

EXCAVATION OF A MOUND IN WESTON WOOD, ALBURY

A FURTHER NOTE

BY

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THE interpretation offered by Lady Hanworth and Mr. Hastings of the evidence from this excavation¹ presents two major difficulties. In this note I set these out and then attempt a very tentative reassessment of the evidence.

The first difficulty concerns the relationship of the old road to the mound. This road (shown on the map of Senex of 1729) is, as the writers accept, clearly earlier than 1745-56 which they have adopted as the earliest date for the mound. I, however, believe the mound to be earlier than the road, and therefore to have been built much earlier than in the eighteenth century.² As the writers say, "the road, which enters Weston Wood opposite Weston House leads north, taking a wide bend to the east in the middle of the wood to avoid an oversteep climb. After righting itself it passes by the mound and goes downhill to meet the ancient cross-ridge road observed by Margary."

This account needs to be expanded if the position on the ground is to be appreciated by the reader. Weston Wood lies on an east-west ridge. The course of the road, proceeding north-south, is a compromise between a long detour to avoid the high ground, and a very steep climb over the highest part of the ridge. At the bottom of the ridge near Weston village it therefore deflects to the east, then resumes its north-south direction, climbing steadily, and, having crossed the ridge at a point well below its highest point, deflects west again towards its original line. The mound lies on the back of the ridge at the precise point where the road surmounts it and then, dropping, deflects west. The position in the immediate neighbourhood of the mound is, therefore, that the road comes up the hill towards the mound in a northerly direction, heading almost straight for the berm. It goes round the mound through almost

¹ *Sy.A.C.* LVIII, 92-103.

² As Lady Hanworth and Mr. Hastings note, E. S. Wood's article on "Earth Circles on St. Martha's Hill" discusses the Weston Wood mound and other sites in the area (*Sy.A.C.* LIV, 10-46). His Fig. 6, p. 36, gives a very generalised sketch map of the area. In discussing the Weston Wood mound he says: "Fig. 6 . . . makes clear the chronological priority of the mound over the road, which makes a detour and a right-angled turn round it" (p. 43).

90° on a course hollowed out of the berm and then, dropping slightly, continues somewhat north of west. It is the precise line of the road at this point where it passes over the crest of the ridge and curves round the mound, that requires close attention. It is crucial to the writers' argument that the road was there before the mound and berm: its earlier course is therefore all-important. This point has, therefore, to be considered in more detail.

Lady Hanworth and Mr. Hastings deal with it in one sentence: "After the mound was made, the road eventually encroached upon the berm, which is the easier path from the north." Easier than what other path, and encroached from where? To the east of the berm, where the ground is fairly level, there is no evidence of the road, e.g., in any hollowed path. This might not, in itself, be conclusive, were it not that to the north the ground drops steeply from the berm some 15 ft or more. The road therefore cannot have encroached from an even wider sweep around the berm.

There is no evidence, either, that the road cut across the present site of the mound. Such evidence might have been expected from the hollowed course of the road just south of the mound, as well as from the excavation, but it is totally lacking. As for its course following the path to the west of the mound, *ex hypothesi* this was not there until the mound was cut away from the ridge.

If, then, the road did precede the mound there remains the question whether it lay on the actual line now followed by the berm, this being later superimposed upon it. Let us consider first the difficulties in explaining this course of the road before the mound and berm were built:

- (a) The turn in the road would have been made on the precise radius of the mound through almost 90°. People do not normally turn a corner in this manner: they cut across it.
- (b) The writers are satisfied that the berm was built up on the north side when the mound was built. Before the berm was built, therefore, the road must here have run on the natural surface of the hillside at a level lower than the subsequently built-up surface of the berm. A few yards to the south, however, while passing over the crest of the ridge, the passage will have been almost at the level of the berm. Therefore from the point of view of levels, too, the purpose of making a turn on the precise radius of the mound is inexplicable. Not only is the turn unnatural: it is also more difficult.

Supposing, however, the road did make its turn in this way, the berm must later have been built upon it. The sequence would then have been:

- (a) The road in the course of time would have been gradually worn down and hollowed.
- (b) The mound would then have been fitted into the turn in the road and the berm constructed on it. This, as we have seen, involved considerable building up of the berm on the north

side. This building up would have taken place on the road and would have presumably involved making a substantial step in the road where it joins the berm from the south.

- (c) The road would then have been hollowed out again within the berm by passing traffic.

Behind these specific difficulties there lies the question why anyone should have constructed a berm across the road when this could have been obviated by setting the mound and berm back a few feet. That the road was used considerably by traffic is borne out by the extent to which it is hollowed into the berm—according to the writers' hypothesis, since the eighteenth century.

