

A RABBIT DAMAGED BARROW

AT BELLE TOUT,

BIRLING GAP,

EAST SUSSEX.

TV:55939580

Project No. 2004/08

July 2004

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Lewes

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Abstract

In May 2004 a member of the public reported finding part of a human skull on a scheduled bowl barrow at Belle Tout (NGR TV:55939580).

Following discussions between English Heritage, the National Trust and East Sussex County Council, it was decided to evict the rabbits that had disturbed the barrow and repair their damage. During this work a watching brief and artefact retrieval exercise was maintained by the author.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1. In May 2004, a member of the public reported that he had discovered part of a human skull in the up cast spoil from a rabbit burrow on a bowl barrow at Belle Tout (Scheduled ancient monument no.ES109). The artefact had been left *in situ* by the finder. The author visited the site a few days later, found and retrieved the skull fragment and reported the matter to Vivienne Coad Field Monument Warden for English Heritage.

1.2. A site meeting was set up between Vivienne Coad, Glen Redman (Warden for the National Trust) and Greg Chuter (Historical Environment Consultant for East Sussex County Council). It was clear that the barrow was being severely damaged by rabbit burrowing, during which the skull fragment had been unearthed. It was decided that the rabbits should be removed and that their damage made good, with the author maintaining a watching brief and artefact retrieval exercise during the works.

The skull fragments were examined by Lucy Siburn of Archaeology South East who declared them ancient and not be of police interest and the coroner was informed accordingly.

2.0 SITE TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOLOGY

2.1. Belle Tout is the name given to a downland spur, now truncated by coastal erosion (Fig. 2). With steep slopes defining its eastern and northern sides, the top of the spur presently lies in the area of the 18th century light house, a height of 80m o.d.,. The spur slopes gently in a north westerly direction and then drops rapidly towards Birling Gap. On its south western side is the remains of a shallow dry valley, most of which has been destroyed by coastal erosion.

The barrow sits in a prominent position at the north western tip of the spur (just above the 65m contour), at the point where the land begins to fall away rapidly.

2.2. The British Geological Survey (Sheet 319: Lewes) records the underlying geology as upper and middle chalk which in the area of the barrow is covered by a very thin layer (c.50mm thick) of topsoil.

3.0. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

3.1. The Belle Tout spur contains/contained a number of archaeological monuments (Fig.3):

Outer enclosure~ The Belle Tout spur is delimited by a univallate bank and ditch, which may have originally enclosed the whole hilltop. Since 1968 the earthwork has been sampled in 10 places, showing it to consist of a contemporary two phase simple dump construction, with a shallow u-shaped ditch. The date of which has been the subject of much debate, but at present is suggested to be Neolithic (Brown M. 1996).

Inner Enclosures~ Located at the head of the shallow dry valley, but now almost destroyed by coastal erosion, were two overlapping rectilinear enclosures, thought to date from the late Neolithic and early Bronze Age periods (Russell M.1996).

Chalk cut shaft~ In 1971, a cliff fall exposed a vertical shaft cutting down through the chalk and into the underlying gault clay. The top of the shaft corresponded to a circular depression recorded on a 1909 survey of the inner enclosures. The shaft was cylindrical, 1.7 metres in diameter, narrowing to 1.0 metres at its base, with a series of footholds cut at 0.5 metre intervals. This feature has been interpreted as either a well or a 'ritual' shaft, possibly later in date than the smaller of the inner enclosures.

Barrows~ Only one recorded barrow now survives on the spur and it is this that is the subject of this report. The barrow was first recorded in the 1930's by Grinsell as part of his pioneering cataloguing of barrows in Sussex (Grinsell L. 1934), when it was described as a gorse covered tumulus some,

10-11 paces in diameter and 3 feet high with a gradual sloping mound. He noted a hollow in the centre, most probably the remains of a robber trench. In 1973 the Ordnance Survey Archaeology Division Field Investigator records the barrow as a bowl barrow measuring c.10.0 metres in diameter and 0.8 metres high, lying under rough grass and gorse. The barrow was resurveyed in 1996 as part of the RCHME 'Industry and Enclosure in the Neolithic Project' survey of Belle Tout (Brown M. 1996) when it is described as being 11.8 metres in diameter and 0.7 metres high located, in a clearing in the surrounding gorse. The robber trench in the centre is recorded as a slight hollow.

