

THE RE-EXCAVATION OF GREEN LOW — A BRONZE AGE ROUND BARROW ON ALSOP MOOR, DERBYSHIRE

By BARRY M. MARSDEN

ON 25 April 1845, Thomas Bateman in the afternoon excavated the round barrow called Green Low on Alsop Moor (SK 151554).

"This tumulus had been heaped over with a rocky and unequal surface, in which a hole had been cut in order to serve the purpose of a cist . . . on clearing out the soil with which the cist was filled, the skeleton of a man in the prime of life was laid bare; his knees were contracted and drawn up till they nearly approached the head, and immediately in the rear of the shoulders were placed an elegant and most elaborately-ornamented drinking-cup, a piece of spherical pyrites . . . a flint instrument of a circular-headed form, and a splendid flint dagger; a little lower down the back of the skeleton there lay three beautifully chipped and barbed arrow-heads of flint, seven other instruments of the same material but of inferior workmanship, and three instruments made from the ribs of some animal, neatly rounded at each end . . . Still lower down, close to the pelvis, lay the remains of an infant; across the pelvis lay a bone pin . . . The contents of this barrow are highly interesting, as they present a striking degree of similarity to the contents of barrows discovered in Wiltshire . . . The drinking-cup is quite different to any heretofore found in Derbyshire . . . All the flints here discovered had undergone the action of fire, and present a spotless white, which materially improves their appearance."¹

The barrow Bateman describes is that of a Beaker chieftain, the "drinking-cup" the typical long-necked A beaker common in Derbyshire barrows of the early Bronze Age. L. V. Grinsell has suggested that the assemblage of grave-goods, so characteristic of those in Wessex barrows of the period, could well indicate the burial of a Wessex chieftain — possibly an émigré accepted into local society.² The infant inhumation could represent a sacrifice, although this cannot be proved; there is however sufficient evidence from burials in Derbyshire to establish the practice.³ The bone tools regarded by Bateman as modelling instruments could be, according to Ashbee, the remains of composite bows.⁴ The bone pin must have secured the wrappings of the body.

On the evidence of Bateman's account a Beaker aristocrat of the early Bronze Age was interred in a rock-grave in the usual contracted attitude,

¹ T. Bateman, *Vestiges of the Antiquities of Derbyshire*, 1848, 59-60.

² L. V. Grinsell, *The Ancient Burial Mounds of England*, 1953, 227.

³ T. Bateman, *Ten Years' Diggings*, 1861, 79.

⁴ P. Ashbee, *The Bronze Age Round Barrow in Britain*, 1960, 105. For other examples of these bone tools found with Derbyshire beaker burials, see Bateman, *Diggings*, 89, 103, 107.