The second major difficulty lies in the writers' claim that the mound and berm were constructed to create an eighteenth-century landscape feature. This, brings in its train a whole series of further problems. As I shall try to show, the evidence points only to an alteration of a pre-existing mound in the eighteenth century, and then not for landscape purposes. If the mound was built or altered as a landscape feature, it was presumably to be looked at, or from, or both. It can hardly have been built as a vantage point: there are no steps or other means of access to the top, apart from scrambling up the sides. Furthermore, it was covered in trees by 1788,³ and there is no reason to assume that it was not planted in this way when work was done on it in the first instance. If it was designed to be looked at, this is even more curious. The principal design feature of the mound is its circularity. But it is some 5 ft. high and all the paths to it drop away. Its circularity could hardly be seen even from horseback, and even if it had no vegetation on it. It was curious, too, to put the berm on the course of the road, where it must have been known that it would soon be cut up and worn down by passing traffic. The ring of stones also presents difficulties. In their views on these the writers are not consistent. On the one hand they say that "the stones are neatly set and interlocked although they are in loose sandy soil, and unless they had been buried immediately they would surely have tumbled long since"—to which they rather inconsequentially add the phrase "had they been ancient." They continue, however, "It is more likely that they formed a simple revetting and may have been left exposed as an ornament" (p. 95). Later they add (p. 101) ". . . the stone revetting is reminiscent of the edging to many flower beds in the district."

Perhaps it is sufficient to say on this that I agree that the fact that the stones are in such good order suggests that they were buried almost at once: in any case, as ornaments, they would not have been very satisfactory, for they would have been hardly visible in grass, let alone in bracken which pervades the area. Perhaps the absence of any weathered surface at the level of the

³ As shown on a map in the possession of Miss Warren of Shere. There is also a map of about 1802 in the Albury Estate Office, which shows the mound. Photographs of both are in the Guildford Museum.

stones does not add much in the way of objection. Plainly, however, it would be much more satisfactory if we could explain the stones in some other way, preferably as an original structural feature of the mound, pre-existing eighteenth-century alterations. The maps, too, tell against this being a landscape feature: as already noted, in the 1788 and 1802 maps the mound is marked distinctively, but in the same way as an ordinary plantation to the south. There is no suggestion of landscaping on these maps. Finally, it is far from obvious why anyone should landscape here, for the mound is remote and hidden from Weston House and village, and, as I have said, is unrelated to any other landscape feature.

For all these reasons, therefore, it appears to me that the writers' contention that (*a*) the road preceded the mound and berm, and (*b*) that the mound and berm were built in the eighteenth century as a landscape feature, cannot be sustained.

The view that the mound and berm were there before the road, however, makes its course completely intelligible. The ridge had to be crossed somewhere in the vicinity of the mound, and the flat surface of the berm was ready made. On this basis no difficulties arise about the line of the road, about its levels, about the sequence of events involving the building of the berm, or about the siting of the mound in relation to the road. This explanation fits the evidence simply and completely.

That work was done on the mound in the eighteenth century can, of course, still be accepted. This is suggested by the discovery of the coin beneath the clay capping, and by the distinctive marking of the trees on the maps referred to above. For the reasons already given, however, it is not easy to believe that the alteration was for landscape purposes. What the purpose was is not known, but I will make an entirely speculative suggestion about this at the end of this paper.

Assuming, then, that, though altered in the eighteenth century, the mound is older than the road, we are left with the problem of reassessing the evidence and suggesting some alternative explanation of the original nature and purpose of the mound, though the evidence is such that it can only be most tentative. We have here a circular mound about 100 ft. across. It probably had a ring of stones just within its bounds, broken only on the side where the mound was cut from the hillside: and it was encircled by a berm, similarly except where the mound was cut from the hillside. It preceded an apparently mediæval road (Weston itself is mentioned in records as early as 1241), and can thus tentatively be assumed to be mediæval or earlier. This at once suggests a round barrow, at any rate to a layman. Lady Hanworth and Mr. Hastings dismiss this suggestion in one sentence: "A Barrow. A large proportion of the mound is natural and it is not typical in shape or size." Let us consider, however, how far the evidence is compatible with its being a barrow.

Let us take first the question of shape. Its circularity is quite

compatible with this being a round barrow. Its size is, it is true, large for a barrow, but there are many barrows larger. The mound is, however, unlike a barrow in that it has a flat top: but work was done here in the eighteenth century, presumably by levelling, adding a clay capping, and then planting. The berm is associated with barrows. Indeed, it is difficult to think of any other type of mound of which a berm is characteristic. Stone revetting forming a ring within the barrow is quite usual, too. Mr. Ashbee in his recent book⁴ when discussing such retaining circles, refers to an article by Mr. E. H. Payne⁵ where it is stated: "There is great diversity in the structural form of retaining circles. Some were of stones set up with a clear space, often of several feet, between each; in others the stones formed a regular ring with each touching its next door neighbour. These two types have been termed 'open' and 'closed' respectively." Obviously, if the hypothesis that this is a barrow is correct, we have here a closed ring.

