

THE EXCAVATION OF TWO BARROWS ON CHELMORTON LOW, DERBYSHIRE

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THE excavation to be described was carried out during the second and third weeks of August 1961. Chelmorton Low is a steep-sided promontory facing west, immediately north of the village of Chelmorton which is four miles E.S.E. of Buxton (SK 113706). The hill from which the promontory projects runs roughly east and west, between the villages of Taddington (east) and Chelmorton (west), a distance of about two miles. The hill is roughly triangular in shape with the broader end (about a mile from north to south) to the west, adjacent to Chelmorton. From about the middle of this broad western end projects a blunt, rectangular promontory defined by the 1,300, 1,350 and 1,400 ft. contours. In the region of the 1,300 ft. contour the promontory is about a third of a mile wide and about a quarter of a mile long. On the northern, western and southern sides the ground falls very steeply for about 200 ft. and there is an extensive view in these directions. The top of the promontory rises to over 1,450 ft., higher than the general level of the hilltop which is defined by the 1,400 ft. contour.

Above the 1,450 ft. contour, on the highest point of the promontory, are situated the two barrows which were excavated. These are placed along the axis of the promontory, i.e. east and west, so that their profiles and their siting in relation to the promontory can be clearly seen when viewed from either north or south. The two mounds are 90 ft. apart at their nearest points and differ somewhat in size. The more westerly of the two, i.e. the one in the more prominent position (barrow no. 1), is the larger, measuring 75 ft. in diameter and rising now, at its highest, to about 7 ft. Barrow no. 2 is 65 ft. in diameter and rises to a height of 5 ft. Both have quite clearly been subjected to a considerable amount of disturbance. In both cases the central area consists of a considerable depression, the silted up remains of the hole dug to uncover the primary burial when the barrows were first excavated in the 18th and 19th centuries.

There is some record of this early work in Bateman.

“At the summit of the eminence which rises above the little village of Chelmorton there are two considerable barrows, within a short distance of each other; the circumference of the larger one is nearly eighty yards, that of the smallest about *twenty*; on

the top of each is a circular cavity or basin. A barrow, about the size of the former of these now mentioned, described by Pilkington as being situate about a quarter of a mile north-east from Chelmorton, was opened in the year 1782, by some labouring men who were searching for stone to build a walled fence in a neighbouring field. After removing a thin covering of moss and soil from the lower extremity of the mount or barrow, they discovered a kind of breastwork, or regular wall of single stones, formed without mortar; not apprehensive of meeting with anything extraordinary beyond this wall, they proceeded with their work, but were soon surprised with the sight of several human bodies; they found that the wall was at the end of a cell or coffin in which the bodies had been deposited. The breadth of the cell within was two feet, but its depth was not fully ascertained, though supposed to be about a yard; the sides consisted of stones about eight inches thick and two feet wide; they were placed on their edge and formed a kind of partition; the stones used for the covering were from one to three inches thick, but not larger than the others. 'Though some of the stones and a small quantity of the soil had fallen into the vault, yet several human bodies or skeletons might be clearly distinguished, lying at full length, with their heads towards the centre of the mount. The bones had never been disturbed, and were apparently united at the different joints, but by the slightest motion were found to be entirely loose and unconnected; upon examination they were discovered to be remarkably strong and sound; the ribs, in particular, were so little decayed that they would easily bend without breaking. Those who saw the bones thought that they were uncommonly large, and it was imagined that the persons to whom they belonged must have been, when alive, at least seven feet high; the teeth were sound and perfect. From the number of bones and skulls, and the dimensions of the vault, it was supposed that it contained four or five human bodies, and though only one vault was opened, it was presumed that others were carried throughout the whole circumference of the mount, and might be about twenty in number.'¹

From the same work there is a reference to the second barrow.

"The other being more accessible, was singled out as the object of research, on the 9th of September, 1846, and though removed to the rock, for a considerable extent, it did not present more tokens of interment than one or two fragments of calcined bone, a neat lance-head of flint and numerous rats' bones, all which were found about the centre. There is strong reason to presume that this barrow had previously undergone examination, although there is no record of such a circumstance having taken place."²

There are one or two points in the foregoing account which call for comment. The dimensions given for the second barrow (20 yds. in circumference) are quite obviously a mistake. They suggest that it was about 20 ft. in diameter. While it is certainly smaller than barrow no. 1, it is still a considerable mound with, as noted above, a diameter of 65 ft. The barrow opened by Pilkington in 1782 was described by Bateman as being situated a quarter of a mile *north-east* from Chelmorton. The two barrows in question are quite clearly due north of the village and, in relation to the village church, are situated in a N.N.W. position. There are two possible explanations for this discrepancy. Either Bateman (or Pilkington) is mistaken, or else the barrow opened by the latter is not one of the two under discussion. However, there is no record

¹ T. Bateman, *Vestiges of the Antiquities of Derbyshire*, 1848, 21-2.

