and this new evidence may give further support to the idea

that the site was regarded as an especially sacred place which was highly favoured by the elite of a wider region.

Further information on the grave goods

The neatly shaped rectangular whetstone, at 22.5cm long, is probably the largest yet to have been found in an Early Bronze Age context. It may have had more than one function but its sides are grooved thus recalling grooved stones that have been interpreted as arrow-shaft smoothers. This makes an interesting connection with ten of the flints in the grave, which have already been worked up to an intermediate stage on the way to becoming arrowheads. The fact that these are all blanks, rather than finished objects, is intriguing, especially since the same is true of six flints recovered in the Barrow 11 excavations on the Heath in 2014. Normally, finished arrowheads are placed in graves at this time, only occasionally being supplemented by one or two blanks serving as 'spares'. The link with Barrow 11 is strengthened by the fact that both have stone equipment suitable for whetting and/or grinding. Barrow 11 yielded three stone objects, one a beautifully finished perforated whetstone of fine-grained stone. Part of a bronze dagger and a flint fabricator were also present.

Most of the Barrow 13 artefacts had been placed in the grave alongside the cremation sack, but one thoroughly burnt flint was more intimately associated, presumably having been in the cremation pyre with the body. Although badly spalled due to the heat, enough surface survives to show that it would have been a very finely made knife.

Inventory of the Barrow 13 grave

- Cremated bone fragments
- Large rectangular whetstone/rubbing stone with side grooves
- Ten triangular flints, prepared as blanks for barbed-and-tanged arrowheads
- A finely worked flint knife that had been in the cremation pyre with the body
- Four further flints including a core for generating further flint implements
- Two mineral-replaced organic (probably wooden) objects, one interpreted as the 'handle' of a bag containing the cremated remains

Credits/background facts

People of the Heath is a four-year project (2014 – 2018) hosted by Petersfield Museum.

Lead archaeologists: George Anelay (Field Director); Dr Stuart Needham (Research Director); Ken Mordle (supervisor of Barrow 13).

The main funders of the project are Heritage Lottery Fund and South Downs National Park Authority.

Most of the Barrows on Petersfield Heath are scheduled monuments and we are grateful to Historic England for permission to excavate small parts of them.

The site is owned by a Trust run by Petersfield Town Council.

Alongside the excavations, Petersfield Museum runs an archaeological education programme with site visits for local schools.

Website: www.peopleoftheheath.com

'People of the Heath' is supported by

