

# Saxon Barrows excavated by General Pitt Rivers on Merrow Down, Guildford

by P.R. SAUNDERS

In 1975 a collection of General Pitt Rivers' papers was deposited in Salisbury Museum. Amongst these papers are eight leaves of manuscript entitled 'On Tumuli near Guildford' and a roll of drawings marked 'Merrow Downs, Whitmore Common'. In the *Catalogue of Pitt Rivers Papers in the Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum* (Thompson 1976, 18 and 123-4) they are numbered P.40 and R.7a-h respectively. Close examination of these papers reveals that the manuscript comprises a rough draft in Pitt Rivers' (then Col. Lane Fox's) own hand which was published in greatly abstracted form (Lane Fox, 1877a). The tumuli described were two Bronze Age and six Saxon barrows. The manuscript and drawings give more detail than was published and, as will be shown, they support Pitt Rivers' own maxim that 'A discovery dates only from the time of the record of it, and not from the time of its being found in the soil' (1898, 28) for although the discoveries of the barrows were reported they were not fully recorded by the 1877 publication. The Bronze Age barrows and their urns were not adequately published until 1924 (Gardner 1924, 27-9). Few details of the Saxon barrows were noted and even their geographical location has remained in doubt (Grinsell 1934, 49). My purpose here is to record the information which has now come to light about the latter barrows.

On the section drawings of the Saxon barrows (R.7a) it is noted that they were excavated in October, 1876, on Merrow Down. In the 1877 publication (Lane Fox, 116-7) they were described as being 'in the same locality' as the Bronze Age barrows. The latter were identified by Gardner (1924, 27-9) and the manuscript notes confirm their being on Whitmoor Common (Worplesden) and add that they were opened on 16th and 17th May, 1877. Although the knife from one of the Saxon barrows is documented in the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford as coming from Merrow Down, nevertheless the barrows have always been thought to be on Whitmoor Common. Grinsell (1934, 49) located 'some vague mounds which may be the remains of these barrows' at c SU 991538 and as recently as 1978 members of the Mayford History Society were able to identify six features which they thought might be the barrows (Mrs I. Atherstone, pers comm). However, the manuscript clearly states that they were 'on Merrow Down 3 miles to the south of this former locality' and they cannot therefore be these mounds. Furthermore, the manuscript records that 'Four of these were in a cluster on the top of the hill just south of Level's Dean'. The latter would have been Levylsdene House, situated at TQ 02575014 to the east of 'Uplands', the house where Pitt Rivers lived between 1873 and 1877. Pitt Rivers was thus admirably placed to observe the barrows which he described as 'being so small that they had never been noticed as tumuli and Col. Fox was himself in doubt when he commenced whether they would turn out to be graves'. Although it is not possible to locate their exact position on Merrow Down from the above

description, they are most likely to have been in an area centred on c TQ 025499. They should not be confused with a Bronze Age barrow also excavated on Merrow Down by Pitt Rivers (1877b, 281) which according to Lasham (1896, 27) was south-east of Levylsdene and 'contained a British urn'.

It is noteworthy that in 1957 a Saxon spearhead and human remains were found at the rear of 'Saxons', Levylsdene, Merrow, at TQ 0266050058. The spearhead is in Guildford Museum (G. 3810) and is figured in Swanton (1973, 134, fig 53d). In 1973 a child's skeleton was found at a depth of 50 cm in a chalk-cut grave in the garden of 'Bartons', 17 The Fairway, Merrow, at TQ 0295 5023 (Bird 1977) and, although unassociated, this too could be of Saxon date.

The sections of the barrows (figs 1 and 2) are traced from the original watercolour drawing which was almost certainly that exhibited at the British Association for the Advancement of Science Plymouth meeting in 1877 and mentioned, but not illustrated, in its *Report*. Pitt Rivers numbered the barrows 1-6. The *Report* failed to discuss them individually and Pitt Rivers' own descriptions are therefore quoted here as they appear in the manuscript. As will be evident, punctuation was not a prime consideration of Pitt Rivers in his rough drafts.