² *Vestiges*, 97.

of any barrow north-east of Chelmorton, and the distance quoted (a quarter of a mile) is correct. It seems likely, then, that this was simply a mistake in direction on the part of either Bateman or Pilkington.

Two different burial rites seem to be represented by the two barrows. From Bateman's account it is quite clear that the burial rite in barrow no. 1 was inhumation. In the second barrow, on the other hand, it appears to have been cremation, suggested by "one or two fragments of calcined bone." In very broad terms this would suggest that barrow no. 1 was earlier than barrow 2, more particularly since the inhumation was probably a secondary burial while the cremation, from its position, could well have been the primary interment. In any case this priority is suggested by the relative positions of the two barrows, no. 1 being quite clearly in the primary position on the promontory. The most interesting aspect of the inhumation rite in barrow no. 1, however, is the fact that the stone coffin or cell appears to have contained no less than four or five bodies, in other words, to have been a collective grave, in whatever sense that term is used. The cell was 2 ft. wide and, although the length was not given, it was long enough for the skeletons to lie at full length, i.e. at least 6 ft. The stones forming it were about 2 ft. wide and 8 in. thick, and were placed on edge. The question of how the bodies were deposited, either successively or contemporaneously, is one which is common to all collective tombs and will not be discussed here.

What does seem to merit consideration, however, is the relationship of barrow no. 1 in particular to the megalithic tombs of Derbyshire. It is not suggested that it is a megalithic tomb, but it does seem clear that the traditions of megalithic funerary architecture were still very much alive when it was built. For example, some of the chambers at Minning Low differ very little in size from the cell in the Chelmorton barrow. Chamber no. 1 (at Minning Low) is only 3 ft. wide at its maximum and even less in height, although it is certainly longer than the 6 ft. suggested for Chelmorton, and appears to acknowledge the difference between passage and chamber by the imbrication of the orthostats about halfway along its (present) length. The chambers of the majority of the Derbyshire megalithic tombs appear to be 4 to 5 ft. wide, about the same in height and between 5 and 10 ft. in length, dimensions which clearly mark them off from the Chelmorton barrow. At the same time, the structural features of the latter suggest that the earlier building tradition was still in being, in however diluted a form, and the communal interment likewise suggests that the burial practice associated with this building tradition was still being followed. Apart from the chamber or cell, the other structural feature which suggests a megalithic background is the presence of a stone kerb around the barrow. The kerb is mentioned in Bateman's account, but its existence was proved also by the excavations to be described below. The second barrow also was shown by excavation to have a stone kerb. The position of the burial in barrow no. 1, immediately inside the kerb, suggests that it was a secondary and not a primary interment. Presumably the latter was at the centre and has been destroyed by the excavation which produced the depression in the top of the mound.

THE 1961 EXCAVATIONS

In all the two barrows were investigated in five places, four in barrow no. 1 (trenches A, B, C, D) and one in barrow no. 2 (trench E). The features revealed by these excavations will now be described.

Barrow No. 1 (Plate Va, b).

Trench A (Fig. 24). A trench 34 ft. 6 in. long and 6 ft. wide was dug from the northern edge of the mound towards the centre to the point where the central depression began. Its purpose was to investigate the structure of the mound in a section not disturbed by previous investigation. At a