A further large (? bowl) barrow, measuring 36 feet in diameter, (now been destroyed by coastal erosion), was located at TV:55529575 to the south west of the barrow under investigation. An enlarged food vessel, some 7 inches high, was discovered inverted over a cremation embedded in red loam during investigation of this barrow in 1813 (Giddy D. 1814). This urn was donated to the Eastbourne Museum, but appears to have been destroyed during enemy action in the 2nd World War. Fortunately it was drawn by R. Musson in c.1950 (Musson R. 1954) and this illustration is reproduced in this report (fig.6b).

This barrow appears to have been part of a larger barrow cemetery. Giddy records it as being one of a group of 'several' situated near the junction of the outer enclosure and the cliff. However Russell's suggestion (Russell M. 1996), that these may be the same barrows investigated in 1869 by Sir J. Evans, Colonel Lane Fox and other notables (Evans J.1870), does not stand up to further scrutiny. These four barrows are recorded as running in a north-

west to south-east line lying 'about a quarter of a mile to the west of the signal houses on top of Beach Head, in an area under cultivation'. If the Belle Tout lighthouse is as Russell suggests the 'signal houses', then a quarter of a mile would position the barrows three quarters of a mile east of the large bowl barrow. The 1st edition Ordnance Survey 6 inch map records a line of four barrows at Forty Acres, a quarter of a mile from the Coastguard Station (which was sited opposite the present Beach Head Hotel), which exactly matches Evan's sighting. These barrows have since been destroyed by agriculture (Chuter G. 1991)

Giddy enigmatically mentions at the end of his barrow excavation 'report' that a smaller urn was found on the property of Mr. Gilbert (of Birling Manor Farm) but in a tumulus not so large and at some distance from the large barrow investigated. This may imply that Giddy opened another barrow on the spur and 'some distance from the large barrow' suggests the possibility that this may have been the bowl barrow that is the subject of this report. The urn, appears to have eventually ended up in the Budgen collection (now archived in the Towner Art Gallery and Museum) and was that described and drawn by Musson in c.1950 (Musson R. 1954), who records its fabric as 'oatmealy and soapy' with a red oxidised outer surface. An enlarged version of his illustration is reproduced in this report (Fig.6a). Typologically the pot is an early Bronze Age small food vessel.

Artefact Finds~ As early as 1867 Colonel Lane Fox noted concentrations of humanly struck flint on the Belle Tout spur. Subsequent finds include a Paleolithic implement, a hammer stone (ascribed to the early Bronze Age) and a Neolithic flaked flint axe. In addition there are two flaked flint axes

and three flaked flint picks found at 'Belle Tout', amongst the various antiquarian lithic collections housed at the Towner Art Gallery in Eastbourne, (Chuter G. 1990). More recently, humanly struck flint flakes were noted by the author on the foot path above Birling Gap.

4.0. PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND INVESTIGATIVE METHODOLOGY

4.1. A programme of works was drawn up by Paul Roberts, Inspector of Ancient Monuments for English Heritage, in order to secure the future well being of the monument. This stated that

- the rabbits must be evicted,
- any archaeological material in the upcast recorded and
- reinstatement works carried out on the rabbit burrows.

4.2. An archaeological recording and watching brief was maintained during this work, by the author, which comprising:

- identifying and plotting the areas of rabbit damage after the barrow had been strimmed.
- photographic recording of the barrow and its damaged areas prior to the reinstatement.
- sifting of the upcast from the rabbit burrows using a 5mm dry sieve in order to recover any surviving archaeological material. (The sifted spoil was then reused in the subsequent reinstatement works.)

5.0. RESULTS

5.1. The rabbit damage (Fig.4) was found to result from a single active warren, with two entrances (2 & 4), which occupied the central area of the barrow and a series of four rabbit scrapes (1,3,5 & 6) were noted on the south and west sides of the barrow. The top of the barrow showed a clear sub rectangular depression, clearly indicating the sites investigation in the past. There is no surviving record of this work or its findings.

5.2. Two concentrations of archaeological material were recovered during the exercise. These consisted of two further fragments of human bone, a human tooth and humanly struck flints:

Rabbit Scrape (1)

	Quantity	Weight (grams)	Comments
Waste flakes with cortex	24	241	Heavy hammer nodule preparation
Flakes	30	137	Large and small flaking debitage

Upcast from burrow (including original finds) (2)

	Quantity	Weight (grams)	Comments
Waste flakes with cortex	16	176	Heavy hammer nodule preparation
Flakes	30	83	Mainly small flaking debitage
Fire fractured flint	2	38	

5.3. 10 fragments of bone and 1 tooth, weighing 22 grams, were recovered from the upcast from the barrow (fig.5). 8 of the fragments can be joined together to form the occipital bone of a human cranium. Another fragment represents the left condyl of the jaw; the tooth is a lower canine. The occipital lump of

the skull is hardly visible and there is a lack of muscle ridges, all female characteristics. The skull plate appears to be only partly fused and the tooth shows moderate wear suggesting that this individual was a young adult.