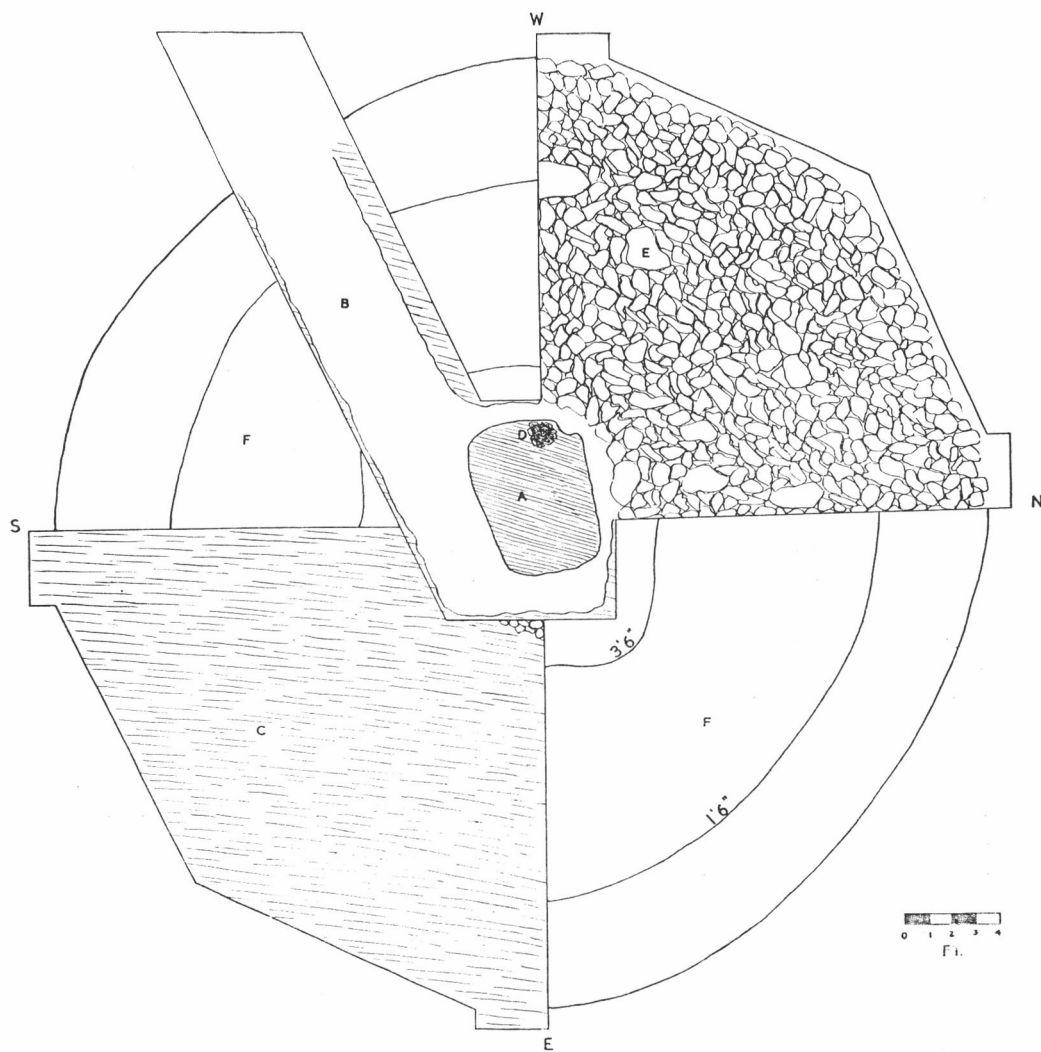


FIG. 15. Plan of Green Low, Alsop Moor.

A. Grave-pit. B. Bateman's trench. C. Limestone strata. D. Deposit of bones left by Bateman.
E. Cairn material. F. Unexcavated area.

accompanied by a child, an extravagantly decorated A beaker, and a fine collection of flint and bone artifacts. As no definitive re-excavation of a Bateman barrow had been completed and fully published,⁵ it was decided to re-excavate Green Low to check the methods of his operations and his report.

⁵ Ladman's Low, Dow Low and one at Hindlow, all near Buxton, have been re-excavated since 1928, but no full accounts have been published. See Ashbee, 46, for a plan of the Hindlow barrow. J. Forde-Johnston has begun the excavation of two barrows on Chelmorton Low, *D.A.J.*, LXXXII (1962), 82-90.

In 1963 the barrow on an elevated stretch of pasture west of the A515 Buxton-Ashbourne road appeared as a grassy, flat-topped mound 3 ft. 6 in. in height and almost 40 ft. in diameter. Although Bateman gave no height for the barrow, it seemed to have been reduced probably to provide stone for wall-building during the 18th century enclosures. Like most early Bronze Age barrows in Derbyshire, it was built on the limestone plateau of the west close to others of the same period.

THE 1963 EXCAVATIONS

The north-west quadrant was examined first. The turf was removed, and the cairn material, mainly small pieces of limestone mixed with a few larger ones, exposed. Finds included a number of pieces and chippings of a grey-white patinated flint, mainly scattered round the periphery of the barrow, four quartz pebbles, and three fragments of dark grey wheel-turned Romano-British pottery, including a rim-sherd and two wall-sherds, of the 2nd century (Fig. 15).

The first section produced a few small sherds of dark-cored reddish ware of Romano-British date, eight quartz pebbles, and more flint flakes, again of the grey-white type, scattered indiscriminately. The second section yielded a further eight quartz pebbles, and more flint flakes of the same kind. More significant was the discovery of a fine side-scraper of white flint. A few more pieces of reddish pottery and a sherd of samian ware were found, also the canine tooth of a child, two teeth of the long-horned ox and further fragments of animal bone.

The third section in this quadrant exposed the limestone bedrock at a depth of 15-18 in. In the cairn material were further flint chippings, a few sherds of reddish ware and two quartz pebbles. Teeth and bones included the pre-molar of an adult with rather long roots, the canine tooth of a horse, three molars and two pieces of antler of the red deer, the upper canine of a fox, the metacarpal bone of a raven and a few sheep bones; one antler piece has a rounded end, and both could be broken parts of tools of some description (Fig. 16).

