

EXCAVATION OF TWO MOUNDS ON THURSLEY COMMON

BY

J. X. W. P. CORCORAN, M.A., Ph.D., F.S.A.

IN March and April 1959 sections were cut through two mounds on Thursley Common in an attempt to determine their date and any cultural associations.¹ The mounds are marked on Ordnance Survey maps as "tumuli,"² and one was scheduled as an ancient monument by the Ministry of Works. Permission to excavate was kindly given by the landowner, Colonel W. H. Whitbread of Warrenmere, Thursley, and the Ministry of Works, Ancient Monuments Division.

The mounds lie a short distance to the north of a trackway running westwards across Thursley Common as it climbs a low rise. They are situated on a slightly curving ridge running in an approximately east-west direction at a height of 200 feet above Ordnance Datum. The immediate environment is dominated by sand with a covering of coniferous trees and heather. To the south-east and north-east of mound A there is a marshy area marked by reeds. Prior to excavation mound A³ appeared to be much disturbed, apparently built of sand and turf and clear of trees but with a discontinuous covering of heather. There were signs of extensive disturbance at the centre of its somewhat flattened top. It was approximately 9 feet high, almost 90 feet in diameter with traces of what appeared to be a ditch and outer bank approximately 100 feet in diameter. To the south-west a small extension of the mound could be detected. Mound B,⁴ 200 yards to the west of A, was similar in dimensions and appearance with perhaps less evidence of disturbance but more thickly covered with heather. It had stronger surface indications of a possible ditch.

EXCAVATION

Mound A

It was decided to excavate mound A by the quadrant method, and trench I, four feet in width, was planned to run northwards towards the centre of the mound for a distance of 60 feet. This

¹ *National Grid References*: Mound A, SU (41)/9109 4092; Mound B, SU (41) 9089/4090.

² Ordnance Survey One Inch Sheet 169; Six Inch Sheets XXXVIII NW and XXXVII NE.

³ Grinsell's Thursley Common No. 2, *Sy.A.C.*, XLII, 59, Pl. XI.

⁴ Grinsell's Thursley Common No. 1.

cut through the position of the supposed ditch, but it was evident that there had never been a ditch although what appeared to be a slight bank was composed of soil both heavier and containing more stones, including ironstone, than the mound proper.

The mound was composed of sand with well-defined lines apparently formed of decayed vegetation. It was at first assumed that this was evidence for a turf-built barrow; but further excavation showed that these dark lines were too regularly disposed to allow of such an interpretation (pl. VIIa). A similar arrangement of dark bands and sand could be seen in disused military slit-trenches dug into the sandy ridge to the south of the mounds. Although there were clear signs of horizontal demarcation there was none of the typical arrangement of individual turves as seen in the true turf-built barrow. This suggested a natural formation but until a complete section through the mound could be examined it could not be assumed that there had never been humanly built additions to what already appeared to be a natural mound.

With trench II cutting into the centre from the north and meeting trench I it was clear that this was a mound of completely natural formation. The centre had been extensively disturbed, possibly by antiquarians within the last two centuries, although there is no known record of this. The mound was also patterned with a complex of rabbit warrens. Trench II also cut through what had appeared to be the bank and ditch but revealed nothing of archaeological significance.

Mound B

Having established that mound A was archaeologically sterile, a trial trench was cut running northwards to the centre of mound B. This revealed that the latter was essentially similar in composition to mound A.

INTERPRETATION

Local tradition attributes these mounds to iron-working in the district, for which there appears to be historical evidence; but their position athwart the parish boundary between Thursley and Elstead suggests an earlier date. Any explanation of the formation of these mounds, however, must omit human activity in either the prehistoric or historic period, as a simple geological interpretation is possible.⁵ Although a detailed geological appreciation would be out of place in this context, some short interpretation is appropriate in view of the wider archaeological implications discussed below.