6.0. CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1. The archaeological watching brief successfully recovered further fragments of bone and a modest assemblage of humanly struck flint which can be shown to have come from the core of the barrow. It is likely that the human bone originates from a primary burial in the barrow. The proximity of a large robber trench to the rabbit burrow raises the possibility that the skull fragment may have already been disturbed by antiquarian investigation and discarded within the backfill as a 'worthless' artefact. The postulated primary inhumation burial within the barrow suggests, on stylistic grounds, an early Bronze Age date for its construction, thus making it contemporary with the nearby late Neolithic / early Bronze Age enclosures. This date also equates with of the small food vessel presumed to have been found in the barrow.
- 6.2. Concentrations of humanly struck flint are commonly found on many round barrows in this area. Unfortunately no diagnostic tool types were recovered, that could have helped provide a date. The assemblage consists mainly of hard-hammerstruck cortical flakes, suggesting flint nodules were being prepared for tool manufacture elsewhere. The flint used was white patinated, with occasional grey patches and a thin brown cortex of a type commonly found on the surface over much of the Belle Tout spur.

7.0. ARCHIVE

- 7.1. The full paper, photographic records and finds have been collated in accordance with '*Guidelines for the preparation of excavation archives for long-term storage*' (UKICI 1990) and deposited at the Towner Art Gallery and Museum in Eastbourne.
- 7.2. Copies of this report have been logged with Vivienne Coad and Paul Roberts of English Heritage, Caroline Thackray National Trust Archaeological Advisor, Glen Redman National Trust Warden, Lawrence Stevens of The Eastbourne Natural History and Archaeological Society, and the County Councils' Historical Environment Record.

8.0. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- 8.1. The writer would like to thank the member of the public (who wishes to remain anonymous), who's keen eye and archaeological awareness brought these finds to notice. Thanks are also due to the National Trust rangers for their hard work in strimming and restoring the barrow and to Vivienne Coad and Paul Roberts for their advice in planning this project.

9.0 REFERENCE

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Historical Monuments of England, Cambridge.
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- Musson R. (1954), 'An illustrated catalogue of Sussex Beaker and Bronze Age
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H.E.R. Summary Sheet

Site Code.	BTB 04
Site identification and address	Bowl Barrow at Belle Tout, Birling Gap.
District and / or borough, County	Wealden, East Sussex
O.S. grid ref.	TV:55939580
Geology.	Upper and Middle Chalk
Project number.	2004/08
Fieldwork type.	Watching Brief
Site type.	Rural
Date of fieldwork.	6 th July 2004
Sponsor/client.	National Trust and English Heritage
Project manager.	Greg Chuter
Project supervisor.	Greg Chuter
Period summary	Neo. to Bronze Age.
Project summary.	<p>An archaeological watching brief and artefact recovery exercise was maintained on the reinstatement of rabbit damage on a bowl barrow at Belle Tout, following the discovery of human bone. The exercise recovered further bone and a small assemblage of humanly struck flint.</p> <p>Examination of the bone fragments suggests they are of a young adult female, presumably the primary burial.</p>