Barrow 1 'was 24 ft in diameter and one foot three in height. The section clearly shows the process that had taken place, a hole 2 ft in diameter had been dug in the green sward about 15 in deep as the bottom of it beneath the surface mould which is 10 in thick extended 5 in into the chalk beneath. Then the body which had been burnt elsewhere, for no trace of charcoal or burning was found here, had been brought and deposited in the hole with earth the numerous fragments of a burnt body being found just about the top of the hole, then the tumulus was raised over the interment.'

Barrow 2 'was 33 ft to the west of the first. It was 11 ft in diameter and only 8 in greatest height in fact scarcely perceptible but a green spot of grass in the centre showed that there was something unusual in the soil beneath, in fact immediately the turf was removed burnt earth for a space of four feet in diameter was found beneath and a burnt body one foot beneath the top. There was no trace of a hole dug here but the burnt bones were an inch or two beneath the natural surface. If the hole did not extend into the chalk it would not be perceived in the section. This body must either have been burnt on the spot or the burnt earth must have been brought with the body and interred with it.'

Barrow 3 'was the most important because it determined the date of the whole, it was 50 ft to the N.W. of the last, 13 ft in diameter and one foot greatest height. It had a green spot of grass in the centre. Like the last, immediately on removing the turf, black earth was found as before in a circle of 4 ft diameter, a small flint core and a chip lay under the turf but this may have been accidental. In the black earth was a quantity of charcoal which had not been found in the other tumuli, 2 or three pieces of burnt bone the remains of a body which had decayed were found in this black mould and on the same level 5 in from the top and two feet to the west of the centre, an iron Saxon knife 6 in long including the tang of 1½ in and ¾ in greatest breadth . . . It was evident that this body was burnt on the spot as beneath the black earth and charcoal was found a seam of red burnt earth where the fire had been'. The knife blade (fig 3) is in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford (original Pitt Rivers collection no 90/8386,

