

EXCAVATIONS AT THE MINNING LOW CHAMBERED CAIRN (BALLIDON 1), BALLIDON, DERBYSHIRE

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INTRODUCTION

The Minning Low chambered cairn (SK 20955728) is the largest and most imposing of the group of megalithic tombs clustered on the limestone plateau on the Derbyshire-Staffordshire border. This group of round or oval cairns includes Fivewells (Taddington 1), Green Low (Aldwark 1), Tides Low (Tideswell 1) and the now practically destroyed sites of Bole Hill (Bakewell 1), Stoney Low (Aldwark 2) and Harborough Rocks (Brassington 1). The area also contains neolithic cairns of a different shape and derivation with elongated mounds of long cairn type, examples of which exist at Harratt Grange (Peak Forest 1), Perryfoot (Peak Forest 2), Brushfield (Brushfield 1) and Ringham Low (Over Haddon 1). Unfortunately most of the latter group have either been severely damaged or obliterated in the past, and only the last has been properly recorded. (Note: the barrows in this paper are listed and numbered in accordance with the author's *Burial Mounds of Derbyshire*, 1977.)

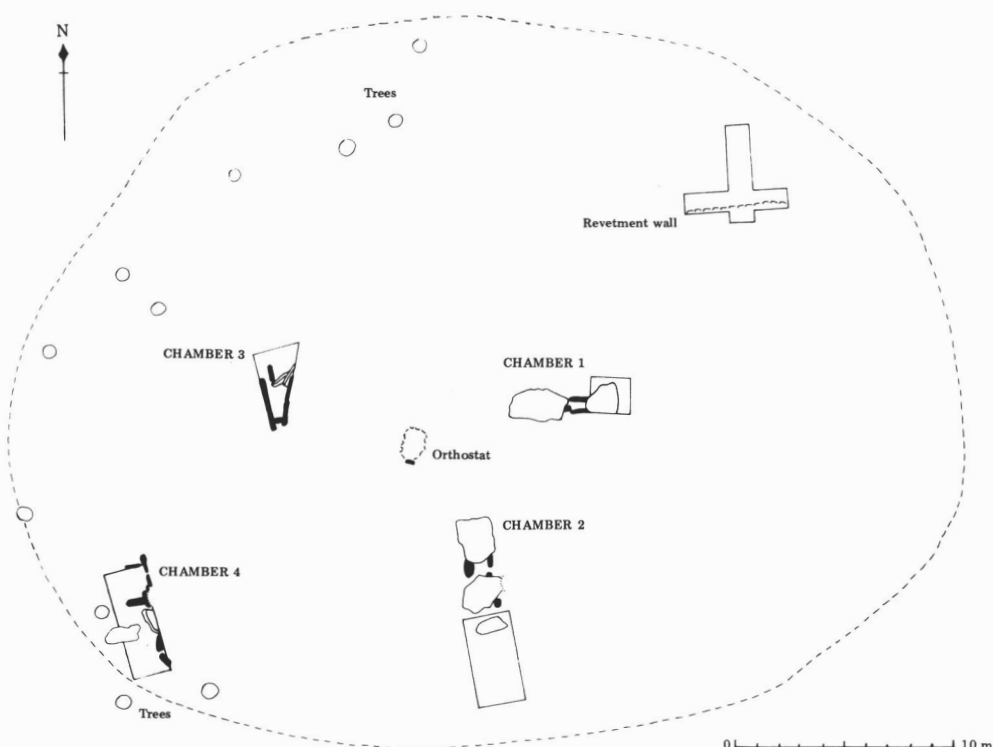


Fig. 1 Minning Low: plan of cairn, showing areas excavated.

Most of the round group suffered the attentions of Thomas Bateman in the mid nineteenth century, though all had earlier been damaged — and in some cases destroyed — by wallbuilders seeking stone during the enclosures of the late eighteenth century. Minning Low itself was truncated in the 1780s, and a contemporary plan (Douglas, 1793: 169) shows it as it appeared at that time. The despoilers uncovered a number of stone structures, some of which had had their cover stones dragged off. Other capstones were left *in situ*. Perhaps the burial chambers were rifled at this time, though it seems more likely that some of them at least were cleared out during the later Roman period when there is evidence of activity in some of the chambers themselves.

Bateman dug into the cairn in 1843 (Bateman, 1848: 39), 1849 and 1851 (Bateman, 1861: 54, 82), clearing out three of the chambers, Nos. 1, 2 and 4. He also penetrated the mound material in two places, at the centre and somewhere at the edge. He found that all the chambers he examined had previously been robbed. Much Romano-British pottery of local type, and late bronze coins from the chambers and in the cairn structure itself, suggested occupation in the fourth century A.D. Bateman also found part of a revetment wall and the entrance to a ruined chamber, though his vague description makes it impossible to ascertain exactly where this feature was located.

At the present time the site, crowned by a copse of dying beeches, forms a landmark for miles around. It is a much mutilated tumulus measuring 34m north to south by 44m east to west. Its greatest height is some 3.20m. The whole area of the site is covered with humps and depressions, the result of both the wallbuilders' search for stone and subsequent digging, to say nothing of decades of vandal activity. Four definite stone structures are now visible (chambers 1-4) on the plan (Fig. 1), plus further doubtful ones. The present dilapidated state of the monument made it desirable to carry out some restricted work aimed at clearing out and replanning the rubble-choked chambers and investigating some limited areas in the hope of solving certain problems relating to the cairn. This work was undertaken during 1973-4 with the permission of the landowner and the Department of the Environment. The major part of the work concerned the four chambers, and is best summarised under the headings of the individual tombs themselves.

