

THE EXCAVATION OF THE SNELS LOW AND LEAN LOW ROUND CAIRNS, DERBYSHIRE

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SNELS LOW

The Snels Low cairn (SK 118794) is situated at the northern end of a plantation crowning a conical limestone hill at a height of 1,150 feet o.d. immediately north-east of the village of Peak Forest (Fig. 1). The surrounding area is rough grassy pasture. In 1971 it appeared as a comparatively high mound smothered in rough undergrowth, with a central hole and apparent disturbance on the south side. The cairn was one of the few burial mounds to be marked on the 1-in. Ordnance Survey map of 1840. Despite this it seems to have escaped the attention of local 19th-century antiquarians such as Bateman and Pennington.

The cairn was excavated between June and August 1971 by quadrant trenches from the four cardinal points of the compass. The diameter of the mound was found to be 41 ft. Its greatest height was 2 ft., although the centre had been truncated at some time in the past. The mound had been erected on a rising knob of limestone and the absence of any old turf line suggested that the whole area had been stripped of vegetation prior to the raising of the mound.

THE STRUCTURE (Figs. 2-3)

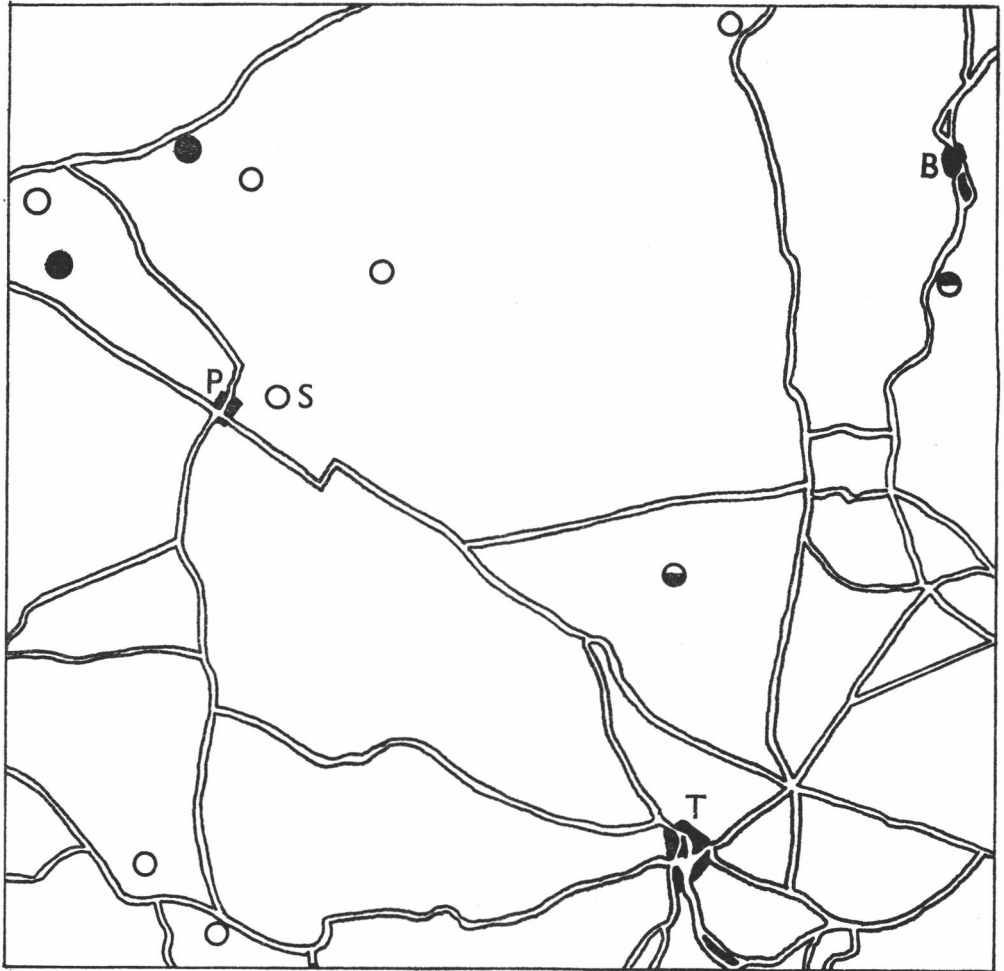
The structure of Snels Low was more complex than the simple limestone cairns previously excavated by the writer (Marsden 1963; 1964; 1970). After the deposition of the primary burial, a cairn had been piled up over and around the area. Although disturbed by stone-robbing, this cairn retained a maximum height of 2 ft. and a diameter of 16 ft. The stones of the cairn were generally small, and the weathered condition of many of them suggested that they had been gathered from the nearby land surfaces. Completely covering this cairn, an outer envelope of hard compacted clay loam up to 3 ft. 6 ins. thick had been piled.

