

Excavation of two Bronze Age barrows on Whitmoor Common, Worplesdon by General A H Lane Fox (Pitt Rivers)

While General Lane Fox was stationed at Guildford as commander of the West Surrey Brigade Depot (Bowden 1991, 83) he excavated a number of barrows in the area (Lane Fox 1877), but because the work remained partially unpublished, there has been some confusion regarding their location and date. Papers relating to this work deposited at Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum (acc nos R.7[a–h]) enabled identification and publication of the Saxon barrows on Merrow Downs (Saunders 1980). Although this original archive is poor by Lane Fox's later standards, it allows a few details of the Whitmoor Common excavations to be added to those already published (Gardner 1924, 27–9) and some confusion over the type and location of the barrows to be clarified.

The western barrow (figs 1–3; SU 9863 5333; HER 1834; Pitt Rivers' 'barrow 2') has been portrayed as a saucer barrow (Grinsell 1987), but in that publication the National Grid References and the descriptions appear to have been transposed. Two somewhat impressionistic watercolour section drawings exist among the records of Lane Fox's excavation of this barrow (fig 5; Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum acc no R7[e]). These indicate that the barrow mound was 12m (37 ft) in diameter and then stood to a height of

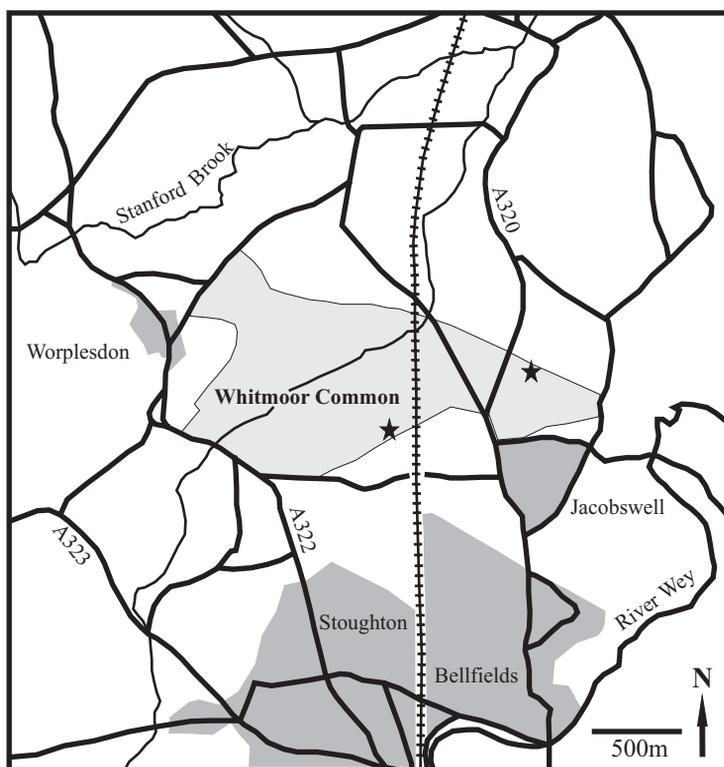


Fig 1 Whitmoor Common. Location of barrows (stars). (© Crown copyright Ordnance Survey. All rights reserved)

