

People of the Heath: Bronze Age Barrows in Petersfield.

Petersfield Heath is home to the densest concentration of Bronze Age round barrows in south-east England. Twenty-three barrows survive, and there may have originally been as many as thirty in this small area. Round barrows were mainly built in the Early Bronze Age (c.2200 – 1500 BC) and are one of the most visible traces of prehistory in our modern landscape.

Most of the barrows on the Heath are dome-shaped mounds. Seven, however, are of a rarer type with a flat area encircled by a bank and ditch. Both types of barrow are known to have been used for the burial of human remains, but they probably had wider religious and commemorative functions too.

The ***People of the Heath*** project (2014 – 2018) undertook the first archaeological investigation of this impressive cemetery. Trenches were excavated into fourteen barrows following geophysical surveys. Some of the finds made can be seen in this exhibition. Soil samples and organic material taken from the excavations have helped to date the site and provide more information about what the environment was like at that time.

Reconstructing the Bronze Age environment

Samples of soil from the barrows were taken to University of Reading for pollen analysis. Identification of preserved pollen grains has shown what plants were growing on and around the Heath in the Early Bronze Age.

The barrows stood amongst clearings dominated by heather. The quantity of charcoal seen in the soil suggests that the vegetation was regularly burnt off to maintain the clearings. Heathland was not widespread at this date and its development on Petersfield Heath is early compared to many sites in the region.

Set slightly further back from the barrows there would have been mixed woodland of elm, oak, lime and ash, with hazel on the margins. The particular nature of this combined woodland-heathland landscape has few modern equivalents. The area later made into the

Lake would have been wetland with alder and willow trees, together with swamp vegetation such as sedges, horsetail and grasses.

The burials and other deposits

The excavations found seven burials as well as other significant deposits of artefacts and charcoal. Represented in the display are four urn burials and two with a range of other grave goods. Funerary rites in this period were diverse in terms of how the dead body was treated, where it was placed and what objects were put with it. The burials from Petersfield Heath reflect this diversity well and include some novel elements.

Evidence for wooden and other organic artefacts is rare on comparable sites. The wooden handle for the bag containing the cremation from Barrow 13 is unique, as is the wooden cup found alongside the Barrow 8 urn. Equally unusual is the cladding of an inverted cremation urn with the broken sherds of another urn from Barrow 19. Another strange deposit in Barrow 19 was the part-pot which had been inserted into the fill of a large earlier grave at the centre, but without any burial.

Urn burial and part-pot, centre of Barrow 19

2050 - 1900BC

This urn [1] was placed up-side-down in the top of an earlier deep grave at the centre of Barrow 19. Scanning followed by micro-excavation showed it to be almost full of burnt bones. In addition, seven worked flints were distributed around the inside of the mouth before the pot was covered with an organic lid and turned over. One of the flints is a strike-a-light, part of a fire-making kit [2].

A few metres away was another deposit, this time without any bones. The lower portion of a pot [3], the break already worn, was buried within the fill of a second large grave. Inside was another broken vessel identified as part of an 'incense' cup, and a curious little 'thimble' cup [4]. Beneath these was a thin mat of moss.

Grave group, Barrow 13

1950 - 1770BC

This impressive grave group was associated with a cremation deposit placed in a cut grave underneath the barrow's centre. The burnt bones had been contained in a bag suspended from an elegant wooden handle which survived in mineral-replaced form [1].

Most of the artefacts were ranged down the west side of the grave and only a burnt and fractured flint knife [2] accompanied the body on the funeral pyre. The flint artefacts include a set of ten blanks for arrowheads [3]; these could have been ready for the deceased person to finish off in the afterlife. Two whetstones were also found [4], one being the largest yet known from the Early Bronze Age.

Grave group, Barrow 11

1880 - 1700BC

Like the burial from Barrow 13, this one had flint arrowhead blanks and whetstones. However, the burial rite was probably different – an inhumation placed in an organic coffin set on the old ground surface, then covered with the barrow mound. Any bones present had decayed, but mineral-replacement might have fossilised part of the skull [5].

Most of the flints [6] were found in a small heap and were covered by the two rough whetstones [7]. The flint strike-a-light, the perforated whetstone [8] and some bronze dagger fragments (not displayed) came from the other end of the coffin.

Faience bead, Barrow 14

1700 - 1600BC

Part of an annular ornament [9] was found alongside an inverted urn inside Barrow 14. It is made of faience, a manufactured glass-like substance which requires a high-temperature technology introduced from the Continent around 1900 BC. This bead or pendant is of the quoit-shaped type found widely, but not commonly across Britain. The urn is still undergoing micro-excavation.

Urn 'burial', Barrow 8

1750 - 1625BC

This Collared Urn [1] was standing upright in a pit barely bigger than the pot itself. The strange mineral-replaced forms attached to the body may derive from webbing needed to lower the heavy pot into its hole. Although there was a mass of charcoal at the top, there were no bones inside. There was, however, strong evidence for an organic inner container that had decayed in situ.