Mound A is formed of layers of sand and small stones up to two millimetres in diameter and separated by continuous bands of brown material, sometimes converging. These bands have an appreciable silt content. In the lower part of the mound the sandy

⁵ The site was visited by Dr. K. M. Clayton, M.Sc., of the London School of Economics, who kindly interpreted the geological features to the writer.

material is mustard-yellow in colour but changes through buff, brown-grey and pale fawn to almost white near the surface. The bands of silting are usually between two and three millimetres thick although occasionally they are as much as 20 millimetres thick. They change less in colour, being pale chocolate-brown in the lower part and very dark brown, almost black, in the upper part of the mound. They are mostly a few inches apart but are not completely regular and in places they converge. At the lowest level reached an exceptionally thick band of sandy material, 12 inches thick, is underlain by a layer of lustrous fragments of carstone up to 3 inches by 1½ inches in size and, less common, small fragments of chert up to 1 inch in length.

The mounds are stabilized dunes, and were built up in a series of layers as a result of the trapping by vegetation of blown sand. The silt bands represent successive soil accretions. Change in colour of the sand is best interpreted partially as a change in the character of the blown material at the time of deposition and partially as the result of the gradual podsolization of the surface of the Folkestone Sand over the surrounding area. The dunes lie on the stone layer of the original desert stone pavement. There is no evidence of wind direction at the time of formation as the mounds appear to be quite symmetrical although the extension to the south-west of mound A may be significant.

DISCUSSION

The two mounds have been referred to frequently in literature relating to the prehistory of the county.⁶ In external appearance they are indistinguishable from round barrows of the Bronze Age, and one recent writer has been prompted to date them on this evidence to c. 1600–1200 B.C.⁷ The results of this excavation suggest that, before attributing any similar mound in the county to human construction of prehistoric or early historic date, some study should be made of the environment. It is apparent that, given an ecology similar to that of the mounds at Thursley, any earlier references to excavation or finds should be studied before that particular mound can be considered artificial. As Grinsell noticed in his analysis of alleged round barrows in Surrey, their distribution in the county is centred mainly on heathlands, particularly on those of Greensand. This contrasts with the distribution of barrows in neighbouring counties which are predominantly on the chalk.⁸ Grinsell's analysis shows that true barrows containing Bronze Age burials existed in the county, and in view of the plentiful evidence of Mesolithic activity and occupation of Surrey Greensand such evidence of continued occupation is not unexpected. It cannot be assumed,

⁶ E.g. D. C. Whimster, *The Archaeology of Surrey*, London (1931), 236. G. J. Copley, *An Archaeology of South-East England*, London (1958), 296.

⁷ Nicholas Thomas, *A Guide to Prehistoric England*, London (1960), 191.

⁸ Grinsell, *op. cit.*, 27.

however, that all circular mounds bearing a superficial similarity to true barrows are man-made.

Some 100 circular mounds exist at present in Surrey, and twice this number are known to have existed in the past. Many of the mounds listed in Grinsell's analysis are accepted as barrows, although most of them have failed to yield either prehistoric artifacts or evidence of interment even after excavation. Many of those on sand have dimensions similar to those at Thursley and some, such as the line of four lying on the ridge between Frensham Great and Little Ponds, may be stabilized dunes. It is not possible, however, to attribute a natural origin to all mounds on the Greensand, as there is evidence for Bronze Age interments, for example, in the destroyed Silvermere barrow at Walton-on-Thames and the barrows on Whitmore Common, Worplesdon, all lying on Bagshot Sand. Structural details of these mounds are unknown, and it is possible that these Middle and Late Bronze Age interments were inserted into already existing mounds which may have been of natural formation. It is clear from the literature that most natural mounds have been accepted as artificial barrows, and it is just as likely that Late Bronze Age man, accustomed to inserting his burials in already existing barrows, was as easily misled as the modern archaeologist.

