

ART. IV.—*The tumulus at Skelmore Heads near
Ulverston.* By T. G. E. POWELL, F.S.A.

Read at Cockermouth, July 14th, 1972.

THE diminutive “long cairn” at Skelmore Heads was excavated by me in 1957, and reported in CW2 lxiii 20-26. Excavation had revealed an extensive amount of destruction that had been effected in times past through robbing for stone walling, and doubtless other digging of an uncontrolled kind, including the activities of the North Lonsdale Field Club in 1927/28.

Within recent years considerable advances have taken place in an understanding of the neolithic settlement of the North of England, and of the variety and relationships of long tumuli in Britain as a whole. For the first, palaeoecological studies, principally by Pennington (1965), Walker (1966), and Oldfield (1971, with further references), have opened up an entirely new vista of woodland utilisation, and eventual land clearance, that had begun by the middle of the fourth millennium B.C. if not somewhat earlier. It is now evident that certain areas in the North of England were attractive to the earliest farmers on the island who did not turn to northern expansion only after the southern chalklands had been exploited. Apart from abundant evidence provided by pollen analysis, sedimentation, and refined radiocarbon assays, the way to new archaeological approaches is demonstrated, at least in part, by the results from Storrs Moss, near Carnforth, where utilised woodland, probably serving a nearby settlement, was identified, and dated to a period lying about the middle of the fourth millennium B.C. (Powell *et al.*, 1971).

The importance of the early neolithic in the North

of England is further underlined by the situation now unfolding in Ireland especially as a result of the work of Case and ApSimon (1970), and their collaborators in the natural sciences (Smith *et al.*, 1971). There, too, a similar pattern of forest history and land utilisation, with corresponding radiocarbon dates, is revealed. It follows that such phenomena in material culture as large rectangular timber buildings, and fine ware in plain pottery styles, evidenced at Ballynagilly, Tyrone (ApSimon, 1969), should also be anticipated in regions of favourable environment throughout northern England. The interest of the limestone area leading from western Yorkshire across to the head of Morecambe Bay can hardly be overstressed for future research.

For the second, it is now clear that there was both time and space in the North of England to allow for the building of substantial funerary monuments of more than one kind, and that the earliest of these need not be mere copies of southern burial usage.

Two recent studies have contributed materially to a reassessment of the "long barrow" situation. Ashbee (1970) has brought together all the information, antiquarian as well as modern, on long tumuli of earth or stone not containing megalithic, or other stone-built, chambers. Most if not all of these are now considered to have contained timber-built structures, and this has been very well demonstrated by recent excavation at Willerby Wold, and at Kilham, on the chalkland of the East Riding of Yorkshire (Manby, 1965; 1971). Of immediate interest is Ashbee's revivification of Greenwell's description of the long cairn at Crosby Garrett (Raiset Pike), Westmorland (Greenwell, 1877, 510-513; Ashbee, 1970, 46, 132, 172).

In the light of recent excavations, especially at Wayland's Smithy, phase I (Atkinson, 1965), and Ashbee's own Fussell's Lodge (1966 and 1970), it seems certain that there was a burnt down timber burial structure

at Crosby Garrett, and that Greenwell's vertical flues should be reinterpreted as the remains of substantial upright posts (Ashbee, 1970, 53).

The existence of a large transverse stone slab in this barrow adjacent to one end of the burial deposit is another point of interest. In writing to Mr Ashbee that Skelmore Heads had escaped his list, his opinion was sought as to the possibility that the transverse slab set on edge at the eastern end of this tumulus might correspond to that at Crosby Garrett, and if the line of three stone uprights down the centre of the stone-built cairn might reflect the idea, if not the original function, of large timber posts deduced at Crosby Garrett, and elsewhere. Mr Ashbee has assented to these possibilities, and further proposed that the "disturbed area" at Skelmore Heads might have contained a timber structure all traces of which would have been removed by the time of the 1957 excavation. If this should have been the case it may also be inferred that no extensive burning had taken place, and this is supported by the absence of charcoal, or even the smallest scraps of burnt bone, as already stated in the excavation report.

The other study is by Manby (1970) who provides a detailed statement on structural and dating evidence from northern English long barrows. He has independently appreciated the possible role of the two large stone uprights at Skelmore Heads between which should have existed the burial deposit. Manby emphasises the predominance in the North of rites involving conflagration of timber structures, and of human cremation, but makes clear the exceptions among which Skelmore Heads should be numbered. It must suffice for the present to contrast the burial rite assumed at Skelmore Heads with that in evidence at Crosby Garrett (Raiset Pike) while noting apparent similarities in structure. Manby's map (1970, fig. 1) is

the most detailed of northern long barrows yet seen. It is not to be expected that the gaps lying between the Yorkshire groups on the one hand, and, on the other, the groups of the Eden valley, and Low Furness-west Cumberland, can, or should be, filled in with a scatter of monuments. Some tracts of country were probably suitable for passage only, in others destruction has taken its toll. There is, however, now new impetus for a detailed search, and more reason to expect "long barrows" of one kind or another in areas west of the Pennines favourable to neolithic settlement.

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