On the west side of Snels Low was a feature not apparently represented elsewhere in the mound. This was a 'false cairn' structure, a capping of a single layer of flattish limestones extending horizontally some 10 ft. west from the side of the central cairn at a depth from the present surface of 1 ft. Beneath this stone layer was a thickness of clay loam which extended downwards to the old ground surface.

THE BURIALS

The skeletal remains of two individuals were found in the area of the central cairn. The primary burial, eccentrically placed in the south-eastern part of the cairn, was represented by the lower half of a crouched adolescent skeleton laid on the old ground surface. The upper half had been removed by past excavators. Above the burial was a 1 ft. thick layer of clay apparently once covering the whole of the interment. Four feet west of this burial was the intrusive extended skeleton of a 5- or 6-year-old child, introduced into the top of the cairn. This skeleton, whose mandible, perhaps disturbed by later animal action, was found lying on top of the left femur, lay 1 ft. 2 ins. below the present surface of the mound. Neither burial had any accompanying pottery and artifacts, although the primary skeleton could once have been so provided, before its disturbance.

Spread throughout the central areas of Snels Low, both in and around the central cairn, were the usual fragments and splinters of human bone so often occurring in these



- LONG CAIRN
- ◐ CHAMBERED R.C.
- ◑ B/F.V.
- F.V.

Fig. 1 Neolithic or Early Bronze Age cairns near Snels Low. S = Snels Low; T = Tideswell; B = Bradwell; P = Peak Forest. Scale 1 inch = 1 mile.

contexts, and best explained as a ritual feature. Among the cairn stones were considerable numbers of water vole bones common in Peak District cairns and commented upon regularly from Bateman's time onwards (Radley 1966, 67; Marsden 1970, 213). These vole bones, and numerous snail shells, occurred in particularly large numbers in the lower levels of the cairn. The only other animal remains were the canine tooth of a sheep or goat 6 ins. below the surface in the north-west part of the cairn, the distal end of the right humerus of an ox on the old ground surface south of the child burial, and the cannon bone of a horse below the turf on the east.