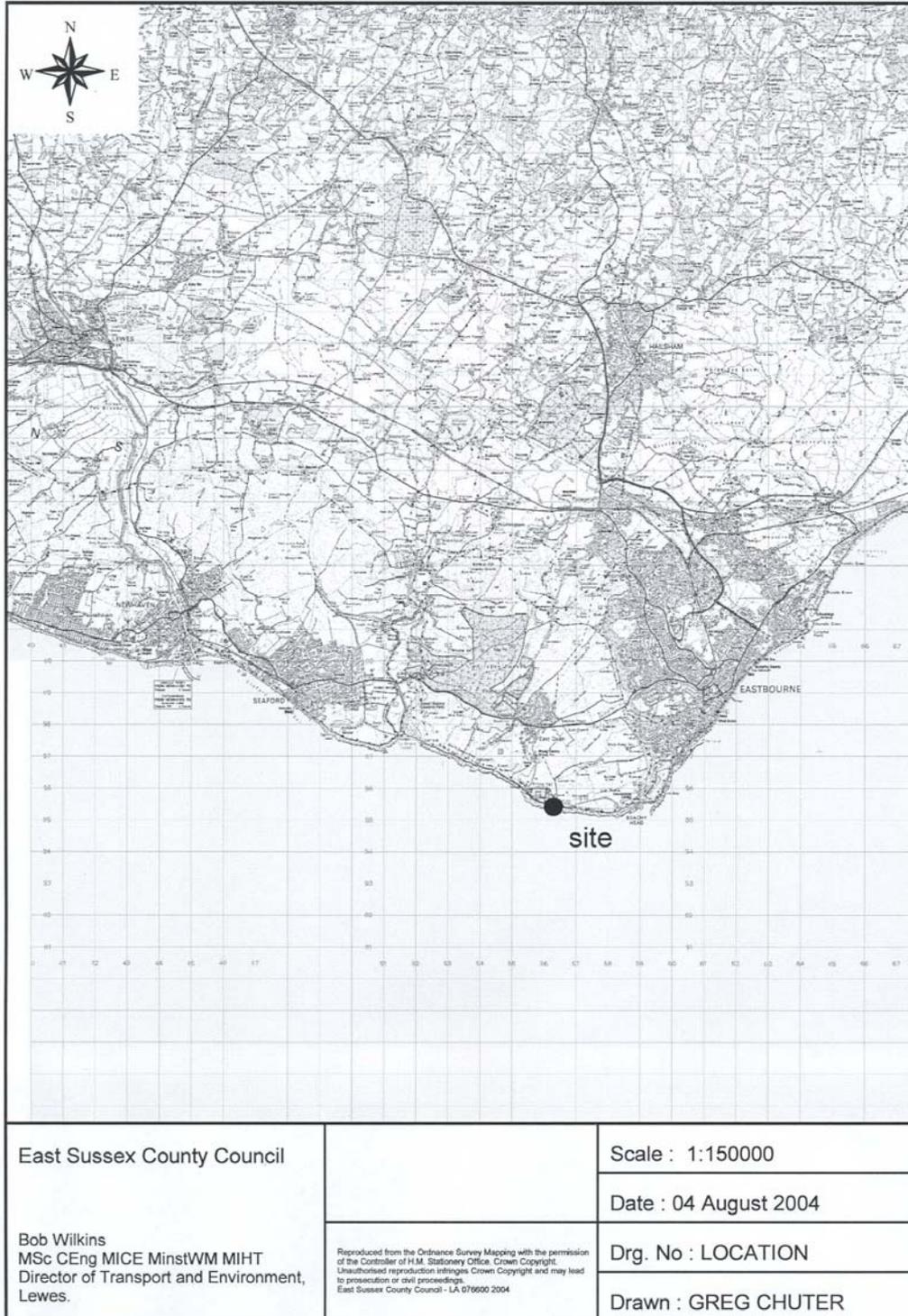


Figure 1. Location

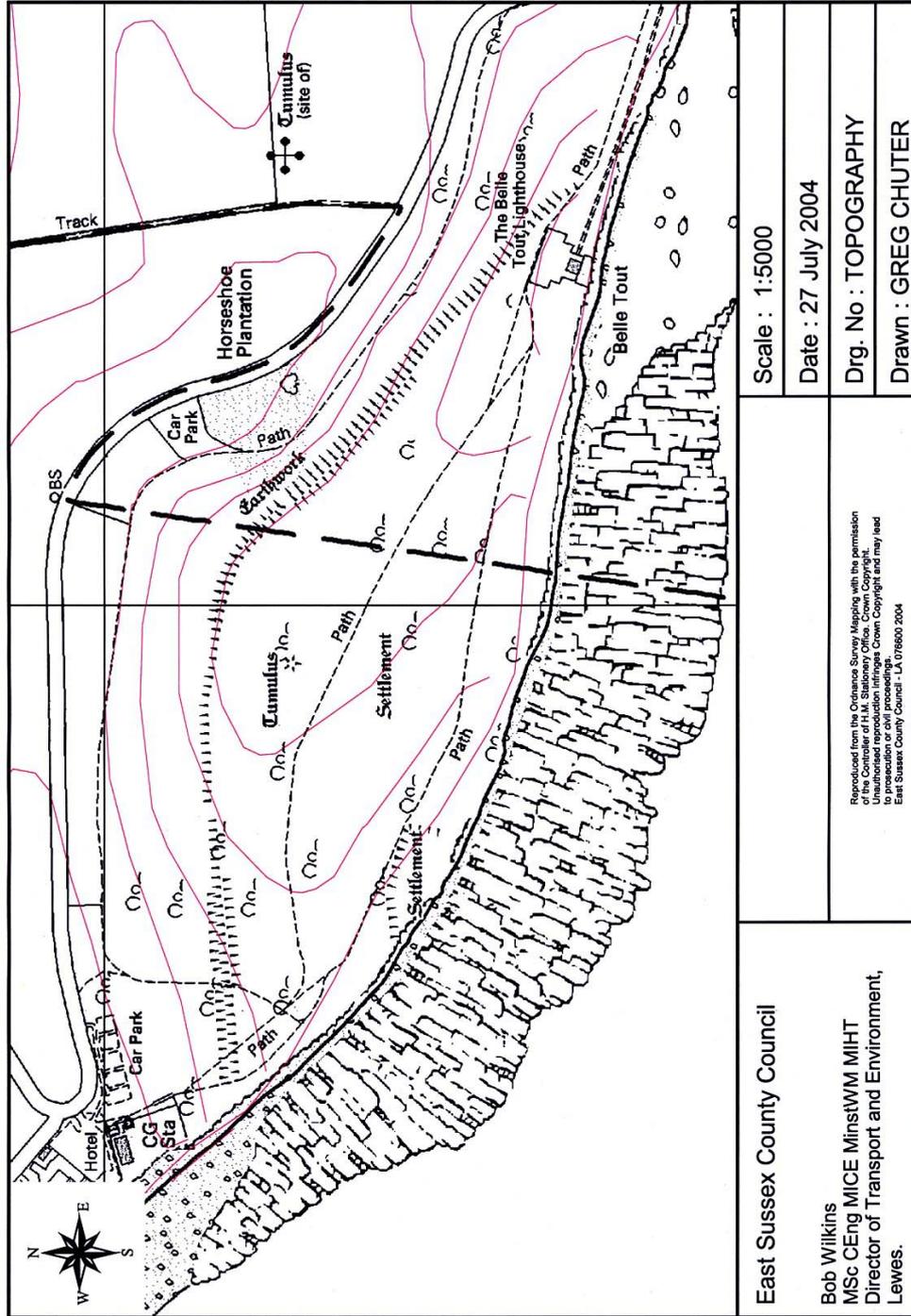