THE EXCAVATIONS

Chamber 1 (Figures 2, 3; Plates 1, 2)

This fine chamber, 1.30m long, 0.90m wide and 1.90m high, is covered by a massive sloping capstone 2.60m long and 1.60m wide. The chamber is orientated to the east, and has a pair of portals at its entrance. It was choked with modern debris, and access to it was gained by squeezing between the capstone and the portal pillars. The associated passage, leading into the chamber from the east, was completely blocked, and only the edge of its coverstone was visible, projecting out from the side of a hillock standing alongside the chamber (Fig. 3). The chamber itself was infilled to an average height of one metre, all rubbish accumulated since Bateman's day; it consisted of soil, stones and recent animal remains. The basal paving slabs had long disappeared and the presence of limestone bedrock proved that the chamber had been built on a rising knoll (cf. Daniel, 1950: 38). A deposit of boulder clay, 0.30m in average thickness, gave some idea of the position of the old turf line and the height of the original paving. A transverse septal slab 0.70m high lay across the chamber entrance. This was one of a pair; its companion, much lower, offset and leaning to the east, was further eastward at the entrance to the passage. A cutting above the line of the passage capstone revealed the dimensions of the coverstone, which consisted of an inferior limestone slab 1.50m long and 1.60m wide, though the limits of the cutting did not reveal its south edge. This stone had cracked along its length, and underneath its eastern end was another shorter supporting slab. The cutting also revealed the chamber entrance which was revetted on both sides with a drywall of large limestone slabs, five courses high on the north and seven on the south. Although limited in extent, the section showed that the area in front of the entrance had been sealed off with massive blocking material consisting of inclined stone slabs completely closing off the passage and chamber, presumably when the site was

Plate 1 Minning Low,
chamber 1: looking west over
main capstone.



Plate 2 Minning Low,
chamber 1: looking east into
entrance passage after
excavation. Scale: one metre.



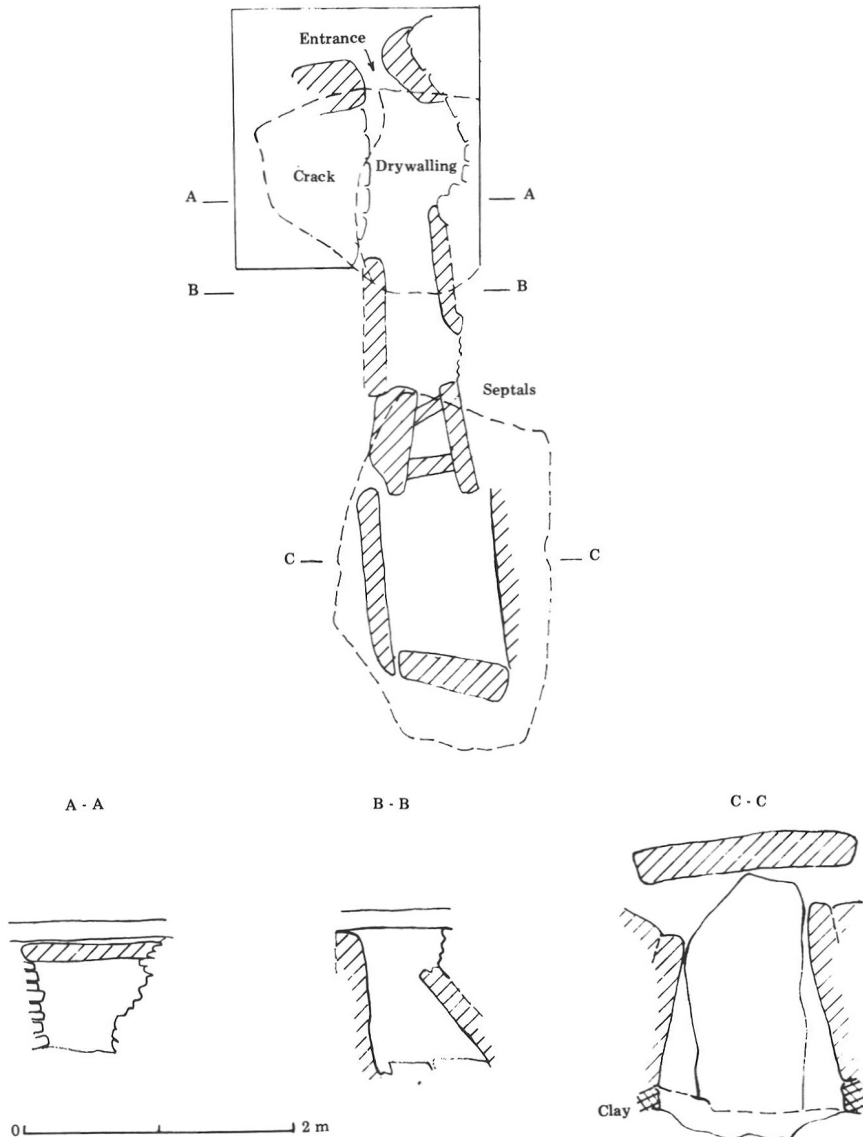


Fig. 2 Minning Low, chamber 1: plan and sections. North is on the left side of the plan.