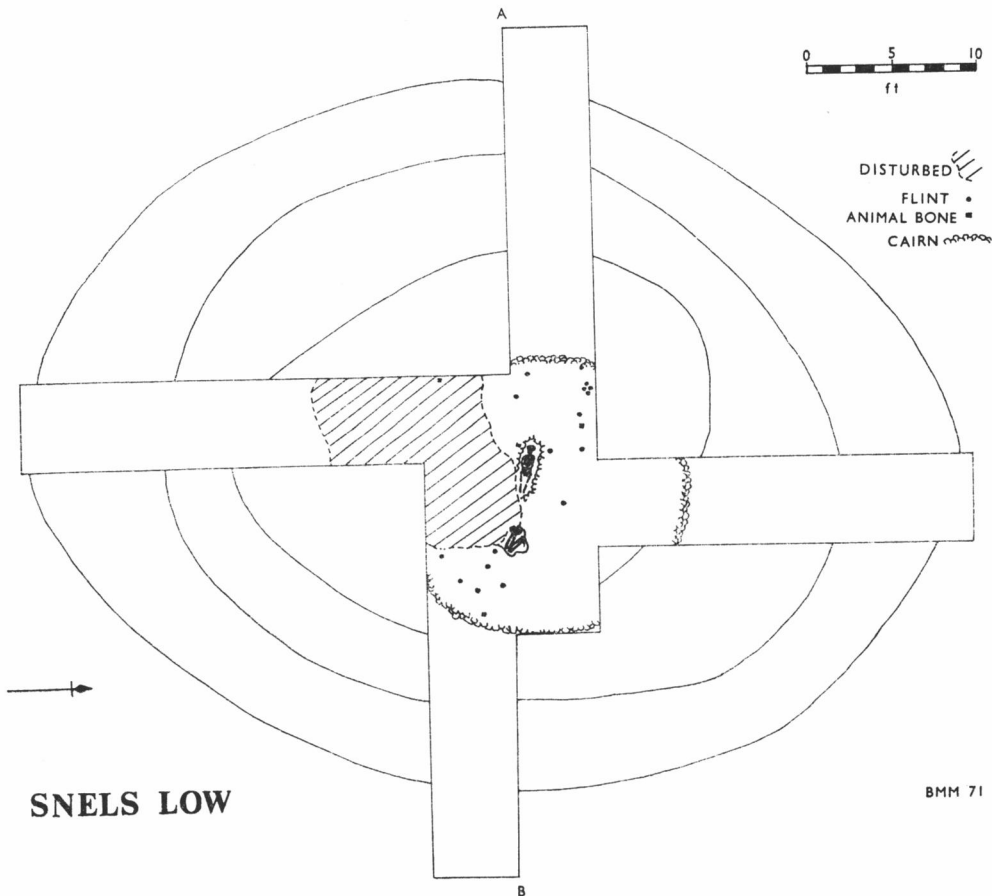


Fig. 2 Snels Low: plan of the cairn.

Immediately south of the child burial and some 6 ins. deeper was a heavily charred human left humerus, almost black with the heat to which it had been subjected. Seventeen flints, mostly flakes, were discovered, all in the area of the central cairn. There were only two recognizable implements among them, a small fabricator and a broken knife flaked along both edges.

At some period the southern part of Snels Low has suffered disturbance. A large hole, dug down to the bedrock, had cut into the central cairn from the south. The upper part of the primary burial had been removed at this time, although the pelvis and lower limbs, together with three teeth, had remained untouched. Fortunately, although this cutting had penetrated to within a few inches of the child burial, this interment had escaped undetected.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a group of cairns in the vicinity of Snels Low, mainly occurring to the north of Peak Forest. They include the remains of two neolithic long cairns, Perryfoot (Pennington 1877, 28) and Harratt Grange, and a chambered round cairn, Tides Low. Other cairns in the area, generally crowning hills at or above the 1,300-ft. contour, include Ox Low (Pennington 1877, 25), Eldon Hill (Pennington 1877, 11), Gautries Hill

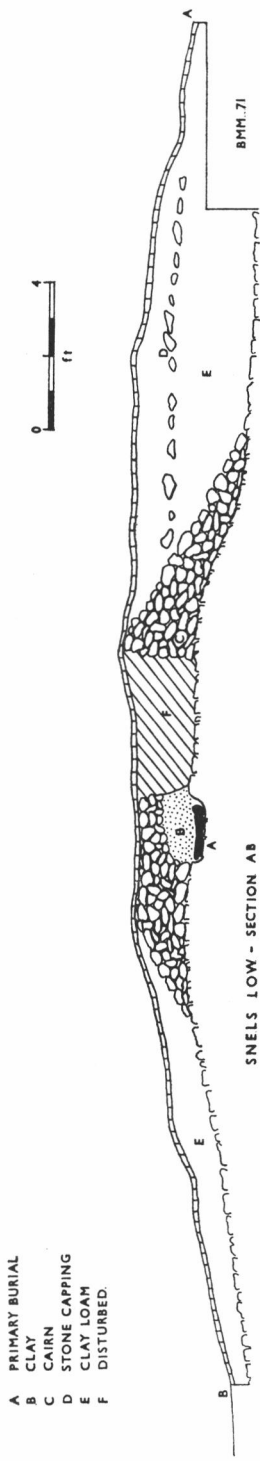


Fig. 3 Snels Low: section across the cairn.

(Pennington 1877, 26), Withered Low (Bateman 1848, 95), Bole Hill (Bateman 1848, 90), and Wind Low (Bateman 1848, 88). These latter cairns, and others a little farther distant, contain a series of burials assignable to the Food Vessel Culture. The burial rite is generally inhumation in stone-built cists or on the old ground surface. Associations include food vessels (Eldon Hill), stone battle-axes (Ox Low), spacer plate jet necklaces (Wind Low) and rivetted bronze daggers (Bole Hill). Some three miles south-west of Snels Low is the Bull Ring henge, although this monument, like Arbor Low, had probably lost its significance by the time the Food Vessel communities were expanding in the area. Although Snels Low shows no definite Food Vessel affinities, its presence, at the centre of a group of cairns assignable to the period, suggests that it can be placed within this cultural complex with some confidence.

Although the primary burial at Snels Low is Early Bronze Age in date, the extended child skeleton, lacking as it does any accompanying artifacts, could belong to a period covering the Iron Age, Roman or Anglian eras and cannot be more closely dated within that time span.