Figure 2. Topography

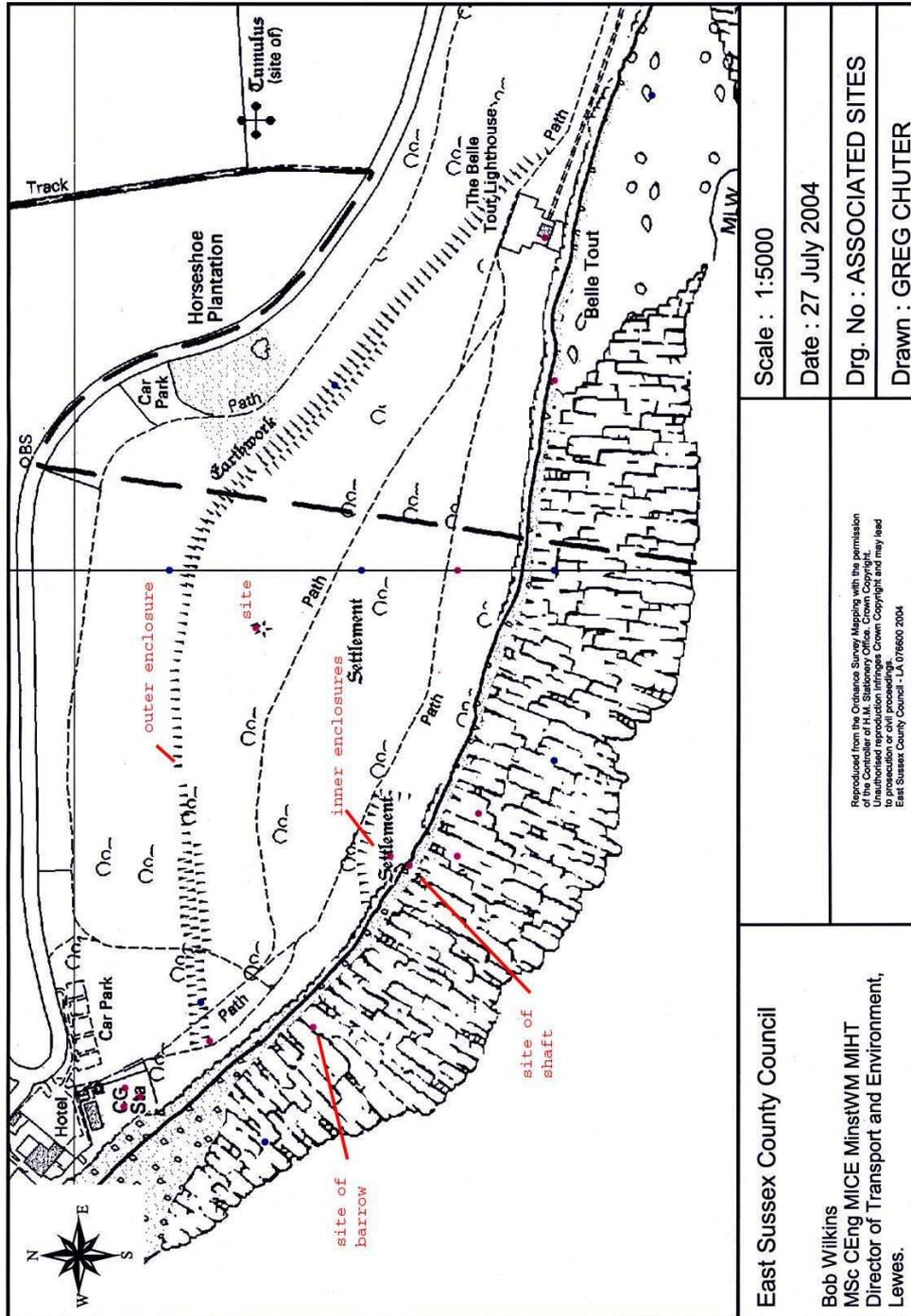


Figure 3. Associated sites

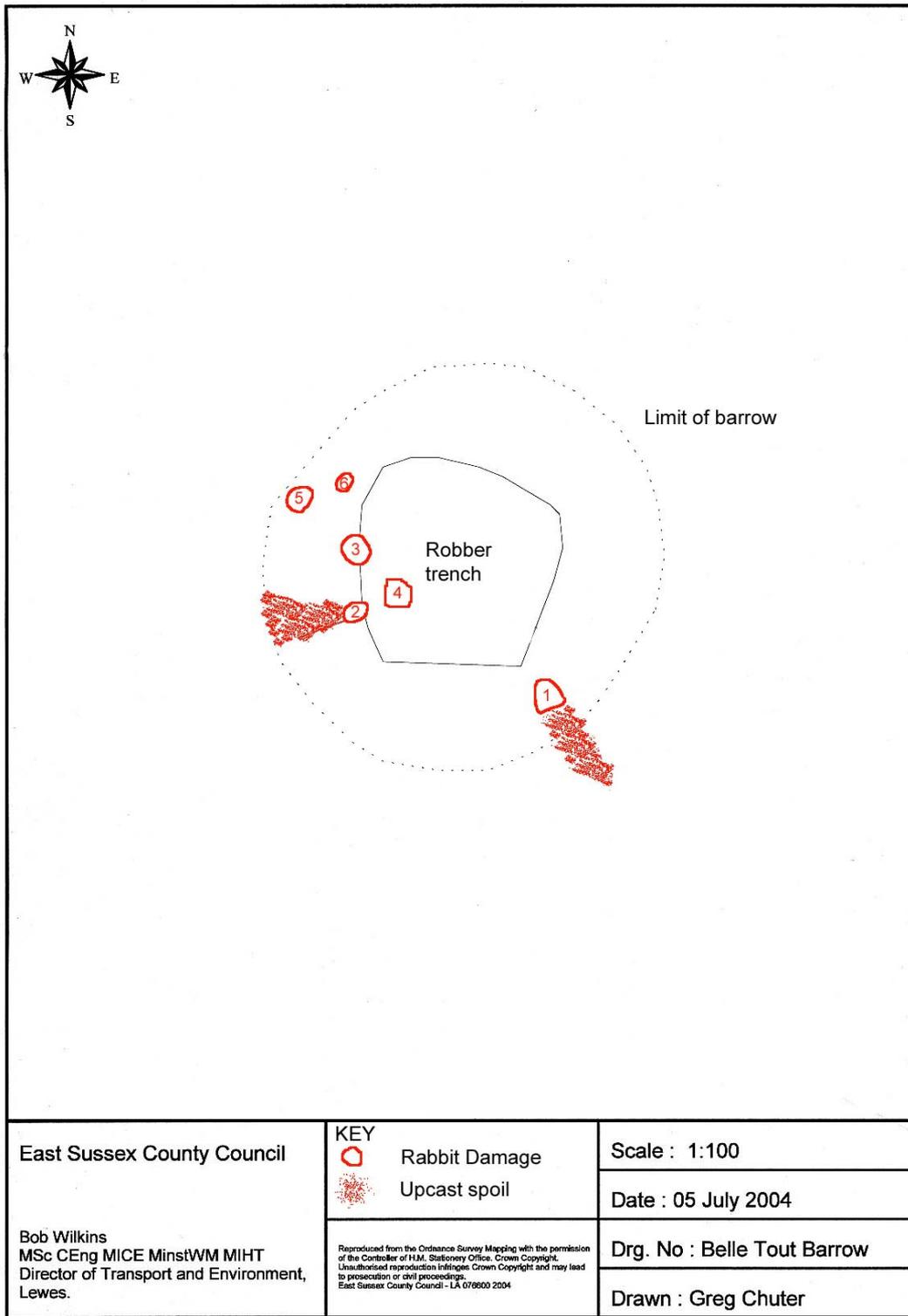


Figure 4. Barrow plan and areas of rabbit damage



Figure 5. Bone fragments recovered.