enlarged. The passage itself, 1.50m long, 0.50m wide and 1.05m high, was also excavated. Flanking the portals at the entrance to the chamber were two further upright stone slabs forming the inner end of the passage. The south slab leaned inwards into the passage under pressure from the mound; there was evidence of drywalling in the gap between the south portal and its adjoining slab. These flanking stones gave way to lengths of drywalling forming the outer part of the passage. The walling was ten courses high and well preserved on the north side, but dilapidated and partially collapsed on the south. The whole passage was blocked to within a few centimetres of the roof with original material, consisting of limestone slabs of various sizes arranged in rough courses, their fresh sharp condition suggesting they were quarried for the purpose. The

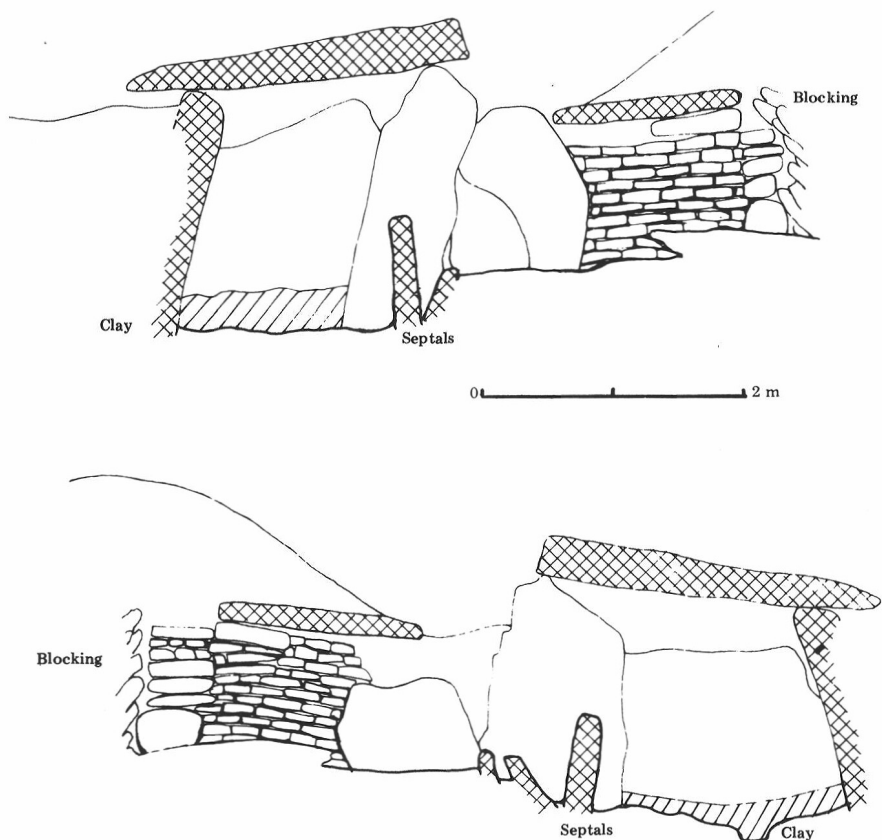


Fig. 3 Minning Low, chamber 1: north face section (above) and south face section (below).

floor of the passage was partly paved and partly of natural rock. The only discoveries made during the excavation of chamber and passage were two tiny beaker sherds, four human cervical vertebrae and a child's tibia.

The excavations showed Chamber 1 to consist of a simple tomb and approach passage. It seems that originally the present gaps between the chamber orthostats and the roof were filled with drywalling, as was the angle between the chamber and passage capstones. The site was evidently once covered by a small oval or circular cairn with a revetted entrance and a drywall perhaps carried round the whole circumference of the structure. This seems to have been the original tomb at Minning Low, later blocked and incorporated in a much enlarged monument.

Chamber 2 (Figure 4; Plates 3, 4)

This site consists of a large chamber and passage, each roofed with a single limestone slab. Like Chamber 1 it was partially filled with rubble and debris; the passage itself was blocked to the roof. The chamber is 1.60m long, 1.20m wide and 1.70m high. It is separated from its passage by a septal slab 0.50m high. The passage is 2.20m in length, 0.60m wide and 1.30m high. One orthostat on the west side had collapsed into the passage, which like the chamber faces south. A transverse slab with an associated sill