The most noteworthy feature of the excavation was the information gleaned regarding the erection of the mound. Snels Low was found to be a composite stone- and earth-built structure, of a type not often met with in Early Bronze Age contexts in the Peak District (but *cf.* Bateman 1861, 48, 58 and 63). The structural sequence included the stripping of a natural rise in the limestone bedrock, where a cairn, some 12 ft. × 3 ft., of generally small material had been piled up over the primary burial. Over this cairn was laid an envelope of clay loam, some 3 ft. 6 ins. thick at its greatest extent. On the west side was placed a capping of a single layer of stones extending some 10 ft. westwards from the side of the cairn. This singular feature was not repeated on the north or east sides, and any traces of it on the south would have been erased by the subsequent heavy disturbance in that area. The margins of the mound showed no trace of any retaining wall or kerbing.

THE FINDS

i Human bones

- (a) *Primary burial* The lower half of an adolescent skeleton laid in a crouched posture on the old ground surface. The upper part of the skeleton had been disturbed and removed during an early unscientific excavation. Remains found *in situ* included three teeth, one incisor, one molar, one canine, the innominates, the shafts of the femurs, fibulae and tibiae (ends decayed) and various fragmentary bones relating to the feet, including six proximal phalanges and four metatarsals. All the bones were very much decayed.
- (b) *Intrusive burial* The skull and constituent bones of this five- or six-year-old child were comparatively well preserved. In the disturbed southern portion of the cairn, perhaps representing part of the remains of the disturbed primary, were a few scattered adolescent bones, including the distal end of the right radius, two rib fragments, a piece of vertebra, the proximal end of the right ulna, and fragments of the proximal and distal ends of the right humerus. Near to the child burial were the fragmented and scorched pieces of a much-burned adult left humerus.

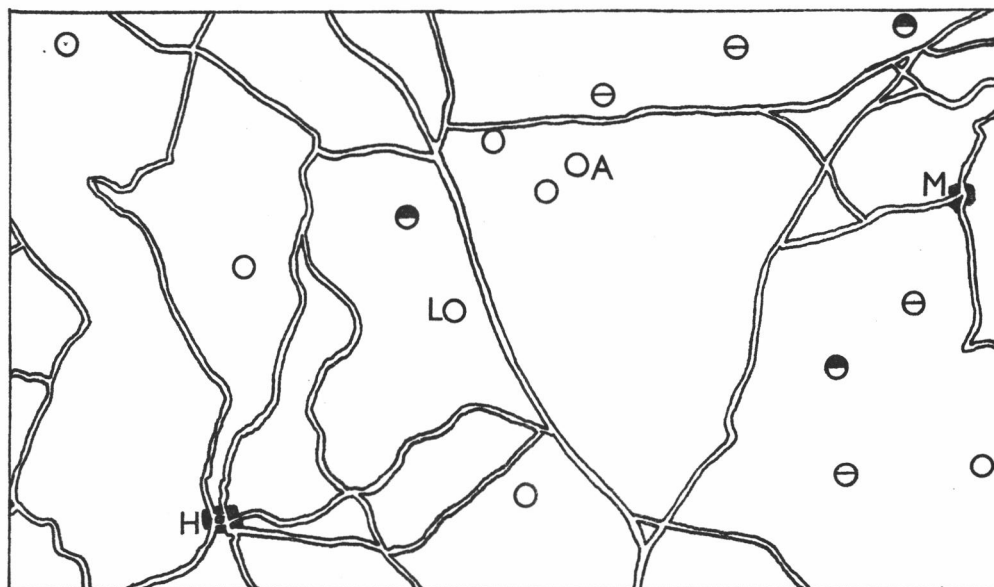
ii Animal bones There were very few animal bones represented at Snels Low apart from myriads of water-vole remains (*Arvicola*). The other bones included the canine tooth of a sheep or goat (*Ovis* or *Capra*) in the north-western part of the cairn, the distal of the right humerus of an ox (*Bos Longifrons*) on the south edge of the east cutting, and the cannon bone of a horse (*Equus caballus*) on the east.

iii Flints Seventeen flints were found at Snels Low, all within the central cairn. Most were small patinated flakes; implements included a small fabricator, and a broken flake knife worked on both edges.

iv Molluscs Numerous intact shells of the *Cepaea Nemoralis* variety were found.

LEAN LOW

The Lean Low cairn (SK 149622), a conspicuous mound clearly visible west of the A.515 Buxton-Ashbourne road, stands on a conical limestone hill at a height of 1,298 ft. O.D. some $1\frac{3}{4}$ miles north-east of Hartington village (Fig. 4). As at Snels Low, the immediate surrounding area is rough grassy pasture. The hill forms part of a continuous range of heights running in a north-westerly direction across typical limestone moorland, and intersected by numerous dry valleys. The landscape is almost treeless



- ⊖ BEAKER
- B/ F.V.
- F.V.