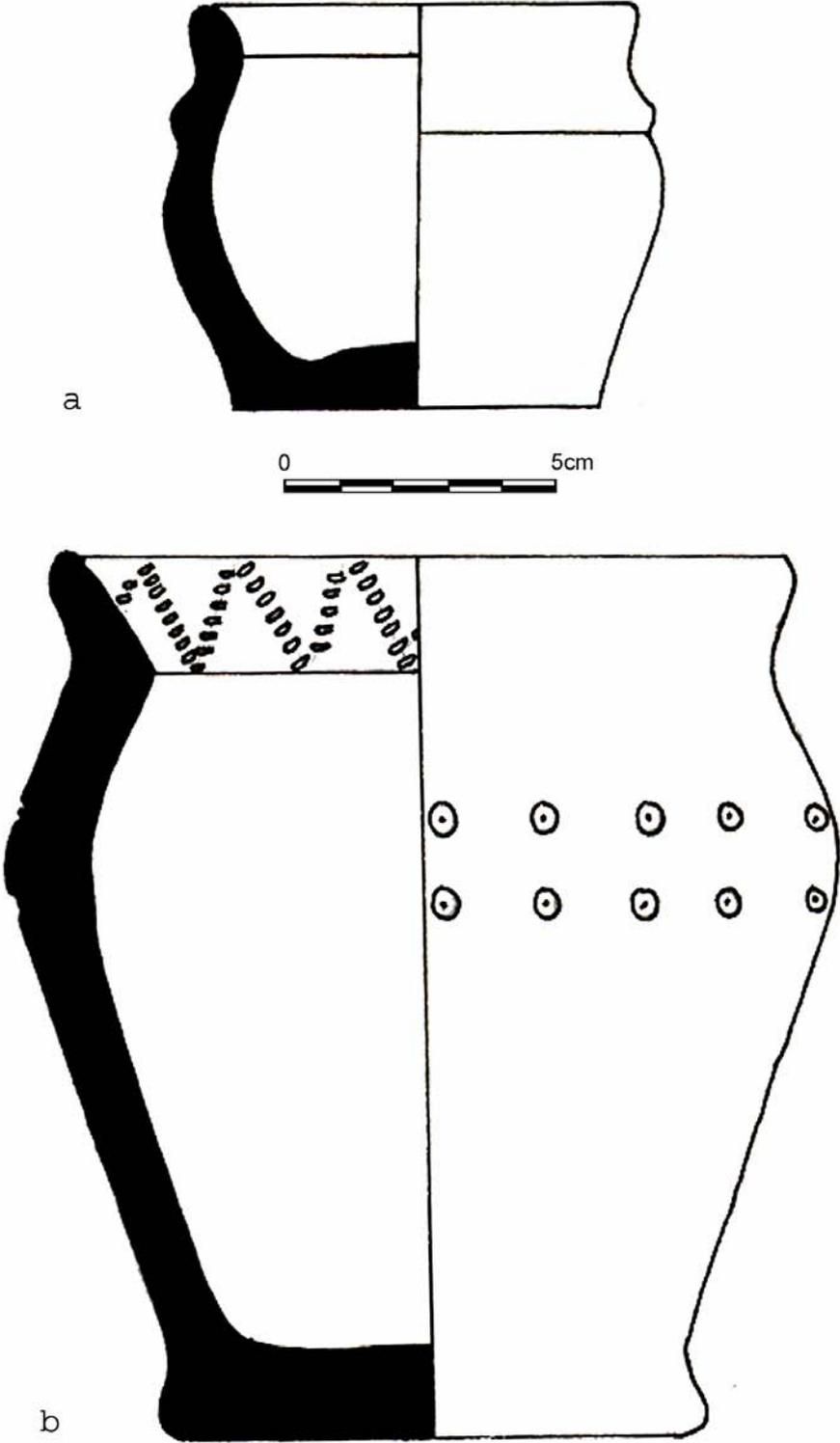


Figure 6. Early Bronze Age food vessels from Belle Tout barrows.

Belle Tout Barrow



Looking north



Looking east



Looking south



Looking west



Robber trench