But, it may be said, both the ring and the berm are incomplete, and in any case the stones are unlike those found in any other barrows. The stones are pieces of carstone which is effectively the only stone found in this sandy soil. They are thus typical of the site; insofar, it is not much use comparing these stones with stones used in barrows on chalk downs or granite moors. As for the broken nature of the ring and berm, this is no more than a natural adaptation to the site. The site is on the back of a ridge which drops to the east and rises to the west. If we can assume that the stones were for revetting, there was no need for revetting where the sand was cut, as distinct from built: nor was there any natural place for a berm as such where the gap between the mound and ridge had been cut. In any case, incomplete rings are by no means unusual. But, it may be said, there was no ditch. Again, if we can assume that the normal purpose of a ditch was to provide material for a mound on a level site, there was no need of a ditch here. The material came from the west side of the mound where it was cut away from the hill side. Furthermore, there are many cases known of barrows without ditches.⁶

It is also true, of course, that no burial has been discovered in the mound. The mound has, however, been altered to a level below the clay capping, and here, in the central area of the mound, the soil is natural. In the central area of the mound, therefore, the original natural surface of the ridge must have lain at or above this level. In the case of round barrows, the human remains are often placed on the natural surface, and soil is heaped around or above them. Assuming this practice was followed here, no trace of a burial is therefore to be expected. In any event, because of the presence of a large tree, the exact centre of the mound was not excavated on this, apparently its first precise and systematic excavation.

⁴ *The Bronze Age Round Barrow in Britain*, p. 49.

⁵ *Proc. of the Dorset Nat. Hist. and Arch. Soc.*, LXV, 43.

⁶ Some are listed by Grinsell. *P.P.S.* VII, 107.

There remains, then, the objection of Lady Hanworth and Mr. Hastings that this cannot be a barrow because much of the mound is natural. This, however, is simply a further implication of this choice of site. The question we must ask, therefore, is whether the choice of site is such that the mound cannot be a barrow. The strongest ground for saying that this cannot be a barrow is that at any rate I have found no other case of a barrow sited astride a ridge; and, of course, it follows that I lack precedents for adaptation of the structure of the barrow to take account of the natural features of the site.⁷ This is a serious objection, but it cannot of itself be fatal: otherwise nothing new could be discovered.

There are, however, other things in favour of the site. There are other barrows on this sandy soil in the area. Perhaps more important is the siting of this mound on a false crest: a characteristic of barrows to which Fox has drawn attention.⁸ Then there is the tradition of dancing on the mound "in old time" referred to by Lady Hanworth and Mr. Hastings and which they say specifically that they do not contest. It seems most unlikely, however, that this would have started in the middle of a wood on the brow of a ridge some substantial distance from the village on a landscape feature in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The contention that the mound was built as an eighteenth-century landscape feature is thus almost certainly incompatible with this tradition, quite apart from the fact that it was covered with trees in 1788. Cases of dancing on barrows, are, however, well known.

There were unusual stones in the wood and in the fields below the mound. Manning and Bray in 1809 (Vol. II, p. 123) reported as follows: "In a meadow of Mr. Thornton's, by the side of the Shireburn Lane, and in an adjacent field and a wood of Mr. Godschall's are some remarkable stones, such as are not found elsewhere in the neighbourhood. In the meadow are five, three of them standing together; the other two are single, at a small distance from the three, and from each other. The largest is one of the three which is 10 feet long, 5 feet 8 inches over, 4 feet 4 inches out of the ground. The one in Mr. Godschall's adjoining field is 10 feet 10 inches long, 4 feet 9 inches broad, and is a little higher than the surface of the ground, lying in a hollow, which perhaps has been cleared out to show it. The others are smaller."

Mr. Godschall's wood is Weston Wood; his "adjoining" field lies within a few yards of the mound downhill to the east above the sand pit (it is in this field that a late Bronze Age settlement has been

⁷ If it is accepted that the most likely explanation of the mound is as an altered barrow, these quite natural utilitarian adaptations to the site may be of especial interest when possible ritual explanations of the features of a normal barrow are considered. In particular, it suggests that neither a ditch nor a complete ring of stones was required by the builder for religious purposes.