Fig. 4 Beaker and Food Vessel round cairns near Lean Low. L = Lean Low; A = Arbor Low; H = Hartington; M = Middleton by Youlgreave. Scale 1 inch = 1 mile.

apart from the odd windbreak plantation. Most of the hills are, or were, crowned by round cairns. Lean Low is within sight of the Arbor Low henge monument, which stands one mile to the north-east.

Lean Low has been subjected to numerous excavations and much damage in the past. A large part of the north side of the mound was completely removed by Thomas Bateman (Bateman 1848, 102). Bateman also dug into the south side, where a crater is still visible (Bateman 1848, 35). His examinations led to the discovery of a cist of limestones 1 ft. 6 ins. deep on the north side, containing a food vessel and a cremation strewn round it on the floor of the cist. The food vessel contained a flint knife and splinters of animal bone. Below this burial, on the old ground surface, was a crouched inhumation. On the south side Bateman found an extended skeleton, its head protected by stones. He was prevented from attacking the centre of the cairn by 'an erection of turf and stones pertaining to the Ordnance Survey'. This 'erection' has since disappeared, and in 1972 there was a considerable dishd cavity at the centre of the mound. The east side of Lean Low has been gutted by a wide and deep gash, the remains of a trench driven to the centre from the north-east angle. This cutting has never been properly filled in and contains a mass of weathered limestones, many of large size.

The cairn was excavated between July and September 1972 by quadrant trenches from the north, west and east sides. The diameter of the mound was found to be 43-45 ft. and the greatest height 2 ft. 6 ins. On the west the builders of the cairn had utilized a rising stratum of limestone bedrock to form part of the mound and thus save a certain amount of labour, a method noted in the construction of other Peak District burial mounds (for example, Marsden 1963, 83; Bateman 1848, 83; etc.).

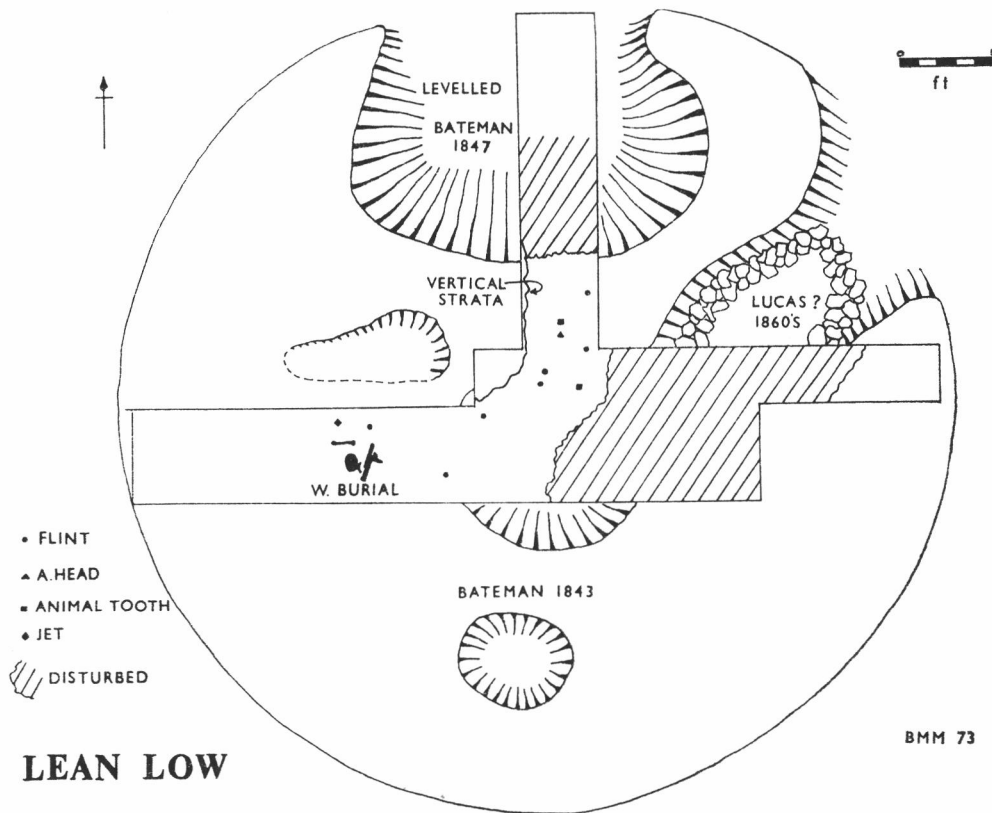


Fig. 5 Lean Low: plan of the cairn.