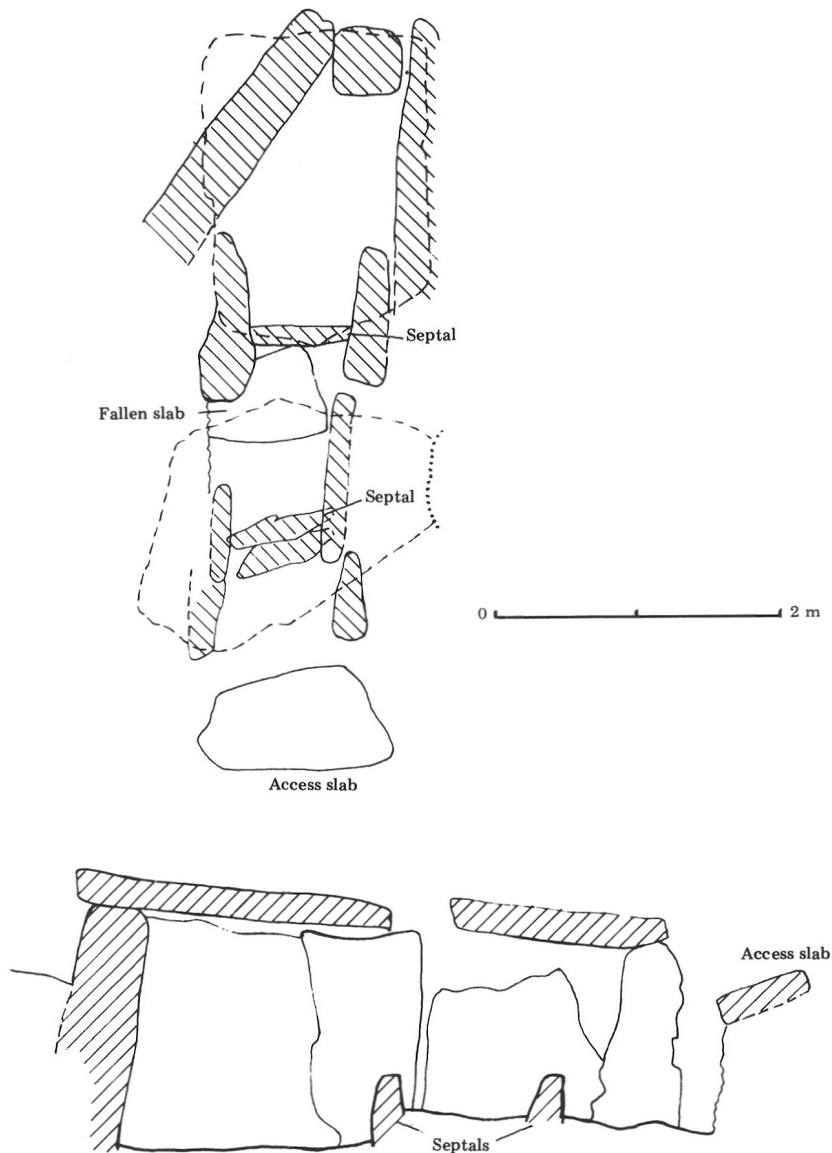


Fig. 4 Minning Low, chamber 2: plan and section. North is at the top of the plan.

marks the entrance to the passage proper from this direction. A cutting was excavated from this entrance southward to the margin of the mound to determine whether the passage continued, at a level at present hidden, to the cairn edge. It revealed a large recumbent and inclined slab whose placement indicates that if it remains in its original position, access to the passage may have been gained by sliding over its upper surface into the entrance.

Like Chamber 1, Chamber 2 was filled largely with modern rubbish. The passage debris contained a few scattered infant bones and two sherds of Roman Derbyshire ware. The original paving of both chamber and passage had disappeared.

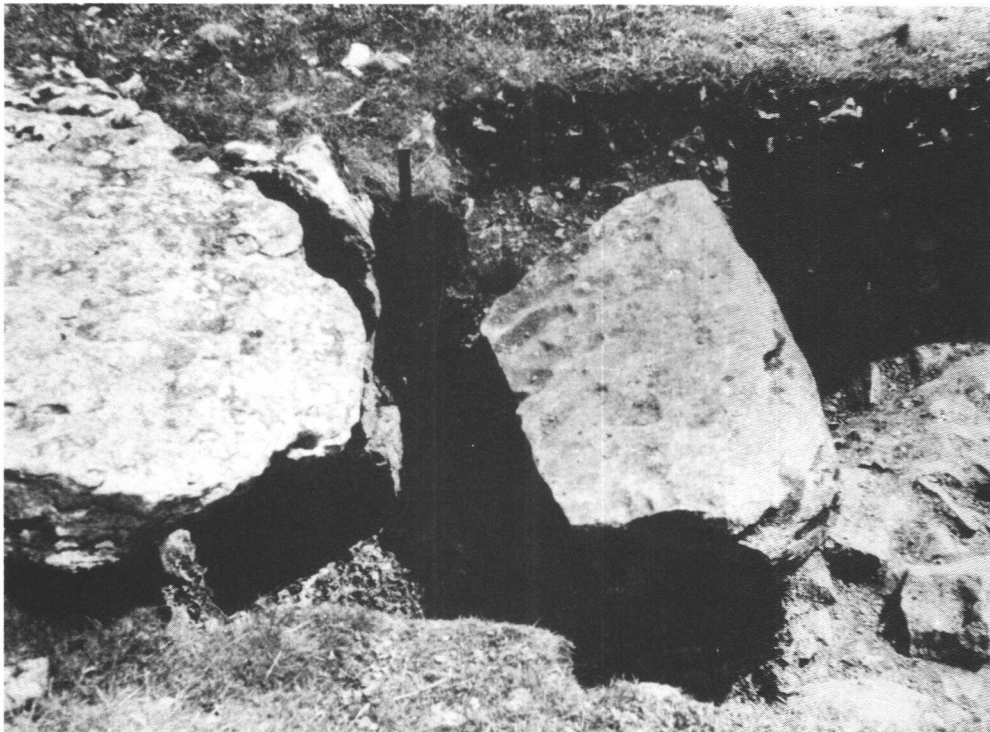


Plate 3 Minning Low, chamber 2: excavation around access slab, looking east.