Figure 7. Photographic record of the barrow after strimming



View inside rabbit burrow

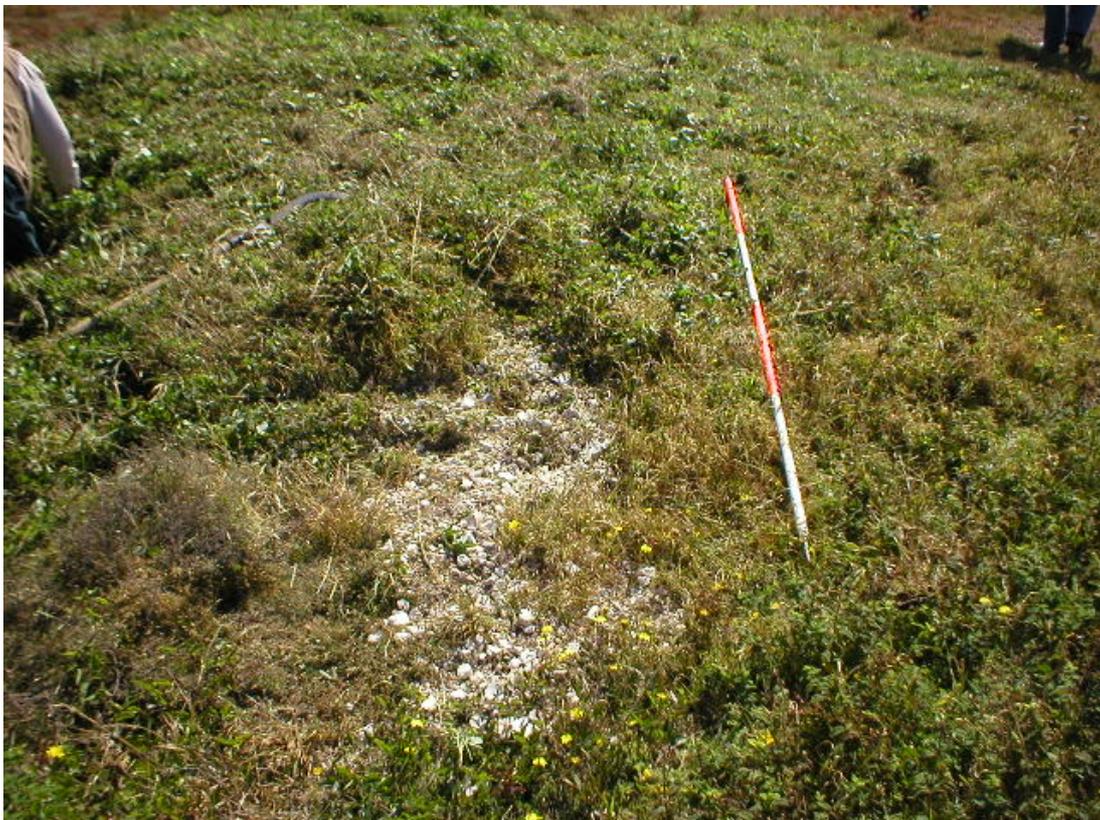


Figure 8. Photographic record of the main rabbit damage



Figure 9. Photographic record of the main skull fragment in situ