Chelmorton Low, Derbyshire: Barrow No. 1, Section A

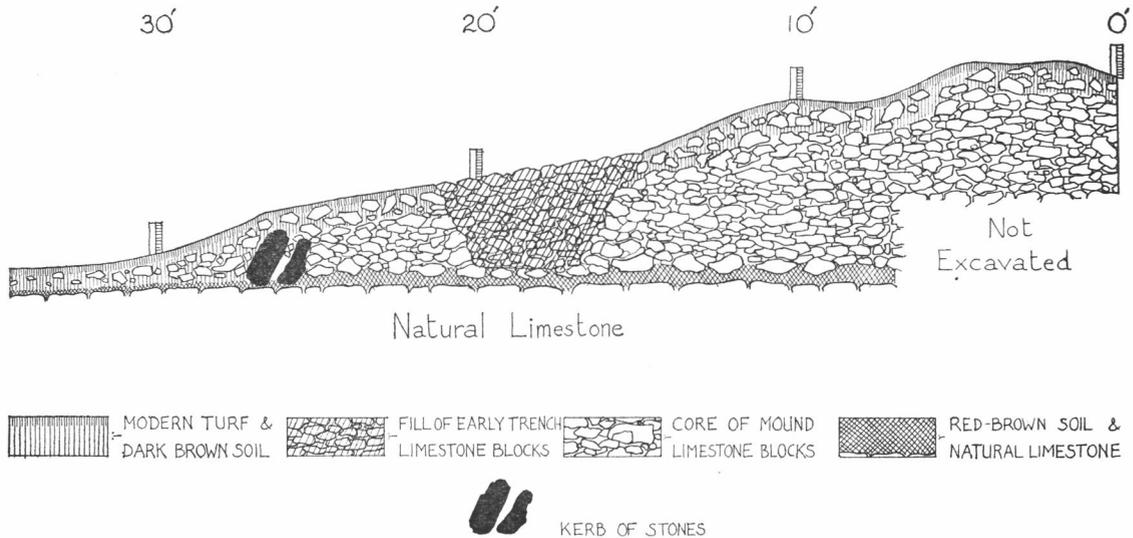


FIG. 24. Barrow no. 1, section A.

distance of 7 ft. 6 in. from the outer end of the trench there was a stone kerb running at right angles across the trench. It consisted of large stones up to 2 ft. long and wide and about 8 in. thick set on edge. It was noticeable that the surface of the ground tipped downwards just above the kerb. The stratigraphy of the section was very simple, consisting of virtually a single layer. This was composed of large stones with practically no soil and often with very large spaces between them. Some of the stones were over 2 ft. long. Between 14 ft. 6 in. and 21 ft. 6 in. from the inner end of the trench there was clear evidence of recent disturbance in the form of a filled-in trench cut at right angles to the excavation trench. There was no turf or

topsoil over this section which was visible as a band of stones running around the whole circumference of the barrow roughly midway between the centre and the perimeter. Where excavated it extended down to the original ground surface. Since the trench has been almost completely refilled (with stones), it cannot be dismissed as the result of quarrying for stone, and must therefore be regarded as part of the early investigation of the barrow. Because of the limitations imposed by the weather the last 7 ft. of the trench were left undug to a depth of 3 ft.

Assuming that the old ground surface continued under this section at the same level, the present height of the barrow at centre is 7 ft. Its original height was probably about 10 ft. Below the layer of stones forming the bulk of the mound was a layer of red-brown clayey soil, 4-6 in. thick, beneath which was the natural limestone. The lowest stones of the layer were embedded in the red-brown soil which presumably represents the original, pre-barrow ground surface. The top of this red-brown layer is at approximately the same level as the present ground surface outside the barrow. It looks as if the weight of the superimposed material had gradually forced the lowest layer of stones into the old ground surface, giving them the appearance of having been embedded. Outside the kerb (i.e. from 27 ft. to 34 ft. 6 in.) there was about a foot of soil above the limestone. The first 9 or 10 in. consisted of modern turf (about 4 in.), with dark brown soil beneath, mixed with both large and small stones, almost certainly spilled down from the barrow. The last inch or two above the limestone was the red-brown clayey soil similar to that found, in a thicker layer, beneath the barrow.

Trench B (Fig. 25). Trench B was laid out on the opposite side of the barrow from trench A. Its purpose was to investigate the kerb and to establish the original diameter of the monument. The kerb consisted of a rather irregular arrangement of stones between 1 ft. and 2 ft. in length, set sometimes on edge, sometimes in rough courses one above the other. In general the kerb was about 18 in. above the natural limestone and about 1 ft. above the red-brown clayey soil covering it. Within the kerb the first foot or so consisted of large stones mixed with a certain amount of dark brown soil. The excavation was not carried below this point, but the next layer seemed to be a much more compact setting of large stones. The top of this compact layer rose towards the centre of the mound in conformity with the present surface. The eastern sides of trenches A and B were in alignment, and on this line the two sections of kerb uncovered were 64 ft. apart (measured to the outer edges). This, however, does not necessarily represent the original diameter of the monument. The eastern portion of the kerb as revealed by excavation (trench C, below) was only 23 ft. to the east of this line, so that the true diameter must lie to the west of trench A, probably in the western part of trench B. Here the kerb is approximately 2 ft. further south and, making a similar allowance for the northern edge, this gives a diameter of approximately 68 ft. north to south. Trench D was dug on the western side of the mound between two points 64 ft. and 68 ft. west of the eastern kerb. No trace of the kerb was found so that it must lie outside these limits —