When the quadrant was cleared down to the natural surface, a small area close to the barrow centre showed by its evident looseness that it had been previously disturbed. The northern side of a pit was soon exposed, and the quadrant then widened at the centre by a rectangular cutting wide enough to include the limits of the grave-pit. Immediately below the turf of this area a fine knife of blue-grey flint was found, almost 3 in. long and chipped down both edges; the lower part of one edge was slightly convex and showed wear consistent with its use as a chopping tool or scraper. Close to the knife was a human molar in good condition.

The very loose material of this central area above the pit was removed section by section. The first produced teeth of the ox, horse and red deer, the wish-bone of a mallard (*furculum*) and pieces of sheep bone. Human bones included three toe-bones, a finger-bone, two wrist-bones (*osmagnum*)

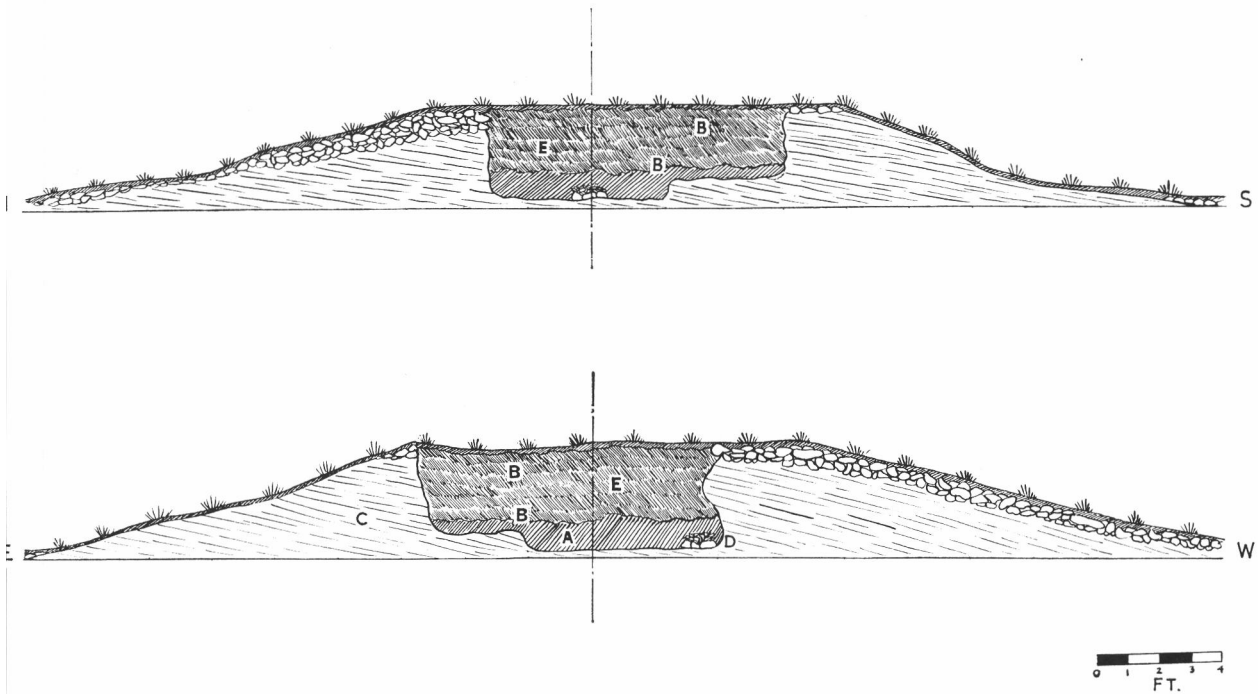


FIG. 16. Diametric sections at Green Low.
 A. Grave-pit. B. Positions of arrowheads. C. Limestone strata.
 D. Deposit of bones left by Bateman. E. Disturbed area.

and a left heel-bone (*astragalus*). In the second section was found a beaker rim-sherd with slashed decoration worked in a chevron pattern, which proved to be unrelated to the beaker found in 1845. Human bones included those of a right and left thumb, a cuboid, a lumbar vertebra, and part of the right orbit of a skull. There were also two ox teeth, a flint flake and a quartz pebble. The most important find however was a superbly chipped barbed and tanged arrowhead of white flint with slightly convex edges. The third section brought the level to the floor of the pit which proved generally even. The eastern side produced three human finger-bones, two toe-bones, a child's tooth, constituent bones of a pig's hock, and the shaft-piece of a sheep's tibia. Another barbed and tanged arrowhead of white flint was finely chipped and rather longer than the first; a nearby piece of white flint had possible trimming down one edge (Fig. 17).