THE STRUCTURE (Fig. 5)

The construction of Lean Low was quite conventional. The mound consisted of a simple pile of limestones of various sizes, some quite small and others of a size and weight that would have made their transportation a two-man task. None of the stones showed any signs of weathering, suggesting that they were quarried for the purpose of raising the cairn. Immediately south of Lean Low is a very small, apparently ancient, quarry which might well have provided the necessary stone.

Fine brown soil was mixed with the cairn material, but there was no sign of an ancient turf-line in the areas excavated, although the undisturbed bedrock in the northern cutting was covered by a layer of boulder clay 1 in. thick.

On the west side there was only, at the highest level, some 1 ft. 6 ins. of made material, due to the raised bedrock. On the north side the height of the artificial cairn material was 2 ft. 6 ins. At the mound centre this was reduced to 1 ft. although this was due to the central depression, the result of an excavation which had removed most of the artificial covering in this area.

THE BURIAL

Only one burial was found during the 1972 excavations. This was on the west side 1 ft. deep on the old ground surface, 9 ft. from the mound centre. The interment was an unusual one, consisting of the cranium of a young person, lacking a mandible, and

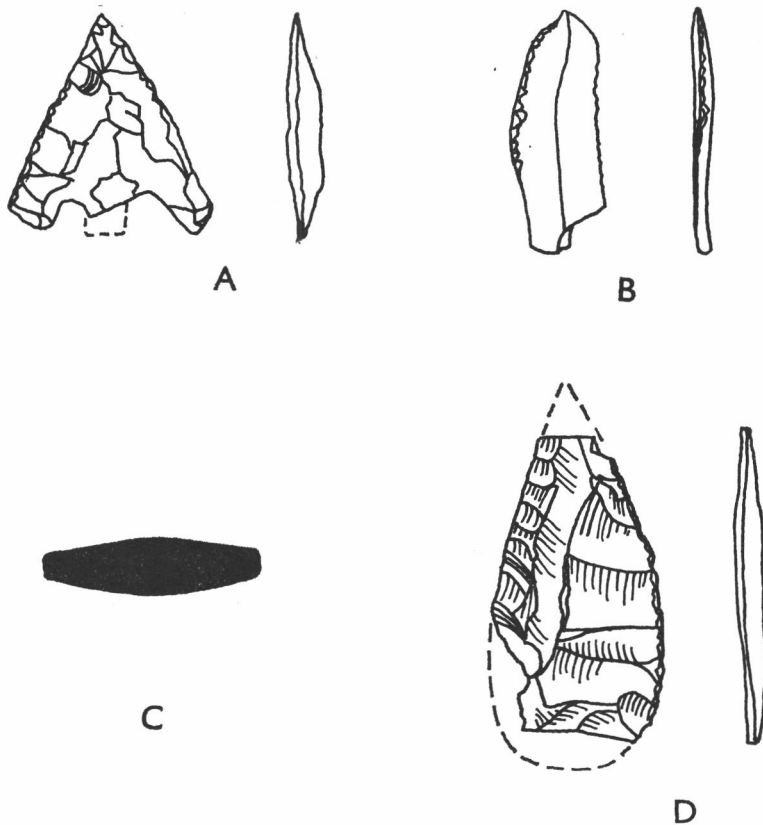


Fig. 6 Lean Low: flint and jet artifacts. Scale 1 : 1.

with a group of selected bones arranged round it. These included the right humerus and ulna, the former on top of the latter, the distal end of the left humerus, the left scapula, three rib fragments and the shafts of both fibulae. These 'part burials', as distinct from disarticulated ones, are an unusual feature in Peak District cairns. Two ft. north-west of the burial on the old ground surface was a fine biconical jet bead (Fig. 6c), together with another piece of the same material.

In the north quadrant trench, Bateman's disturbance was located 8 ft. from the centre of the cairn. Eight flints were found during the excavation, including a barbed-and-tanged arrowhead just below the surface on the north side (Fig. 6A), a superbly worked, though broken, spearhead in the same area, 2 ft. 4 ins. deep (Fig. 6D), and a blade flaked down one edge, 1 ft. deep in the west cutting (Fig. 6B).

