

**Report on watching brief for fence construction on top of Silbury Hill,
Wiltshire,
December 2000**

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Background

Further collapse of the central shaft through Silbury Hill was noticed during the week of 4 December, and CfA agreed to watch the construction of a post-and-wire fence beginning on Monday, 11 December. The fence required 28 wooden uprights, each set in holes approximately 0.3m x 0.3m across by 0.7m deep. Posts were set approximately 2.5m apart in holes excavated mechanically by 10-inch powered auger, while the corner-posts were braced by diagonal-posts driven directly into the ground without excavated post-holes.

Weather conditions at the time were rainy, with gusting winds. The excavation and erecting works took place on 11 & 12 December, with the application of wire fencing and signage continuing into the week unsupervised.

Results

The holes formed a square around the collapsed centre of the hill, and were numbered starting in the Northwest corner and proceeding clockwise. Posts #8, 15, and 22 formed the Northeast, Southeast, and Southwest corners respectively. The enclosure is aligned roughly to the road (the A4), and thus square with respect to the Ordnance Survey mapping grid, although this was not checked by survey.

The turf was cut by spade as a complete "plug" for each hole. It was fairly consistent, being approximately 0.08m thick with dark brown clayey silt soil that contained frequent chalk fragments approximately 10mm in diameter.

Below the turf, most of the holes came down onto large chalk fragments c10-7-mm diameter in a matrix of dark brown clayey silt. The chalk fragments constituted about 80 percent of the mix. There were occasional flint nodules averaging 0.1m in longest dimension.

Holes 2, 5, 6, and 7 had a soil/chalk mixture below the turf closer to 50/50 in ratio. This seemed to carry on the full depth of the holes. Hole 14 was unique, in that it had a layer of pure dark brown silt 0.3m thick extending from just below the turf, with a sharp transition to chalk fragments in a silt matrix of the 80/20 ratio mentioned above. The transition was at a uniform depth around the circumference of the hole, suggesting that it cut through a layer or large feature of some kind.

Finds

Two holes produced finds. Because they were excavated by mechanical auger the finds are essentially unstratified.

Hole 23 produced three large sherds of medieval pot, including a substantial piece of rim. These appear to be 12th/13th century in date. (Pers comm Sarah Jennings)

Hole 14 produced three sherds of pot, along with a nail and a piece of modern wire lead complete with a miniature three-pin plug. The pot may be Iron Age, but may also be medieval. (Pers comm Alex Gibson and Sarah Jennings)

Despite searching the spoil, no other finds were uncovered, and no worked flints were observed.

Comments

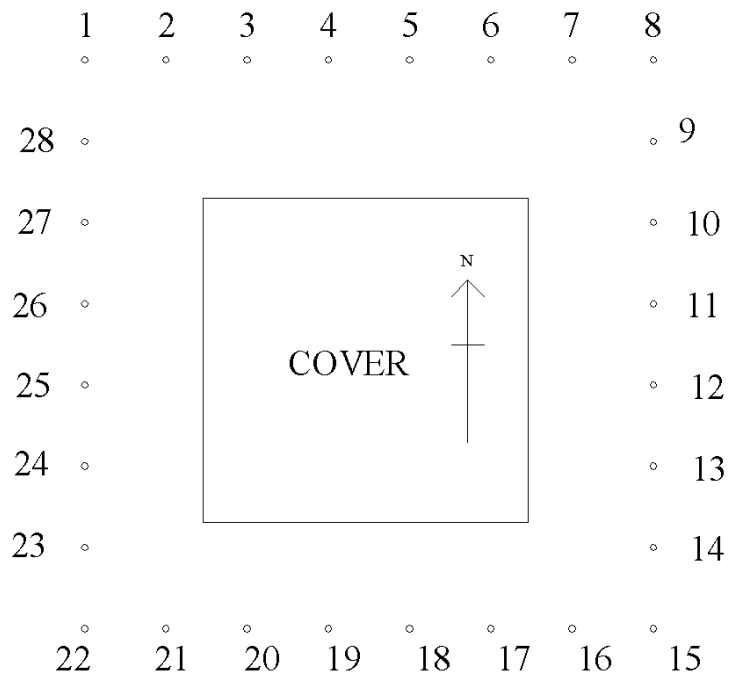
The flat top of Silbury Hill is the logical place to look for features that would identify the uses to which the hill was put, but the method of excavation for these posts did not leave much hope of finding features in plan. Possible features can be assumed in holes 2, 5, 6, 7, and 14 due to changes in soil, but hole 23 suggests that other features exist that are filled with a matrix similar to the material they cut, making identification difficult. Any hope of seeing features on this site would lie in stripping the turf from the top of the hill so as to see features in plan. Given the history of the site it is likely that at least some dumping occurred during the 18th century excavation, possibly sealing earlier features.

It should be noted that the mechanical auger managed to shake the ground to a distance in excess of 3 metres from the hole being excavated. The chalk was relatively uncompacted within the sides of the holes, and the soil matrix was very crumbly in nature (providing very little “glue” to secure the chalk), which should have meant that the vibrations would be absorbed in a very short distance. The fact that they were not suggests that the loose matrix is currently saturated, and thus the water is transmitting the vibration.

Archive

There are 36 colour slide photographs, showing the holes as deturfed, as excavated, and the fence construction. The finds from holes 23 and 14 were photographed, along with the sections within these holes and the spoil around them. There are also shots of the water in the ditch surrounding the hill. Not all holes were photographed, as they were repetitive in nature.

There is a single sheet of A4 drafting-film containing notes along with a diagram of the holes. (Conditions were too wet for ordinary paper.)



Sketch plan with numbering of holes. Note that North Arrow is only approximate.