

Silbury Hill



**The Collated Archive Record of the Archaeology
Revealed during the Collapses of the
Northumberland Shaft in 2000**

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Figure 01: summit crater

(Further figures: photographs of inside the collapsed summit shaft.)

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this document is to provide a readily accessible and fuller record of archaeology revealed during the collapses of the upper part of the shaft during 2000.

2.0 EVENT SUMMARY

2.1 Collapse event 1 and response

- 2.1.1 On 29th May 2000 a squarish hole, recorded as approximately 2.25m wide and 10.3m deep, appeared on the top of Silbury Hill
- 2.1.2 On 31st May 2000 a scaffold and corrugated iron structure was erected to provide a secure capping over the top of the shaft (Fig 01). This work was carried out with archaeological supervision provided by the National Trust but no records were created.
- 2.1.3 On 12th July 2000 a digital video camera was lowered into the shaft.
- 2.1.4 A desk-based assessment of the potential for archaeological recording and investigation was completed in July 2000 (McAvoy 2000a).
- 2.1.5 On 9th August 2000 a field evaluation was carried out. Graham Daws Associates, specialists in rock mechanics and confined space working, carried out an initial assessment of the stability of the shaft and prepared a basic dimensional survey of the shaft.
- 2.1.6 Staff from English Heritage and its archaeological contractors were then able to inspect the deposits at first hand and a digital video recording and colour photography provided a record of the exposed surfaces.
- 2.1.7 A report on the results of the field evaluation was completed in September 2000 (McAvoy 2000b).

2.2 Collapse event 2 and response

- 2.2.1 At the beginning of December a further collapse occurred when the overhang to leave a bell –shaped hole undermining the scaffold capping. This event was recorded photographically by staff from English Heritage. (Fig 01)
- 2.2.2 In addition a clandestine video recording was made and later published
- 2.2.3 A secure chain-linked fence was erected around the collapsed area under a watching brief by EH staff (Cromwell 2000)

2.3 Collapse event 3 and response

- 2.3.1 By 17th December the sides had collapsed leaving a large ‘crater’ on the top of the hill.
- 2.3.2 This further undermined the scaffold capping and this was removed by 20th December.

3.3 The archaeology of the Neolithic construction

- 3.4.1 Archaeological deposits were exposed in the walls of the shaft and cavity to a maximum depth of 13.5m from the top of the mound. At present these deposits can only be broadly characterised, with varying degrees of detail.
- 3.4.2 Two distinct phases of construction, each of differing character, can be seen within the upper 13.5m of this part of the mound.
- 3.4.3 The earlier construction phase (from at least 13.5m to c 10.2m depth) is composed of well-modulated bands of chalky soil and chalk. A 0.5kg sample of the uppermost layer in this sequence was processed and provided a few fragments of charcoal of which *Corylus avellana* (hazel) and cf. Pomoideae (hawthorn) could be identified. Mollusc shells were absent but the residue contained possible Greensand grit.
- 3.4.4 This construction phase appears to have used soil and chalk derived from the stepwise cutting away of the local soil profile. The nature of the deposition sequence can be interpreted as resulting from either systematic mechanisms of excavation and transport or 'structured deposition' during construction. This clearance of the landscape could be related to the scarping of the adjacent slopes and/or the initial excavation of quarries or ditches.
- 3.4.5 The later construction phase (from c 9.8m upwards) is composed primarily of chalk rubble although there are soil lenses and quite thick layers of pale grey ?decayed chalk. No structural remains were noted although it must be emphasised that there was no systematic observation of these deposits. In addition the north side of the shaft was almost completely hidden by clay which could have been spilt during the original excavation in 1776-7.
- 3.4.6 This construction phase may have used material derived from the deeper excavation of ditches or quarries.
- 3.4.7 These two episodes of construction are separated by a dense layer of very white chalk, and above this, a layer containing sarsens and large chalk blocks.
- 3.4.8 The dense chalk layer represents a major event within the overall construction of the mound. Typically 0.08-0.12m thick and found at a depth of c 10.2m from the top of the shaft, this layer was present on all sides of the chamber and was slightly convex at its base. A 0.5kg sample from the layer was processed but no charred plant remains or molluscs were present.
- 4.4.1 Whilst the dense chalk is essentially a continuous band this is interrupted in two adjacent areas and these interruptions might represent *in situ* features. If man-made, then these could have been small pits or post-holes cut through the chalk or they may be the remains of upstanding features around which the chalk had been laid. Alternatively these features may be a result of trees or bushes rooting on the top of the chalk. There is, however, a possibility that these putative features are merely soil adhering to the exposed surface.
- 4.4.2 This dense chalk layer can be interpreted as having been deliberately laid down, perhaps to create a bright white capping or possibly a coating for the earlier construction phase. Alternatively the chalk layer could have been a platform or have been associated with construction.

- 4.4.3 The layer above the dense chalk was fairly thick (c 0.4m) and contained frequent sarsens and large angular chalk blocks that may have been associated with an *in situ* activity prior to the later construction phase. In places this layer was beneath a further thick pale grey layer with small ?flint inclusions.
- 4.4.4 The results of the evaluation can be compared with our previous understanding of the development of the monument.
- 4.4.5 The banded soil and chalk of the earlier construction phase visible in the cavity appears to be similar in composition to a deposition sequence recorded at the edge of the primary mound (Whittle, construction step d). The layers in this sequence are described as a laminated heap of chalk and 'Toblerone' (a mixture of brown clay-with-flints and small chalk fragments). Interestingly, this sequence lay directly beneath a steeply sloping layer that is described as trampled chalk.
- 4.4.6 However the sides of the mound would have had to slope upwards at a minimum angle of c 53° from the old land surface for this sequence to be part of the same event as the earlier construction phase exposed in the cavity.
- 4.4.7 To summarise, the height of the earlier construction phase in the shaft is c 6m above the previously projected height of the top of Silbury II. Its composition is, however, more akin to deposits found directly over Silbury I. The later construction phase is more directly comparable to Silbury III.

4.3 The archaeology of recent use

- 4.3.1 A number of votive objects had been deliberately placed in the cavity between 12th July and 9th August. These were a cloth ball, a small nightlight, a black crystal and a knotted rope. These objects were left undisturbed.

Cromwell, T, 2000 *Report on watching brief for fence construction on top of Silbury Hill, Wiltshire*, English Heritage

McAvoy, F, 2000a *Silbury Hill Shaft, A Desk-based Assessment of the Potential for Archaeological Recording and Investigation*, English Heritage.

McAvoy, F, 2000b *Silbury Hill Shaft, Evaluation Report and Options for Further Work*, English Heritage.

Whittle, A, 1997 *Sacred Mound Holy Rings, Silbury Hill and the West Kennet palisade enclosures: a Later Neolithic complex in North Wiltshire*, Oxbow Monograph **74**.



Fig 01 overview of collapse 2