Early Bronze Age cremation urns are often associated with small 'incense' cups. In this case however a wooden cup [2] was placed alongside the vessel, a unique indication that organic accessory cups might be an alternative to ceramic ones.

Urn burial, NE quadrant of Barrow 19

1900 - 1750BC

This Collared Urn [3] was found inverted in a pit just a short distance beneath the ground surface. At some point in the past something had pushed in the base; this allowed the interior to be excavated through the base. There was a package of burnt bones in the lower half, but also evidence for one or more internal organic containers. The mouth of the vessel had been covered by a lid prior to turning.

The exterior of the urn had a number of pottery sherds [4] attached to it in layers and perhaps bound on with straps. The sherds came from another Collared Urn decorated with twisted cord impressions. This could have been an earlier burial container that had been re-deposited with the new interment.

The Heath through Prehistory

As well as excavating barrows, the project investigated a flint-work site (Site 23) first noticed when the golf club renewed a golf green in 1907. This proved to be a very prolific Mesolithic site, parts of which are undisturbed. The site extends for a considerable distance along Heath Road. A hearth with burnt flint was excavated and radiocarbon dating indicates use around 7300 – 7000 BC. In fact, the flint types show that this site was in use over a much longer period.

Flints of various dates from the Late Palaeolithic to the Early Bronze Age also come from the barrow mounds, usually having been redeposited with the turves used for construction. Together with some pottery sherds of the Late Bronze Age they document a considerable time-span of activity.

Late Upper Palaeolithic flints

A small number of very early flints, including a scraper [1] have been recovered from a few locations across the Heath. They show significant weathering, probably from blowing sand, and probably date to a warm spell, *circa* 12500 – 11000 BC, before the final cold snap of the last glaciation. They show that humans were quick to exploit this area whenever the climate ameliorated.

Typical Mesolithic implements

The basic Mesolithic tool-kit included the types shown: scrapers for a range of scraping functions [7], finely serrated blades for cutting through soft organic materials [8], and burins for drilling holes and scoring grooves [9]. Heavier implements were also made, notably *tranchet* axes, one of which comes from Site 23.

Mesolithic flint-working debitage

Long-term occupation sites yield large quantities of flints. The great majority is always 'debitage', the by-products of knapping to create the desired implements. This material is, though, of tremendous value for understanding the technology of flint-working and the chronology and organisation of activities on the site.

Displayed are a range of cores [2], the blades [3] and flakes [4] struck from them, and core

rejuvenation flakes [5]. Some pieces, known as micro-burins [6], show that microlithic implements were being produced on site.

Arrowheads and microliths

Microliths – small worked blades – are the classic flint type of the Mesolithic, but their form changed over time. They were often hafted in multiple to tip arrows and spears, although some known as Horsham points may have been mounted singly. The finds from Petersfield Heath include various types – obliquely blunted points [10], a curved backed blade [11], Horsham points [12] and scalene triangles [13] – which show that occupation spanned a few millennia from *circa* 8000 – 4000 BC.

Later arrowheads

Larger flint projectile tips came in with the Neolithic around 4000 BC. The earliest style was the leaf-shaped arrowhead followed in the later Neolithic by chisel-edged forms. An example of each of these types was excavated from Barrow 4 [14].

At the beginning of the metal age, *circa* 2450 BC, barbed-and-tanged arrowheads were introduced from the Continent with the Beaker culture. They were often placed with the dead during the Chalcolithic (Copper Age) and Early Bronze Age. Arrowheads were represented in two of the graves excavated on Petersfield Heath (Barrows 11 & 13, see adjacent case) but in both cases all were unfinished pieces, or blanks. Two finished examples came instead from the mound make-up of Barrow 11 [15].

The Middle Bronze Age and after

The excavations yielded only a little material dating to after the barrow period. Nevertheless, it is likely that the Heath would have continued to be exploited for grazing, peat cutting and the gathering of plant materials such as heather, reeds and wood. A small group of Late Bronze Age pottery (1150 – 800 BC) [16] came from a test-pit into what was later found to be an unrecognised barrow (Barrow 23).

The area, however, continued to be well populated. There are plenty of bronze metalwork finds from the region, including the splendid new Buriton hoard (case opposite) and the

well-preserved palstave (axe) from Sheet [17], found during the construction of the new Petersfield golf course.

Working with the Community

Engaging with the local community was a huge part of this project.

Over the four years, 399 volunteers worked with us on a range of activities, including the clearance of vegetation and habitat management geophysical surveys, archaeological excavations and post-excavation analysis, a regional survey and documentary research. This team were, and continue to be, the project's greatest advocates and ambassadors. The project could not have been undertaken without their participation and enthusiasm.

A team of local artists worked alongside the project to create photographic and artistic renderings of the activity and findings, resulting in a number of exhibitions at the museum over the last four years.

The Museum's Learning and Outreach Officer also put together a full programme of school participation, assisted by volunteers. This was extremely popular, with the sessions booking out every season and reaching over 800 children in the local area.

Thank you to our project Supporters.

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