The remains of the skeleton were found in the north-west angle of the grave-pit where Bateman had left them carefully piled on a layer of small stones. The skull, femurs and tibiae were missing. The bones remaining comprised many shattered fragments of rib; pieces of the left and right scapula; the sacrum; the left and right innominate, fibulae, radius, ulnae, clavicles and patellae; the right astragalus; the sternum; numerous toe- and

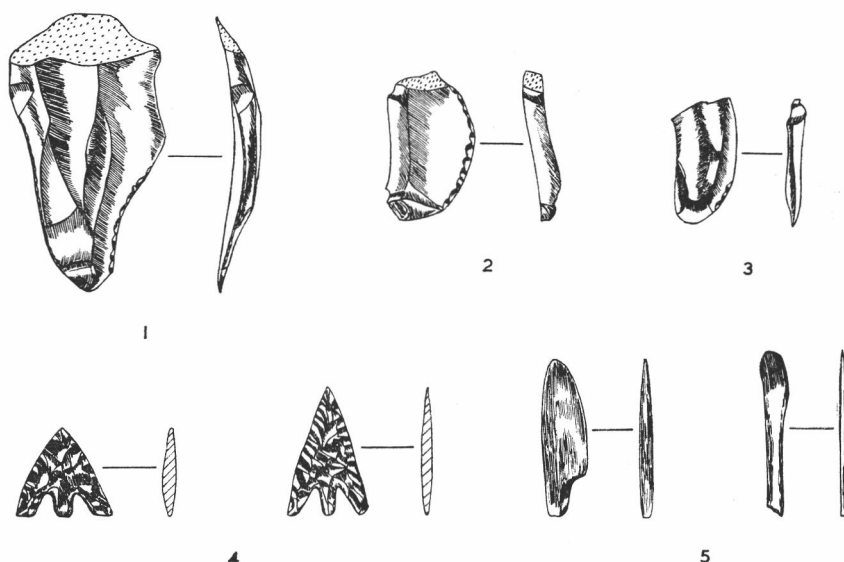


FIG. 17. 1. Flint knife/scraping tool. 2. Flint scraper. 3. Flint implement found in grave-pit. 4. Arrowheads. 5. Tools made from deer antlers.

finger-bones; most of the vertebral bones, including five lumbar, eight thoracic and nine cervical vertebrae.

The rock-grave, orientated a little west of centre, was very roughly square: the north side was 5 ft. 9 in. across, the south 5 ft. 6 in., the east 4 ft. 8 in., and the west 5 ft. The south side of the pit had been disturbed showing that Bateman's trench had broken in from this side.

The south-east quadrant was then examined to discover the limits of the 1845 excavation. The bedrock here was much higher than in the north-west quadrant, with only about 6-9 in. of made material, from which two ox teeth and part of a whetstone were obtained. The area south of the pit was very loose and proved barren. About 4 ft. from the southern edge of the rock-grave the bedrock was exposed, rising almost vertically, although in a very rough and jagged section, to the surface. Here clearly was the southern side of Bateman's trench, which running due east had penetrated 3 ft. beyond and to the south of the pit before the pit had been noticed. The disturbed area continued into the south-west quadrant, no doubt indicating the direction from which the trench had come. Excavation of this trench proved that it had been driven in from this side in a general east-north-easterly direction. This trench opened out into a wider cutting towards the centre of the barrow. The workmen, using picks and shovels, had hewn their trench into the side of the mound, its floor sloping rapidly into the solid rock to a depth of 3 ft. 6 in. on the south side — 6 in. lower than the floor of the pit. Possibly they worked unsupervised, as was not uncommon at this time, even with Bateman,⁶ and apparently hacked through the natural strata towards the centre.

⁶ Bateman, *Vestiges*, 62.