SECTIONS OF SAXON TUMULI ON  
MERROW DOWNS

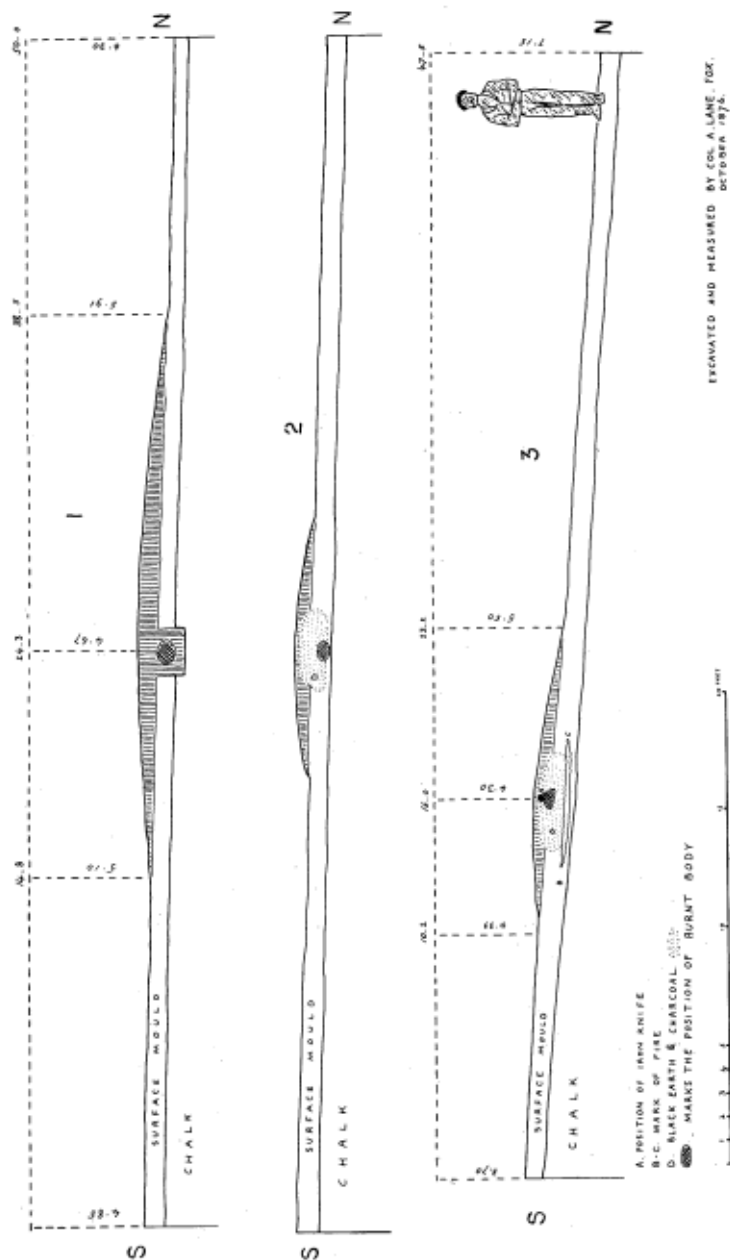


Fig 1 Sections of barrows 1-3 traced from Pitt Rivers' original drawing



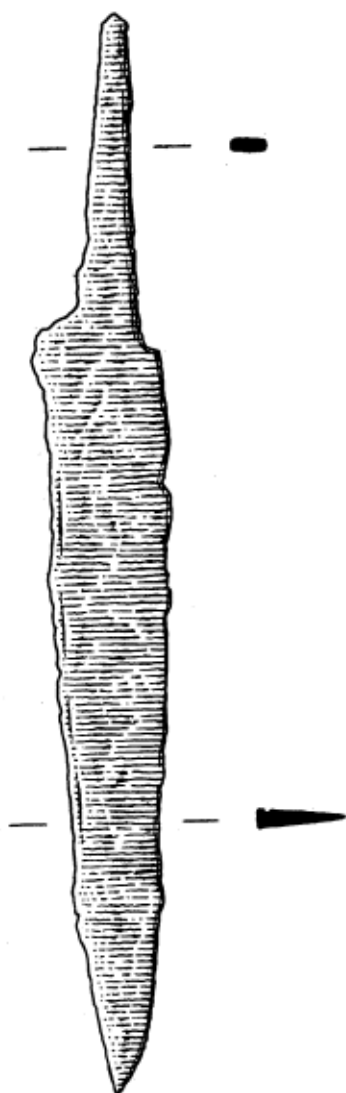


Fig 3 Saxon knife from barrow 3, Merrow Down. Scale 1 : 1

Museum no 1884.121.11) and there is a water-colour drawing of it with the papers in Salisbury Museum (R.7b).

Barrows 4–6 'were opened closely, they were of the same form but nothing was found in them'. Pitt Rivers says no more about these and for reasons which are not apparent barrow 4 is omitted from the original section drawings. Full details of barrow 4 are thus lacking and for barrows 5 and 6 we must rely on the drawings alone.

Of the group of barrows as a whole Pitt Rivers concluded that 'from their unusually small size and the similarity of the contents of those which had any, that the iron knife determines the age of the whole group'. He described the knife as 'of the well known Saxon type not all together unlike a pen knife in form and having near the back the groove which is so well known in connection with Saxon weapons and it determines the whole cluster to be of the pagan Saxon period before their conversion to Christianity when they ceased to burn their dead and began to bury extended in the usual Christian fashion'. The knife is in fact mid-late Saxon in date. David Brown (pers comm) has kindly commented that 'the groove along the back edge is a feature not found before the 7th century' and he has shown (1976, 83–84) that whilst this feature is typical of knives from 7th century cemeteries it also lasts until the 9th century, possibly later. The dating evidence for the whole group of mounds is thus very scanty and should perhaps be treated with caution. However, the recent discovery of the Saxon spearhead in the close vicinity does offer circumstantial support to Pitt Rivers' judgement.

This relocation and proper recording of the barrows excavated by Pitt Rivers could not have taken place without his manuscript notes and drawings. It serves not only to emphasise the significance of Merrow Down in Saxon times but also to remind us of our debt to Pitt Rivers' pioneering example in the recording of excavations.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to those mentioned specifically in the text for help or comments there stated and also to Nicholas Griffiths for kindly drawing the knife blade and to Lynne Williamson of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, for making it accessible. Eleanor Saunders offered constructive criticism of the final text. Figs 1 and 2 were traced by the writer from Pitt Rivers' original section drawings with slight simplification to facilitate clearer reproduction.

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