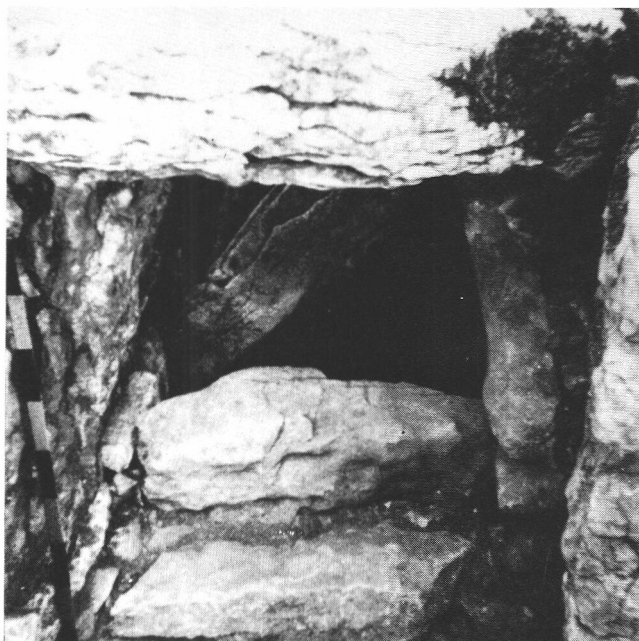


Plate 4 Minning Low, chamber 2: looking north over septal slabs to fallen slab (see Fig. 4). Scale: one metre.

Chamber 3 (Figure 5)

This wedge shaped vault, 2.40m long, 1.80m wide and 2.30m deep, has lost its coverstone and the slab forming the east side has split vertically into two parts under pressure from the mound. This slab also inclines markedly inwards though its western companion remains more or less vertical. The chamber faces north, and a transverse stone at the northern end could be interpreted as a septal, though the present plan of the site suggests a closed megalithic chamber. It was filled with soil and stones and seems to have escaped the attentions of Bateman. Considerable quantities of Roman pottery (mainly Derbyshire and allied wares) were found, but also present was a small chip of samian and a sherd of colour-coated ware, both on the old ground surface. In the lower levels of the chamber were five late Roman bronze coins and part of a penannular bronze ear-ring (see Appendix 1). At the southern end of the chamber 0.20m above the bedrock — again no paving remained — was a small collection of human bones, including parts of an adult skull which may be the only surviving remnants of the burials once deposited in this tomb.

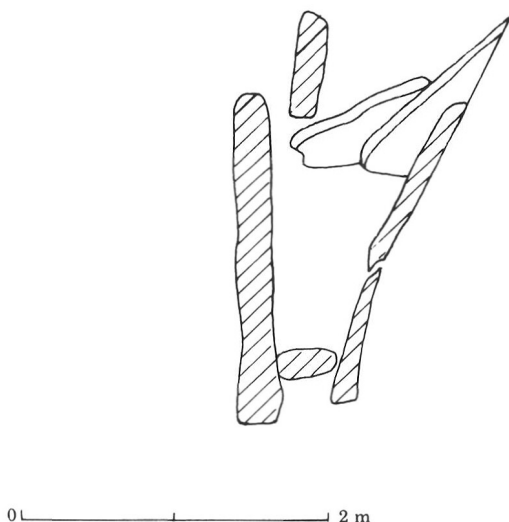


Fig. 5 Minning Low, chamber 4: plan. North is at the top.

Chamber 4 (Figure 6; Plates 5, 6)

This roofless and much disturbed site is peripherally situated on the western edge of the mound. Its overgrown appearance suggested a simple half-destroyed chamber, but excavations revealed a low passage leading in from the south, divided from the chamber itself by a large boulder acting as a septal. All the uprights on the west side of the chamber and passage had been removed with the exception of one survivor, though other large slabs lying further west may have been part of the original construction. The chamber measures 1.35m long by 1.50m wide and was originally just under a metre high. The approach passage is 2.60m long and the present heights of the inclined orthostats which survive on the east side vary between 0.45m and 0.60m; again originally the passage height would have been some 0.90m. The whole site had been thoroughly dug out by Bateman in 1851, and a lead tablet stamped T. BATEMEN was found at the foot of the southernmost stone of the passage. Minute quantities of broken human bones were found in the southeastern area of the chamber, mainly in the interstices of the bases of the stones and septal, whilst a few sherds of Romano-British pottery attest to the early disturbance of this tomb.



Plate 5 Minning Low, chamber 5: looking north over excavation. Scale: one metre.



Plate 6 Minning Low, chamber 5: remains of chamber, looking east, with septal slab on right. Scale: one metre.

Excavations in the northeast sector (Plate 7)

Among the many areas of disturbance on the surface of Minning Low was an old partly backfilled trench on the northeast side. This was re-investigated in the hope that it might have been Bateman's 1843 cutting which had exposed a hidden revetment wall which he felt may have encircled the cairn. The excavation did in fact disclose a well-built retaining wall of limestone slabs, neatly laid in eight drywalled courses and averaging 0.75m in height. The wall had been laid on a footing of clay up to 0.20m thick, a practice noted at Bryn Celli Ddu (Daniel, 1950: 39) and other sites. The stones were sharp edged and fresh looking, and seem to have been protected by extra-revetment material. The wall itself, which had a straight fronted profile, was traced east and west for some 4.50m before it petered out in both directions. It may have been a localised structural feature and not continuous, or it may have represented part of a retaining wall, or perhaps part of a facade as at Green Low (Manby, 1965: 6) which could have flanked the chamber entrance found by Bateman in 1843. The part-collapsed chamber he located but did not explore still awaits rediscovery.

THE HUMAN REMAINS

- Chamber 1. Four adult cervical vertebrae were found, one on the chamber floor at the east end, and three in articulation just above the main septal. The tibia of an infant was found at the base of the passage blocking material at the west end.
- Chamber 2. A few fragments of unidentifiable infant bone were found in the much disturbed passage filling.
- Chamber 3. At the base of the south end of the chamber were fragments of crushed and shattered human bone, including four pieces of adult cranium.
- Chamber 4. Minute quantities of human bone occurred in the lower interstices of chamber and septal.