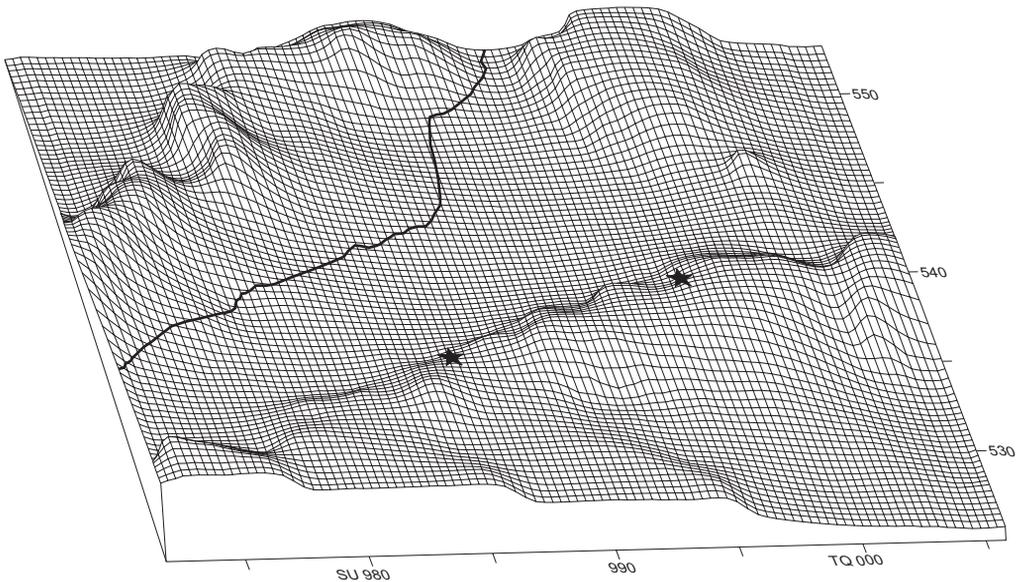


Fig 2 Whitmoor Common. Digital terrain map showing the barrows (stars) in their landscape setting: angle of view 50°. Vertical scale exaggerated.

less than 0.7m (2ft); no ditch is shown and the most apposite identification appears to be that of a bowl barrow. The method of excavation used involved the removal of the body of the mound from two directions – north-west and south-east – leaving a radial baulk from which the sections were drawn, and the subsequent removal of that baulk to allow investigation of the central area. The drawings also appear to indicate excavation to below the original ground surface. According to Lane Fox's notes: 'the section across the centre showed first a layer of 1ft [0.3m] of blackish peat, then 1ft [0.3m] yellow sand and below that a clayey floor'. There is no indication either here or in the section drawing of the presence of any turf stack, a feature of a number of local heathland barrows. At excavation the mound yielded a barrel and two bucket urns, the former inverted, containing cremated bones and thought by the excavator to represent secondary burials. This impression receives support from their location above the original ground surface and the apparent depiction, in two cases, of cuts into which the urns had been placed (fig 3). The nature of this excavation entailed total destruction of the mound, and subsequent descriptions cannot relate to its original form – indeed it seems likely that the original ground surface was also extensively disturbed.

The eastern barrow (figs 1 and 2; SU 9967 5368; HER 1835; Pitt Rivers' 'barrow 1') is still extant, and, although damaged by animal burrowing, it has recently been the subject of a digital terrain survey and shown to be a hybrid between disc and bell types (fig 4; Graham & Graham 2005). No details of the structure of the mound have been found, but Lane Fox's notes record that 'no central grave but a layer of black soil, probably the result of fire was discovered just below the surface and in the centre a small hole was clearly seen in the smooth sandy earth, not more than 2ft [0.7m] deep from the tumulus and near the same in diameter. Charcoal and immense quantities of burnt flint were found immediately above the black mould.' It is not clear from this description whether the hole was cut through the black layer, but the material is likely to have been either the remains of a pyre (Gardner 1924) or redeposited pyre debris (McKinley 1997). The deposition of pyre debris over the grave into which the cremated bones had been placed, as part of a complex ritual, has been noted at Twyford Down, Winchester (McKinley 2000). It should be noted that the original plan of this barrow as published (Gardner 1924) cannot now be found.