Throughout all levels of the north and west quadrant trenches were scattered pieces of human bone and masses of water vole remains. The only other animals represented were the ox and pig; a single tooth of each of these species was found just below the surface in the north area. Recognizable human bone fragments were rare, but two pieces of a human skull, evidently juvenile, occurred just below the turf on the west, and in a similar position on the north was the distal end of the left radius of a child. Also found throughout all levels of the north cutting were many fragmentary cremated human bones. These bone scatters, noted from many Early Bronze Age Derbyshire cairns, seem to suggest, at Lean Low at least, the deliberate introduction of representative splinters of bone among the cairn stones during the construction of the mound, apparently as

some sort of ritual feature. The bones are generally small and eroded and do not appear to be the result of either human or animal disturbance as they are so widely and deeply scattered, and the west cutting, and much of the north cutting, had certainly not been previously disturbed. Numerous snail shells were also present at Lean Low. The cranium of the western burial had no less than 17 shells, and quantities of vole bones, packed inside it.

The east quadrant trench produced extensive disturbance which showed that much of this side of the burial mound had been dug out to the bedrock. Among the disturbance was a piece of clay-pipe bowl of a style extant in the 1860s, suggesting that this digging dates from this period. There is some evidence that this part of Lean Low, and the centre of the mound itself, suffered the attentions of the Derbyshire antiquary John F. Lucas sometime between 1862 and 1870. In his great synthesis of round barrows, John Thurnam illustrated the base of a hybrid beaker (Thurnam 1871, 398; Clarke 1971, 88, 392) which he had examined whilst visiting Lucas to view his collection. The illustration, further described in the text, is clearly labelled, 'bottom of a cup from Lean Low, Derbyshire' (Thurnam 1871, 397). In his own publications, Lucas' friend Llewellynn Jewitt (who lent Thurnam the block for the *Archaeologia* illustration) featured this and other drawings of the vessel. In his *Grave Mounds and their Contents* it is labelled as simply 'found in Derbyshire', but in his *Ceramic Art of Great Britain*, printed in 1879, six years after Lucas' death, Jewitt described it as being found at 'Elk Low', and from this time to the present writers have regarded this singular pot as coming from the latter mound. It seems probable that this identification is incorrect; the evidence from Thurnam's paper seems to offer proof of the origin of this unique vessel. Elk Low itself was thoroughly investigated by Bateman in 1843 (Bateman 1848, 45), and it seems unlikely that Lucas would have considered it worthwhile to carry out further work there, whereas Lean Low, with its hitherto undisturbed centre, denied to Bateman, would have had much more appeal for him.

CONCLUSIONS

The 1972 excavations revealed important evidence regarding the construction of the Lean Low cairn and its builders. The jet bead and square-barbed arrowhead provide further proof that that round cairn was erected by elements of the Food Vessel Culture, also represented by the actual food vessel found by Bateman, and by the hybrid pot itself, if this does come from the same site. Lean Low forms part of the burial mound complex surrounding the Arbor Low henge, which was itself an important religious and cultural focus for the local beaker settlement in the area. This settlement was a protracted one and is represented by many beaker groups from the earliest to the latest, as is revealed by the ceramic styles found in the area (Marsden 1970, 197–201). Lean Low belongs to the second phase of settlement in the district, represented by the Food Vessel Culture. How far there was any interrelation between the two groups in the Peak District is a question not at present answerable with any precision, but generally in the vicinity of Arbor Low food vessels are later than the beakers. The Food Vessel cairn built on the bank of the henge itself suggests that the latter had lost its religious significance when the former was raised. Immediately west of Arbor Low is the huge Gib Hill cairn. Whatever its original purpose was, the mound contained a secondary food vessel cremation in a stone-built cist (Bateman 1861, 17). The Parsley Hay cairn, a short distance north-west of Lean Low produced a Food Vessel warrior grave with a rivetted bronze dagger and a stone battleaxe stratigraphically later than a beaker burial in a 'sitting posture' in a rock grave (Bateman 1861, 22). In fact a group of Food Vessel cairns cluster to the south and west of Arbor Low, including further warrior graves with rivetted bronze daggers, and/or stone battleaxes or bronze flat axes, some in shaft graves cut deep into the limestone, others in rough cists or on the old ground surface. Female graves also exist, such as the Middleton Moor burial half a mile north-west of Arbor Low, with its superb spacer-plate jet necklace (Bateman 1861, 24). Generally in Derbyshire the Food Vessel complex appears towards the end of the recognizable beaker

settlement in the Peak. Later southern beakers share an overlap with early food vessels evidenced by interments in such cairns as Hazlebadge (Bagshawe Mss., Sheffield City Museum) and Hay Top, Monsal (Bateman 1861, 74).