This would not have been difficult as the rock is rather friable and easily prised away. They broke into the pit from the south side, possibly disturbing and smashing much of the skeleton before it was noticed; the condition of some of the bones shows their lack of care. The trench was fully cleared; it was about 4 ft. wide with very uneven sides and floor, and it yielded an ox tooth and a quartz pebble. The lead tablet usually left by Bateman in the barrows he excavated was not found at Green Low.⁷

CONCLUSIONS

Bateman's account was proved to be substantially true. In the early Bronze Age, a pit-grave had been dug to accommodate a crouched inhumation, most probably that of a tribal leader. The burials, pottery and artifacts had been deposited, the pit filled with soil, and a heap of stones piled over the natural outcrop to form a cairn. There was no sign of a kerb or revetment to the barrow, which contained only the primary burial.

The skull orbit found in the pit fitted the skull now in the Bateman collection in the Sheffield City Museum. The other discoveries could all be related to the original excavation, with the exception of the beaker sherd which did not belong to the beaker with the burial. The two arrowheads are fine examples of the flint-working technique of the Beaker people. The second one found bears little resemblance to the other four from the grave. The weapons, like those from Green Low in Sheffield City Museum, are too fine and delicate to have had any practical use. Their edges are finely serrated, and exhibit flaking of the highest quality. They must be regarded as being for funerary purposes only.

The bones found in the pit had been cleared into a corner by Bateman. The skull, tibiae and femurs had been removed, the latter to enable him to calculate the height of the individual. The flints scattered throughout the undisturbed north-west quadrant may be explained in one of two ways: either they were chippings ritually struck from a core,⁸ or they were scraped up from the field surface during the construction of the barrow. The first explanation may gain some support from the fact that most of the flakes are of the same grey-white patinated type. None of the pieces bore the impression of any secondary working. A few pieces of chert also appeared in the sections, together with tiny fragments of water vole bones.

The animal bones are discussed by D. Bramwell in the appendix; they appear to be the cast-in remains of a funeral feast. The presence of so many quartz pebbles in the material of the mound points to the practice of depositing them either as amulets to guard against evil or to improve the buried person's prospects of re-birth.⁹ The crouched position of the body, similar to a pre-natal attitude, might also be held to symbolize re-birth into a future life; the iron pyrites found in 1845, in conjunction with the pieces of flint, was most probably to provide heat and light. None of the human teeth found

⁷ S. Isaacson, *Barrow Digging by a Barrow Knight*, 1845, 69.

⁸ Grinsell, 37, 116.

⁹ Grinsell, 35, 37.

in the barrow fitted the skull in the Bateman collection, although the child's tooth found at the bottom of the pit-grave must have belonged to the infant accompanying the main burial.

The re-excavation provided ample proof of Bateman's methods of excavation. Conducted in a single afternoon, the work was of necessity crude and rudimentary by present-day standards. The human bones scattered in the eastern side of the pit prove that the skeleton must have been partly destroyed before it was noticed; they had clearly been shovelled aside. The general lack of care is further shown by the finding of the two barbed and tanged arrowheads in the infill of the pit, unnoticed by the original excavators.

Bateman's method of excavation by a trench driven straight to the barrow centre, ignoring the rest of the mound, was typical of his times. His claims to vigilance, caution and precision must be judged in their historical context. Then his seeming carelessness can to some extent be defended. Before him, only Colt-Hoare and Cunnington had preserved any consistent record of their work. At least Bateman left a reasonably full record of his work; his finds have been preserved, and his notes are available for re-analysis and re-appraisal. Although at heart a curio-hunter and collector, Bateman was also a pioneer conscious of the implications of his work and with the foresight to publish the results of his research.

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REPORT ON ANIMAL AND BIRD REMAINS FROM GREEN LOW

By D. BRAMWELL

Bateman states that "in removing the upper portion of the barrow, a few human bones, horses' teeth, and rats' bones were discovered." In the present excavation a few other vertebrates were found to be present, thus extending the list and shedding a little more light on the possible taste in animal food in the early Bronze Age.

HORSE (*Equus Caballus*).

Represented by two lower molars from the grave-pit, and by a canine tooth and a cannon bone fragment from the N.W. quadrant. The dentine of the first two teeth has been heavily eroded, leaving the enamel folds as thin upstanding ridges. The remains belong to what we should call a pony — a small horse of 12-13 hands, usually described as the "Celtic" pony.

OX (*Bos longifrons*).

A number of teeth of small oxen were found, including the milk teeth of young animals. The teeth were found mainly in the grave-pit and the N.W. quadrant. The only bone clearly identified as ox was one of the distal articulations of a metacarpal from the N.W. quadrant. At least two animals are represented, and their size is typical of the small prehistoric breed described by Owen as *Bos longifrons*.