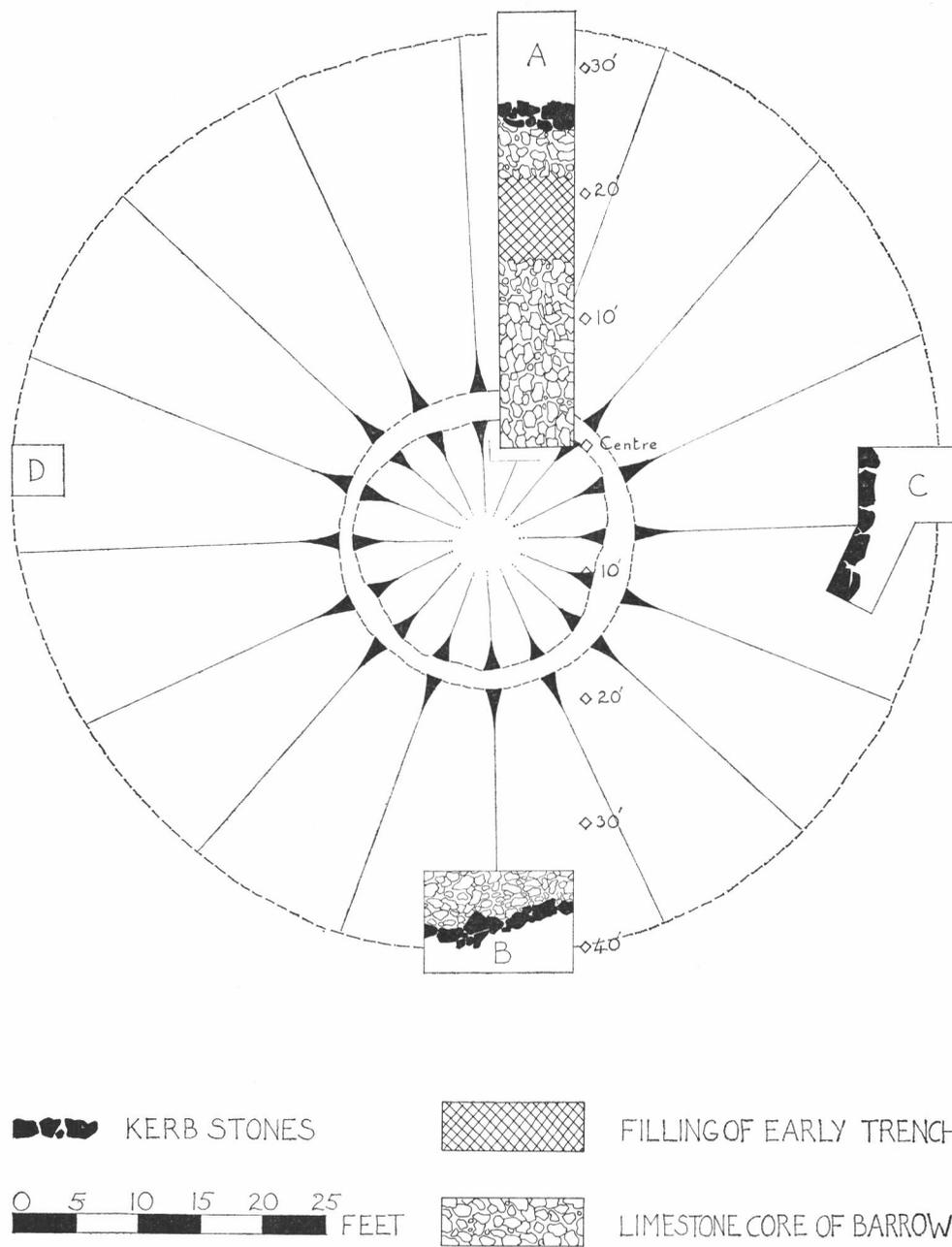


FIG. 25. Plan of barrow no. 1.

either less than 64 ft. or more than 68 ft. In view of the estimated north/south diameter the higher seems the more likely. However, there is no certainty that the original monument was a true circle so that there is no point in placing too much reliance on such estimates. It can be simply stated that the kerb appears to have had an outside diameter of between 60 and 70 ft.