COINS

	Emperor	Date	Identification	Reference	Diameter	Origin
1.	Constantine I	335-337	GLORIA EXERCITVS (1 standard)	HK221	12mm	Chamber 1
2.	Constantine II (as Caesar)	330-331	GLORIA EXERCITVS (2 standards)	HK244 RIC Lugdunum 137	16mm	Chamber 1
3.	Constantine II (as Caesar)	335-337	GLORIA EXERCITVS (2 standards)	HK93 RIC Treveri 591	15mm 15mm	Chamber 1 Chamber 1
4.	Maximian (as Caesar)	303-305	GENIO POPVLI ROMANI	RIC Treveri 602b	28mm	Chamber 1
5.	Constantine I	322-325	DN CONSTANTINI MAX AVG VOTXX	HK474 RIC Ticinum 167	20mm	Chamber 3
6.	Constantine I	310-313	MARTI CONSERVATORI	RIC Treveri 881	23mm	Chamber 3
7.	Constantine II (as Caesar)	330-331	GLORIA EXERCITVS (2 standards)	HK56 RIC Treveri 527	17mm	Chamber 3
8.	Constantius	341-346	VICTORIAE DD AVGG Q NN	?HK152	16mm	Chamber 3
9.	Barbarous radiate	270-275	PAX AVG?		12mm	Chamber 3

Coins 1-4 come from the cairn material above the capstone for the passage to Chamber 1. References in column 4 above are: RIC — Mattingly *et al.*, 1923-1967; HK — Carson *et al.*, 1972.

POTTERY

- Chamber 1. Two diminutive beaker sherds were found on the floor of the passage at the west end.

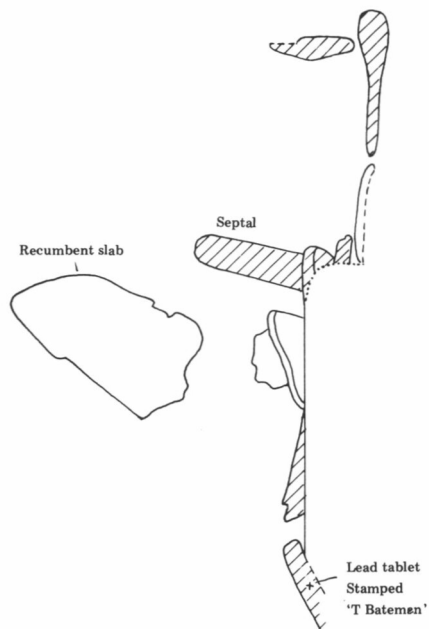


Fig. 6 Minning Low, chamber 5: plan. North is at the top.

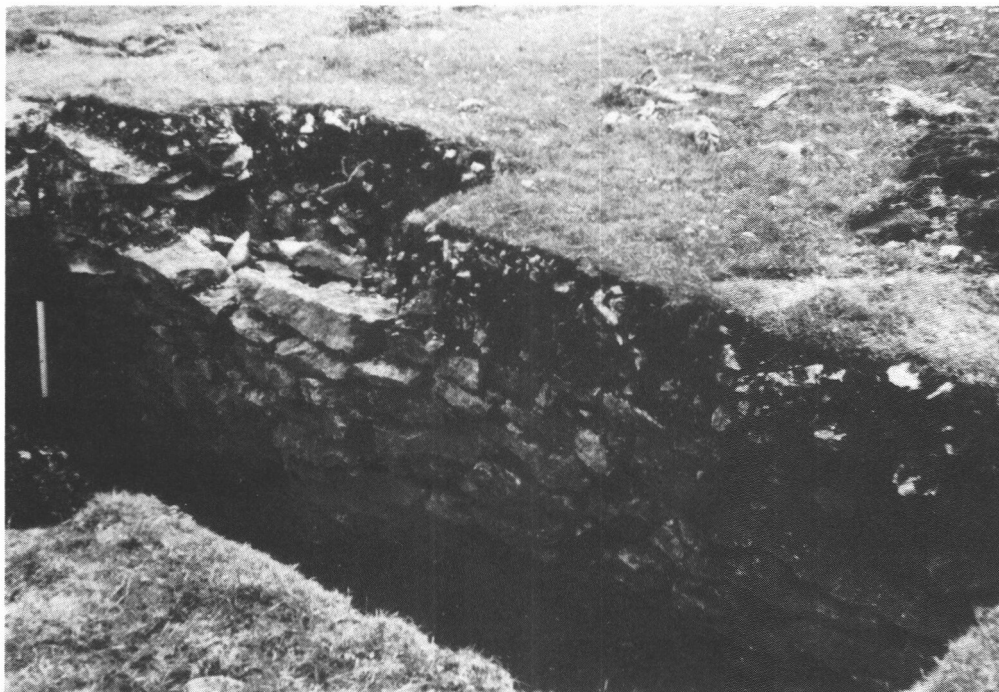


Plate 7 Minning Low: retaining wall in the northeast sector. Scale: one metre.

- Chamber 2. Two sherds of Roman Derbyshire ware were found on the passage floor in a very disturbed area of filling.
- Chamber 3. Numerous sherds of eroded reddish Roman pottery were found in all levels of the chamber filling. On the old ground surface was a small chip of samian and a sherd of colour-coated ware.
- Chamber 4. Three eroded sherds of Roman reddish ware were found at the base of the chamber.