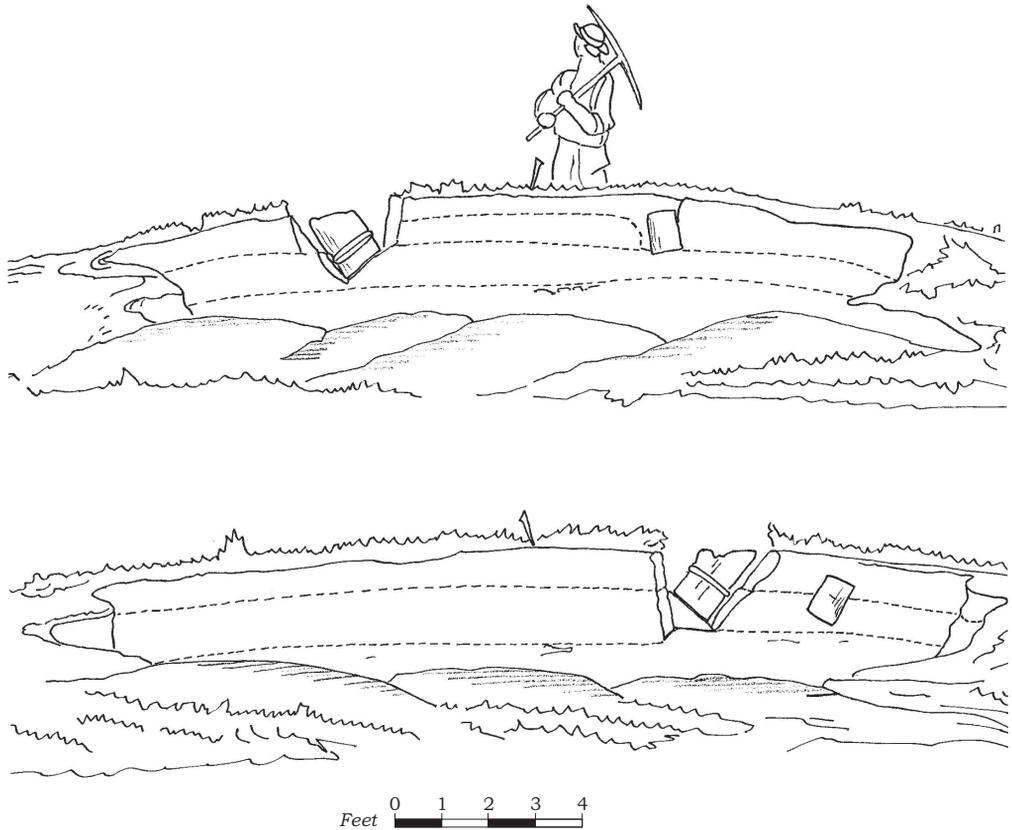


Fig 3 Whitmoor Common. Line drawing of sections of the western barrow (HER 1834) excavated by Lane Fox derived from contemporary watercolour sketches (Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum accession number R7[e]). The upper sketch is entitled 'View from the S E side' and the lower 'View from the N W side'. The scale is taken from imperial measurements shown on the original sketch.

The pottery, by Mike Seager Thomas

The surviving pots from the two barrows form a typologically, technologically and chronologically coherent group attributable to the Deverel-Rimbury pottery tradition, currently dated to between *c* 1500 and 1150 cal BC (the Middle Bronze Age). All are in medium to very coarse flint-tempered fabrics (table 1). The assemblage attributed by the Pitt Rivers Museum catalogue to barrow 1 comprises three weakly convex-sided jars (Gardner 1924, pl X, bottom, and XI, right), one with three small bosses arranged more or less equidistantly around the circumference of the jar (*ibid*, pl X, bottom left); that from barrow 2, a single large, weakly convex sided bucket urn with an applied, fingertip-impressed cordon (*ibid*, pl XI, left). As published in Gardner (1924) and elsewhere (eg Abercromby 1912; Whimster 1931), the latter has an unusually narrow base, an antiquarian reconstruction that should now be modified. A somewhat larger 'bucket urn' from barrow 1, described in the catalogue but now lost (presumably Gardner's plate X, top), and a contemporary watercolour apparently of the excavation of barrow 2, which shows a second bucket urn, also cordoned, a straight-sided urn and a bossed jar analogous to that from barrow 1 – all of them inverted – broadly confirm the attribution of the assemblage as a whole. The surviving pots, like those in the watercolour, have lost their bases, suggesting that they were similarly inverted in the ground.