Trench C (Fig. 25). Trench C was laid out on the eastern side of the mound, its northern edge in line with the southern end of the main trench (A). The kerb was encountered right at its western end and by extending another 6 ft. to the S.S.W. about 12 ft. of kerb in all was exposed. In this section it consisted of a series of massive stones up to 3 ft. in length and between 12 in. and 18 in. wide and high. These were resting on the red-brown clayey soil covering the natural limestone. The spaces between the kerb stones were filled with smaller stones and dark brown soil.

Trench D (Fig. 25). The purpose of trench D was to try to establish the position of the kerb at a fourth point on the circumference of the mound. A trench (4 ft. x 4 ft.) was laid out on the western side of the mound, its northern edge in line with the northern edge of trench C. The distance east to west between the two trenches was 64 ft. No trace of the kerb was found in trench D. If a kerb exists on this side, it must be just outside the limits of the trench either to the east or the west. Unfortunately it was not possible to extend trench D to test this in the time available.

Barrow No. 2 (Plate VIa, b).

Trench E (Fig. 26). Trench E was dug on the south-eastern edge of the second barrow. Its purpose was to see if a kerb existed similar to that in barrow no. 1. An area 16 ft. by 10 ft. was cleared, and a section of kerb 16½ ft. long uncovered. One of the most interesting aspects of this was that, in plan view, the kerb was not curved but consisted of two straight lengths with a clear angle between them. The western portion was 10 ft. long and parallel to the sides of the trench. The eastern section was at an angle of 154° to this and was 6½ ft. long. Without further excavation it is impossible to say how far these straight lengths extended or indeed if the practice was continued around the whole of the barrow. What does seem clear, however, is that the arrangement was intentional and not fortuitous. The stones of the two sections are carefully aligned and the angle is quite clear cut. There are two possible explanations of this layout. The first is that the kerb was not circular but polygonal — in other words it consisted of a series of straight lengths. If the angle of 154° was constant throughout this would mean that there were fourteen sections of slightly less than 12 ft. each. The second possible explanation is that the eastern section of the kerb and the angle mark one side of an incurving entrance. In an area where the tradition of megalithic architecture was still in evidence such an explanation is at least feasible. Only excavation can decide which, if either, of these two possibilities is correct. The stones forming the kerb varied considerably in size and shape. The largest were up to 2½ ft. long, 1½ ft. wide and 1 ft. thick. Some of them were set on edge, leaning inwards; these were mainly of slab shape.



a. Barrow no. 1. The massive stone kerb in trench B.



b. Barrow no. 1. The stone kerb and surface of the natural limestone in trench C.



a. Barrow no. 2. General view from the south.



b. Barrow no. 2. Detail showing kerb and outside it the surface of the natural limestone exposed.