CONCLUSION

From the limited but important excavations pursued at Minning Low it would seem that this great mound, like others of its period, is a multi-phase creation and not the product of a single sustained period of construction. Only large scale operations on the site would determine its complicated history but it seems to have originated as a small mound enclosing a simple chamber and passage, later completely buried and incorporated into a much enlarged multi-chambered tomb complex. Alternatively, each chamber on the site may have been originally covered by its own individual cairn, with the unification of the monument taking place at a later date. It is certain that more chambers existed at Minning Low than are now visible. Rooke's plan of May 1786 (Douglas, 1793) shows five megalithic structures or 'kistvaens'. Some of these can be related to surviving chambers. For instance his No. 2 is clearly Chamber 1, his No. 3 is Chamber 2 (which he drew as mostly buried, with only part of the chamber capstone revealed on its north side), and his No. 5 is Chamber 3. The main problems relate to his Nos. 4 and 6. There is a possibility that his No. 4 is the present Chamber 4, though on Rooke's sketch it seems too far eastward and too close to Chamber 3, and his scale is otherwise reasonably reliable as far as the positioning of the other chambers is concerned. The real question mark, however, concerns Rooke's No. 6, shown as a megalithic tomb apparently orientated east-west and standing on the north side of the cairn. No trace of this site remains, which would seem to indicate that it has either been destroyed or is at present hidden. It was certainly not visible in Bateman's time according to his plan, though he records the presence of five 'cists' (Bateman, 1848: 39). The position of the chamber entrance he cleared in 1843 has been lost, but at a guess it probably lies buried somewhere along the northern periphery of the mound, and might even be Rooke's No. 6.

The history of Minning Low can now be seen as a much more complicated chronicle than has been realised hitherto, and the origins of the complex, as suggested by former authorities, are overdue for reappraisal. For instance, the construction of Chamber 1 points especially to a Severn-Cotswold relationship. This tomb has definite affinities with many Cotswold and Brecknock sites with their short entrance passages leading into simple lateral chambers, the passages themselves consisting of part drywalled and part upright slab composition. There is also the tendency for the passage roofing to be lower than that of the main chamber (see Corcoran in Powell, 1969: 78, figs. 19-21). In all these essentials Chamber 1 is a typical simple chamber in classic Severn-Cotswold tradition. The plan of Minning Low is also capable of reinterpretation. It now appears as an oval mound with the greater width on an east-west axis (Fig. 1). The mound has obviously suffered from a good deal of slipping, particularly on the north and south sides, and if the revetment wall on the northeast represents part of an encircling structure, the shape of the original cairn can be redefined as having a narrower, more elongated configuration — again with many affinities to megalithic tombs in the South West (Fig. 7). The subsequent vaults can then be seen as additions reshaping the primary edifice; two of them, Chambers 2 and 4, have short passages leading southward to the mound edge, and Rooke's No. 6 probably had its entrance along the opposite side. These later chambers show different traditions from Chamber 1. Those with approach passages are entirely stone built with no evidence of drywalling, whilst Chamber 3 seems, on present evidence, to be a closed megalithic tomb, though it could have possessed a since destroyed entrance. Bateman's 1843 chamber likewise implies a passage incorporated in a drywalled facade; as already suggested this should perhaps be

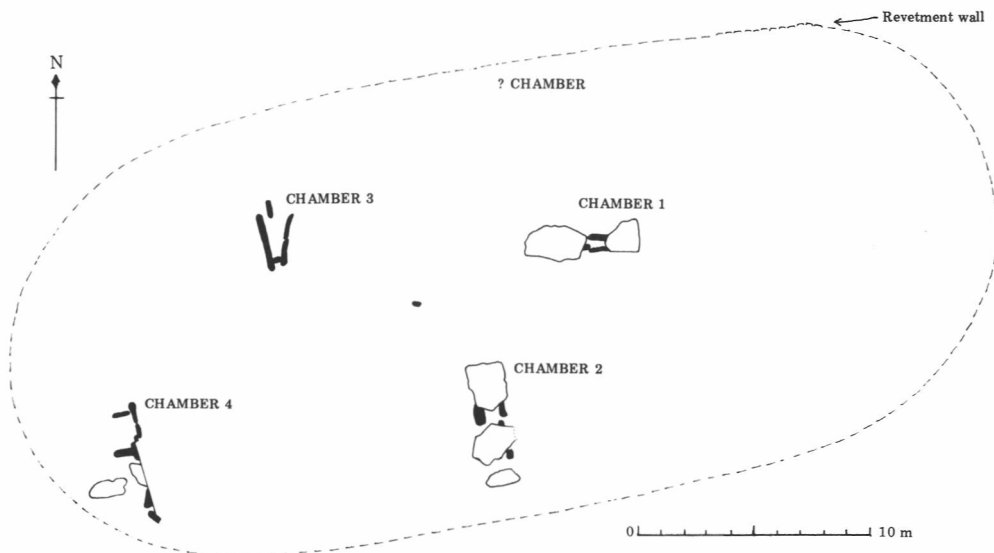


Fig. 7 Minning Low: possible shape of original cairn.

sought on the northern side of Minning Low.