⁸ *Arch. J.* XCIX, 22.

discovered⁹); one large stone remains here, and a large fragment lies at the foot of a quarried edge just to the north. Other fragments lay until recently west of the mound by the cottage near the junction of the old road, of the Pilgrims Way, and of the stretch of the road leading to Newlands Corner. This point, again, is downhill from the mound. Mr. Thornton's meadow is east of Mr. Mr. Godschall's field and is further downhill from it. No stones apparently remain here. It seems improbable that such stones could have occurred here naturally, but the point should be investigated more closely. It is tempting to surmise that the stones may in the past have stood more closely together and were subsequently dispersed. If so, their dispersal downhill is to be expected: they lay downhill from the area of the mound, both to the east and west of it. On the other hand, it must be added that we have no evidence from observation on the ground, or from such excavations as have been made, where the stones might have stood originally.

There was held in these fields the famous Sherbourne Palm Sunday Fair. Miss Heath¹⁰ says of it: "This was of ancient, and possibly pagan, origin, though an effort seems to have been made to turn it into Christian channels. In a poem written by Mr. Lovell, Schoolmaster of Albury, in 1854, it is suggested that the Sherbourne water was held sacred by the pagan priests of Roman times, and he adds that people used to go to Sherbourne for the Palm Sunday Fair, and there were games and dancing and many other forms of amusement." It is very difficult not to associate the fair with the stones and with the dancing on the mound.

As the writers note, the Downs above the site are called "Harrows-hill." They appear to doubt this place-name: it is, however, referred to in the Victoria County History. The name may, as they suggest, be an extension from Hampshire of the name "the Harrowway," but there is no evidence for this. An association with the site below seems to me more likely. Amongst many other heathen Saxon place-names in the area, Peper Harrow, in similar country, lies only some eight miles to the west. There is another point which may be pure coincidence: that three other prominent sites within a few miles, at the eastern end of ridges, probably have pre-Christian associations: viz. St. Martha's, St. Catherine's on Drage Hill, and Church Croft, Puttenham. The Weston Wood site and these three all lie along the east-west line of sand hills south of the Downs.

All this material, when taken together, does point strongly to the mound and the adjoining fields having been a site of pre-Christian significance, and provides some "local colour" for the mound having been a barrow.

⁹ This site is at present being excavated. As noted, it is a late Bronze Age site, whereas the barrow, if barrow it is, is presumably of middle Bronze Age. If, therefore, the close proximity of the barrow and settlement are not coincidence, the barrow must have influenced the siting of the settlement and not *vice versa*.

¹⁰ Heath. O. M., *Walks Round Albury*, pp. 3-4.

The question now remains why the mound was altered in the eighteenth century. No documents that I have been able to refer to give us any answer. There is, however, much written material which might one day yield it to us, and it may thus be worth while recording a suggestion which is the merest speculation. According to Miss Heath, the Palm Sunday Fair was held until 1811, when, on the representations of the rector, it was prohibited. The rector was William Polhill, who was instituted in 1780 and died in 1820. If Mr. Polhill had earlier prevailed upon Mr. Godschall to stop the dancing on the mound, what better way could there have been to do this than to level it and plant trees on it?

To summarize: the explanation of the mound as an eighteenth-century landscape feature has so many objections to it that it cannot be sustained. We are then faced with a circular mound which was altered in the eighteenth century. It was probably mediaeval or earlier; it is some 100 ft. across, with a berm and a ring of stones within it: it is sited on a false crest and was used for dancing "in old time." These features suggest a barrow; though the apparently unique nature of the site must be borne in mind. No other explanation so far put forward seems compatible with the evidence, though further evidence may yet be found to confirm or to refute it.

It remains for me to add that, though this note is critical of their interpretation, it could not have been written but for the excavation undertaken by Lady Hanworth and Mr. Hastings. Many of the points made above were suggested to them when the excavations were proceeding, but they found them unconvincing; nor did they accept my arguments either against their own explanation or in favour of a barrow when they saw this article in draft. They agreed, however, that it was right that they should be placed on record. I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. E. M. Dance for her advice and guidance about sources and their interpretation.

REPLY TO MR CRAWFORD KNOX

Lady Hanworth and Mr. Hastings have replied as follows:

The above article by Mr. Crawford Knox on the mound in Weston Wood contains no new evidence, and is largely a repetition of information included by Mr. E. S. Wood in his article on the earth circles on St. Martha's Hill¹¹ which has already been dealt with in our excavation report. It very clearly illustrates the dangers of uncontrolled theorizing from folk-lore material; for in doing so Mr. Knox has allowed himself to ignore the facts produced by the excavation and to strive after explanations which are not in accordance with the plain evidence, but which on the contrary are inspired by the compulsion to force the facts to fit an *a priori* theory.

(i) Mr. Knox believes the mound "to have been built much earlier than the eighteenth century." This belief is disproved by the metal

¹¹ *Sy. A.C.* LIV, 10-46.