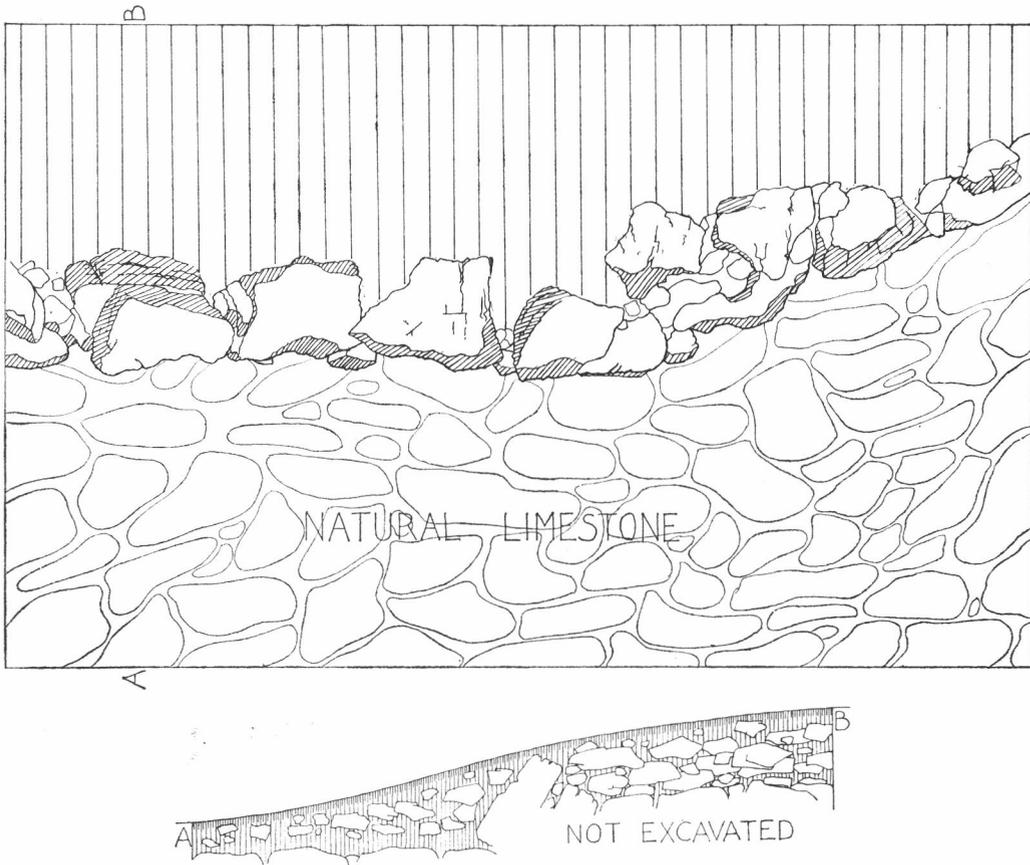


FIG. 26. Barrow no. 2, trench E. Plan and section of the stone kerb on the south-eastern edge of the mound.

Other portions of the kerb were formed of single boulders or stones forming rough coursing. The kerb rose about 1 ft. above the present ground level and $1\frac{1}{2}$ ft. above the solid limestone which is here only 6 in. below the modern turf. Many of the kerb stones appeared to be resting directly on the limestone. This could be the result of their having been set in a prepared foundation or simply a result of sinking by their own weight through the thin topsoil covering. Within the kerb there were large and small stones mixed with soil to a depth of a foot or so below the present turf line. The removal of this revealed the top of a layer (not excavated) of larger stones much more tightly packed, with much less soil.

Bad weather during the period of the excavation and the very exposed nature of the site reduced working time by about half. On a number of days

no work at all was possible and most days were interrupted, usually several times. On only two days during the fortnight was there no interruption due to the weather. All this meant a drastic reduction in the proposed programme of work. It has been intended to cut sections to the centres of both barrows to examine their structure and to expose the whole of the kerb of at least one of them. In the event only part of this programme was achieved. What is now required is a complete examination of the whole of each mound within the kerb down to bedrock so that those portions hitherto undisturbed by earlier excavators can be investigated. Such a task was beyond the resources available in 1961, and no excavation was carried out in the following year. It is intended, however, to proceed with this task as soon as it becomes possible.

The proposal for complete excavation raises the question of the restoration of the sites. In their present state they are grass-grown mounds with large depressions in the top and evidence of other disturbance visible on the surface. The kerbs are not visible. There would be no point in restoring the central depressions so that the restoration of a regular mound seems called for. In such a case it would seem to be an excellent opportunity of restoring the two mounds to something like their original appearance and allowing them to be seen as pieces of prehistoric architecture rather than as humps in the ground. There is sufficient evidence to enable this to be done. The most important feature is the kerb which clearly delimits the area of each. The second point is that both mounds were built of practically solid stone — in other words they were cairns, so that by not restoring the turf one could get back to something like the original appearance. One uncertain factor is the amount of stone involved in each and the height therefore to which it was heaped. Stone has certainly been removed for wall building, but how much is impossible to say. If, however, only the stone still remaining on each barrow was heaped up within the exposed kerb a very good impression would be gained of the original appearance of these funerary monuments. This appearance would be visible not only to viewers on the site but, because of the spectacular siting, from a distance also. From several miles away it would be possible to see the light stone of the mounds standing out in contrast to the dark green of the surrounding vegetation, an effect no doubt intended by the original builders and one which it would seem worthwhile to restore.

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