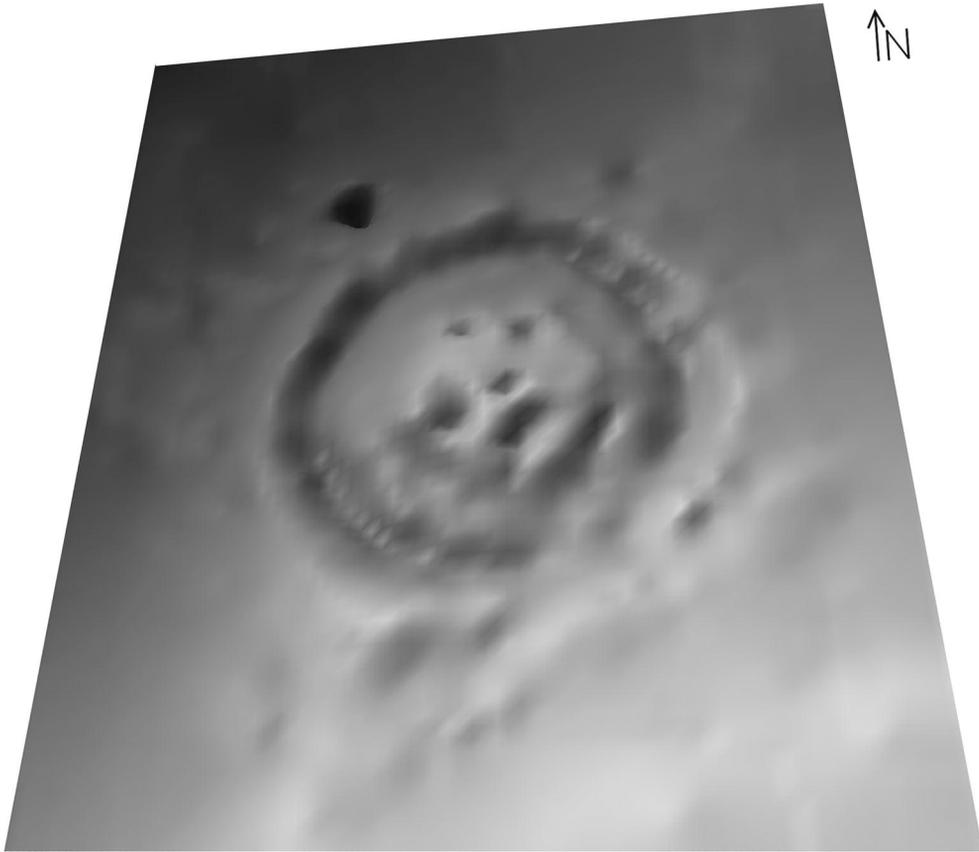


Fig 4 Whitmoor Common. Digital terrain map of the eastern (disc/bell) barrow: angle of view 50°. Berm diameter \approx 23m.

Table 1 Description of pottery held by the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford

Context	Vessel type	Diameter	Body thickness	Fabric	Comments
Barrow 1	(?) convex-sided jar	18cm	N/A	CF1	Rim only – with slight out-turn around <i>part</i> of the jar's circumference. Lumpy/furrowed exterior surface
Barrow 1	convex-sided jar	23cm	14mm	CF2	Squared rim. Roughly finished exterior surface; finger-smearred interior surface. Base truncated
Barrow 1	bossed, convex-sided jar	19cm	8–11mm	MCF	Rounded to squared rim. Three bosses more or less equidistant around the jar's circumference \approx 5cm. Roughly burnished exterior surface. Base truncated
Barrow 2	bucket urn	26cm	13–16mm (narrowing to 8–9mm at rim)	VCF	Squared rim. Fingertip-impressed, applied cordon 14cm below rim. Lumpy exterior surface. Base truncated. Two 'repair' holes straddling a crack between the rim and cordon

MCF = medium to coarse flint-tempered; CF = coarse flint-tempered; VCF = very coarse flint-tempered

Endnote

The figure below is available on the Archaeology Data Service website (<http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/surreyac/contents.cfm?vol=96>). A copy of this material will also be deposited with the Society's library, Guildford.

Fig 5 Whitmoor Common. Sections of the western barrow (HER 1834) excavated by Lane Fox in contemporary watercolour sketches. (Reproduced by kind permission of Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum, acc no R7[e])

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Audrey and David Graham for producing figure 2 and for allowing inclusion of their survey of the eastern barrow as figure 4. Thanks are also due to Mike Brace for drawing figure 3.

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