If the 'Elk Low' hybrid beaker was in fact from Lean Low it would prove a useful local ceramic association, as the vessel suggests a neolithic imitation of a beaker, a pottery copy one might expect from an area integrating beaker settlers on a predominantly neolithic population — a population which, in the Peak, maintained a local continuity using beaker-influenced ceramics, to emerge as a distinct entity, the Food Vessel/Primary Urn group, by perhaps 1600–1550 B.C.

THE FINDS

i Human bones

- (a) *Western burial* The bones of this 'part burial' of a young person included the cranium, five teeth, the upper right and left second and third molars and an incisor, the right humerus and the distal end of the left, the right ulna, the left scapula, three rib fragments and the shafts of both fibulae.
- (b) *Other bones* Apart from numerous unidentifiable fragments there were two pieces of the skull of a child in the west cutting, and the distal end of the right radius of a child in the north cutting. There were also many tiny fragments of cremated bone scattered throughout the latter.

ii Animal bones There were the remains of numerous water-vole bones (*Arvicola*) distributed throughout the cairn (*cf.* Snels Low, above). Other animal remains were rare and included only a single tooth from an ox (*Bos Longifrons*) and a pig (*Sus Scrofa*).

iii Flints Eight flints were found during the excavation. They included a barbed-and-tanged arrowhead with the tang missing, of white flint, and a fine, though broken, spearhead of translucent opalised flint. Both these implements came from the north cutting. A blade of dark blue flint, flaked down one side, was found on the west side.

iv Jet A fine biconical jet bead 28 mm. long was found, together with another fragment of jet, in the west cutting on the old ground surface 2 ft. north-west of the western burial.

v Mollusca Numerous intact shells of the *Cepaea Nemoralis* variety.

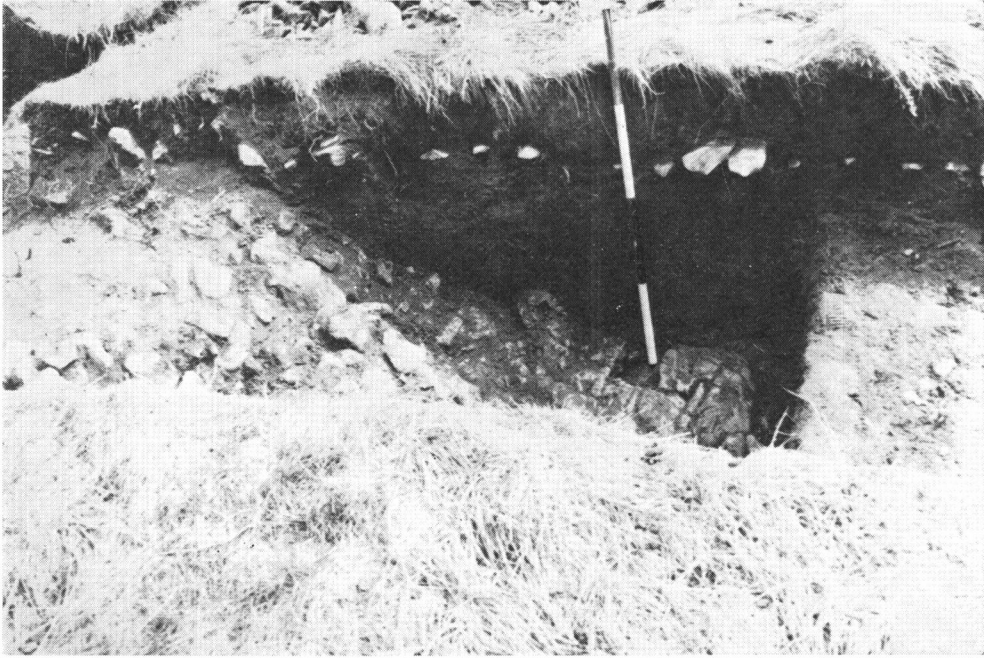
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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THE EXCAVATION OF THE SNELS LOW



Pl. 1 Snels Low: west quadrant trench, showing cairn on left and stone capping in section. Scale, in feet, stands on limestone bedrock.



Pl. 2 Snels Low: central cairn, removed in foreground by robber trench which penetrated to the primary burial which lay under the clay, right centre. Scale in feet.



Pl. 3 Snels Low: remains of crouched primary burial. Upper part disturbed; molar tooth between leg bones. Scale in inches.



Pl. 4 Lean Low: western burial.