As already noted, it would require large scale and prolonged (not to say costly) excavations to elucidate fully the history of this interesting site, which has major potential for those interested in the morphology of neolithic tombs, not only in the Peak District but also in Britain as a whole. This must obviously be a desirable long term project at some time in the future. After the excavations of 1973-4 it was hoped that certain of the chambers, notably 1 and 2, could be left partly unfilled to give visitors some idea of their size and construction. Chamber 3 was backfilled and Chamber 4 consolidated and turfed to enable its plan to remain visible. Unfortunately the remoteness of the site meant that the activities of vandals threatened the first two chambers, and in 1979 these were both completely filled in with tightly packed and archaeologically sterile rubble, to ensure their preservation. The fieldwall surrounding the monument, long dilapidated and in a ruinous state, was at the same time encircled by a substantial post and wire fence to improve protection from animals. The only problem remaining relates to the plantation of dying trees which surrounds the site. In a few short years the last of the surviving beeches will have gone, and the unique quality of the landmark will disappear. There would appear to be a good case both for selective replanting and a general tidying up of the whole area of this most important and instructive Derbyshire necropolis.

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I would like to express my sincere thanks to Mr. F. Edge and the D.O.E. for permission to excavate at Minning Low; Messrs. N. Chubb, M. Dolby, G. Luckwell and D. Watkins and students of the former Bingley College for help with the excavation; and Miss P. Beswick and Miss W. Huddle of Sheffield City Museums for assistance with certain identifications, especially of the bronze ear-ring in Chamber 3 (Appendix 1).

APPENDIX 1. BRONZE EAR-RING

By Pauline Beswick
(Sheffield City Museums)

The object consists of a penannular bronze ring made from a rectangular sectioned strip of bronze, bent and broken at the broader end which for the last 11mm is decorated with 2 converging lines of small pellets set within parallel grooves (Fig. 8). The total length of the ring is 41mm and for 25mm it measures 2mm by 1mm thick widening to 5mm at the broken end where it is 0.6mm thick. The thinner broader end was presumably shaped by hammering and lightly polished prior to the decoration being applied to the front face with tracers and fine punches. Because the object is incomplete it is difficult to be certain of its original function. However, in shape and decoration it is closest to a group of bronze ear-rings associated with later Beakers and the early bronze age Migdale-Marnock metalworking tradition (Britton, 1963), the prototypes for which appear to be basket shaped ear-rings made from thin sheet gold and often found with early Beakers (Clarke, 1970).

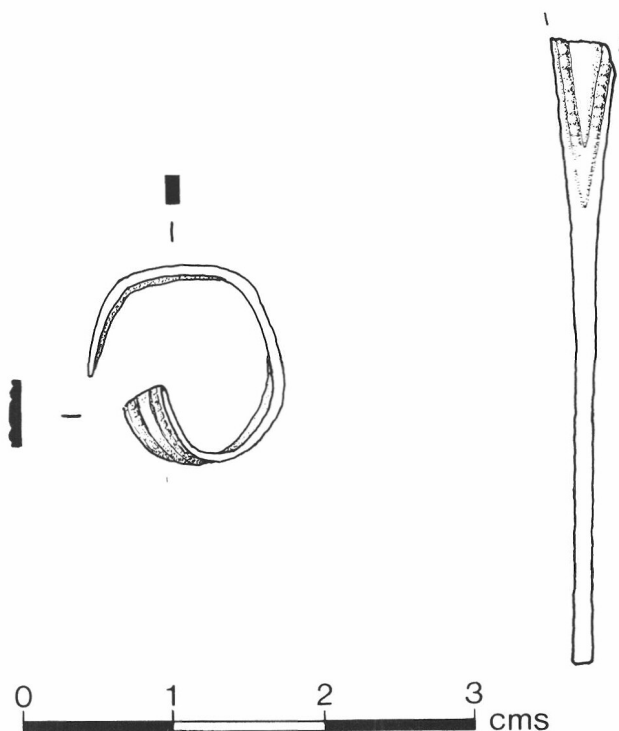


Fig. 8 Minning Low: bronze ear-ring; drawn by Mary Bramhill.

The gold examples are often decorated with dot and line relief motifs similar in concept to the Minning Low example but reproduced by repoussé work (i.e. beaten up from inside). One example found under the ramparts of a promontory fort at Boltby Scar, Yorkshire, has a crudely executed repoussé design of dots enclosed by parallel lines around the rim of the 'basket' (Taylor, 1968). A second gold example, from Alston, Northumberland, is decorated with two closely spaced parallel lines of neatly

executed repoussé dots around the 'basket' rim and continuing up the hook of the ear-ring (Harrison, 1980).

Bronze examples of basket-shaped ear-rings are normally undecorated and appear to have been made from appropriately shaped blanks cast in stone moulds, one end being hammered broad and flat to form the basket and the other end left as a narrow strip and bent to form the hook. Examples are widespread and are known from Scotland in the Migdale hoard (Britton, 1963) and from England from barrows at Cowlam, Yorkshire (Greenwell, 1877), Stakor Hill, Buxton, Derbyshire (Clarke, 1970) and Tallington and Thoresway, Lincolnshire (Davey, 1973). A few decorated bronze ear-rings have been recorded although none are basket shaped. For example a pair of penannular ear-rings from Garton Slack, Yorkshire, found with a Food Vessel burial, is decorated with grooves and finely punched dashes and dots (Mortimer, 1905); and a pair from Goodmanham Wold, Yorkshire, in the form of open-ended loops, is decorated with multiple parallel grooves (Greenwell, 1877).

Two Beaker sherds were found in Chamber 1 at Minning Low in the 1973-4 excavations and Beaker material is not unusual in secondary contexts in chambered tombs. It is conceivable that the ear-ring may have been deposited with a burial in Chamber 3 which was disturbed by Romano-British intruders.

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