A study of alleged barrows in Surrey, therefore, reveals that few have given clear evidence of prehistoric burial. This contrasts with counties such as Wiltshire, Derbyshire and Yorkshire, the excavation of whose barrows have produced abundant artifacts of the Bronze Age. This is not a denial of the occurrence of man-made barrows in the country during the prehistoric period, as accounts of some earlier excavations prove. It must nevertheless be admitted that many mounds lying on sandy heathlands in Surrey cannot be confidently accepted as true barrows if conditions in the past would have made possible the formation of stabilized dunes, and if there are no records of primary burials from excavation reports. The destroyed barrow on Merrow Downs, lying on chalk, in which Pitt-Rivers found prehistoric pottery and remains of post-holes⁹ contrasts with one of the barrows at Farnham Royal. In this a nineteenth-century antiquary failed to find a burial but was careful to note that "this barrow, like the rest, appears to have been formed of small layers of sand of varying hues, apparently brought from different localities, and deposited in small quantities on the mound".¹⁰ This description, despite its lack of scientific precision and accuracy, would equally apply to the mounds at Thursley, particularly as the former lies on the Lower Greensand.

CONCLUSION

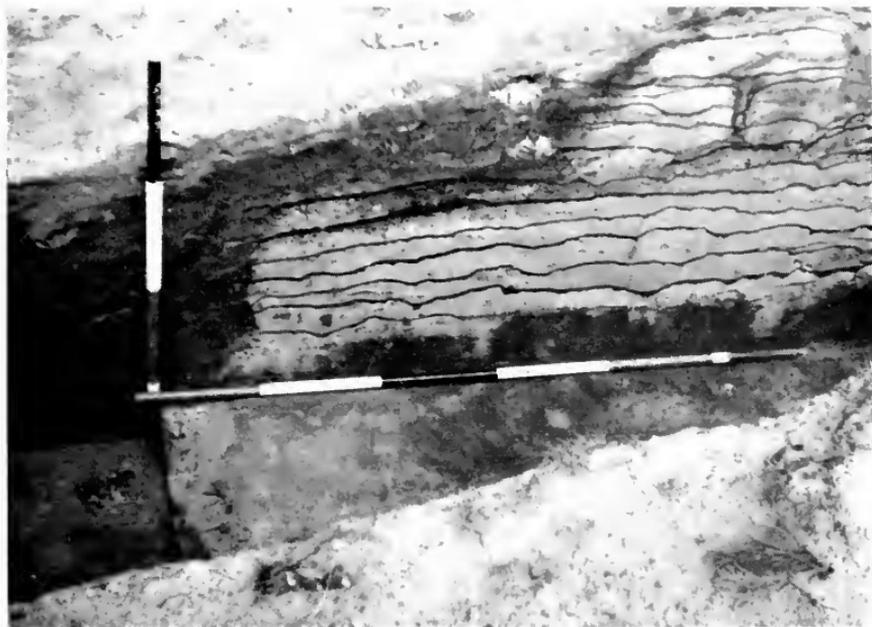
Although the excavation of the mounds on Thursley Common has provided negative archaeological evidence, it is of value in demon-

⁹ *Sy.A.C.*, XIII, 27.

¹⁰ *Sy.A.C.*, VII, 192-3.

strating the possibility that some mounds normally interpreted as bowl-barrows may be of natural formation. This may appear to deprive the county of some evidence of Bronze Age occupation as the omission of some suspect mounds from the distribution map will show. That Surrey was not devoid of occupation during the period is shown by the various artifacts dating to the Bronze Age, and by the existence of those mounds which are clearly of human construction, such as the bell-barrows of the county.¹¹ It must be accepted, however, that most of Surrey would not have been attractive to Bronze Age pastoralists, still less to agriculturalists; and after the Mesolithic period clear evidence of occupation in any strength is not attested until the Iron Age. In a culturally isolated area such as Surrey in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages it would not have been inappropriate for descendants of Mesolithic hunters to retain their traditions and techniques for a period longer than that in neighbouring, geologically more favoured, counties. Such people would have little appreciation of, and less need for, the round barrows of culturally more advanced pastoralists with their leanings towards an embryonic aristocracy.

¹¹ L. V. Grinsell, *Sy.A.C.*, XL, 56-64.



a. THURSLEY, MOUND A: WEST FACE OF TRENCH I, SHOWING LAYERS OF SAND AND THINNER BANDS OF SILT (p. 88).



b. LATE BRONZE AGE POT FROM FARNHAM (p. 112).