

Longcross barrow, Chertsey: a survey and discussion of its setting

Introduction

The Longcross barrow stands just inside the Chertsey parish boundary on the eastern edge of Chobham Common at SU 9912 6466. The barrow has long been recognized as one of the better-preserved round barrows of Surrey (Needham 1987, 106). In March 2002 a survey, carried out by the author in conjunction with members of the Chobham Community Archaeology Project, revealed what appeared to be an unpublished excavation trench cutting across the ditch and mound on the north side of the barrow. This short article presents the opportunity to publish the survey drawing, and discusses the barrow in its local context.

Site description

The barrow stands in a thin strip of woodland on the north-east edge of Chobham Common, which was once part of an extensive area of common land that may have extended to over 5000 acres within the Surrey Heath district. The site is some distance from the nearest concentration of houses, with the exception of the isolated Pipers Green Stud, a modern complex of buildings, about 150m to the south-east. Other than this, the nearest residence is Longcross House, over 800m to the north-west or Childown Hall, a similar distance to the south-east. Access to the site is via public footpaths from the public road at Longcross. The site stands on a low ridge at about 45m OD overlooking the vast expanse of Chobham Common to the west. The soil is sandy and forms part of the Barton, Bracklesham and Bagshot Beds series. The barrow is recorded on the Surrey County Council Sites and Monuments Record (no 1856). It is also a Scheduled Monument (no 20145).

Background history

The barrow is recorded on the 1st edition 6- and 25-inch OS maps of 1870. It was included in Grinsell's (1934, 37) survey of Surrey barrows, following site visits on 17 January 1932 and in February 1934. He records it as 'a large and well-preserved bowl barrow, 92 feet in diameter and 6 or 7 feet high. It is surrounded by a circular ditch 9 feet wide and 2–3 feet deep. The mound is tree-covered and slightly burrowed'. Grinsell makes no mention of any excavation on the site. Around the time of these visits, H J F Tringham published a local history, *The story of Longcross*. In this he records that 'the tumulus in Longcross Woods was opened in my grandfather's time and I believe an urn of rough pottery was found containing ashes' (Tringham 1934, 16). This suggests an unrecorded excavation in the 19th century. In 1987 Grinsell undertook a reappraisal of the Surrey barrows in which he gave revised dimensions in metric at 28m diameter, 2m high, with a ditch 2.7m wide and 0.7m deep. He mentioned an earlier visit by Copsey (1964, 25), who had claimed to detect an outer bank 3m wide and 0.15m high. Copsey also mentions seeing traces of a 'small' recent excavation across the ditch, mound and outer bank. No other relevant records of the barrow are known.

The survey

Recent clearance of vegetation on the barrow gave the opportunity to make an accurate plan. Measurements were taken across the barrow from points on a rectangular grid that had been set up around it. The grid was laid out using a manual theodolite. One of the aims of the work was to teach members of the Chobham Community Archaeology Project how to carry out simple surveys using relatively unsophisticated equipment.

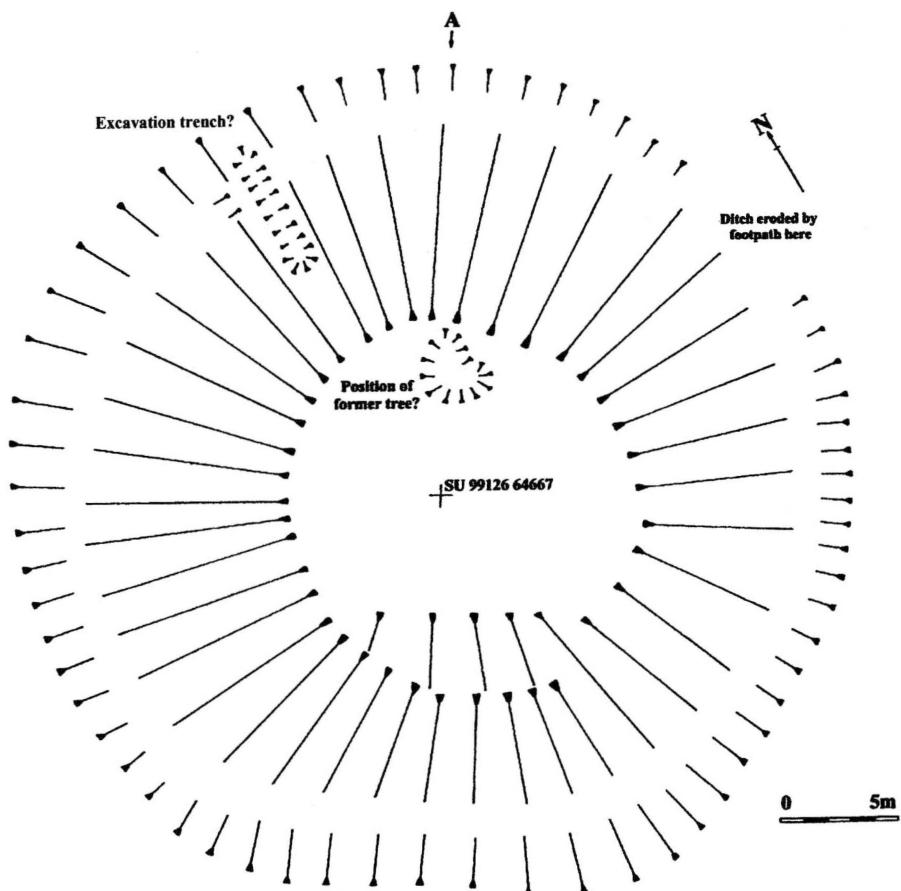


Fig 1 Longcross barrow, Chertsey: survey drawing.

The barrow was found to be 30m diameter at its widest point, and was up to 1.6m high when measured from the bottom of the ditch. There were clear indications of a ditch all around the mound except for the north-east corner where a footpath had eroded all traces for a distance of about 7m. The ditch was about 4m across, and up to 0.7m deep. There was no sign of the outer bank mentioned by Copsey (1964).

The profile of the mound was slightly uneven, possibly caused by the animal burrowings recorded by Grinsell in 1934. The removal of trees might also have contributed to the disturbance although, in general terms, the profile and overall appearance of the mound was well preserved compared with some other heathland barrows in Surrey. A hole in the north-east quadrant at the top of the barrow was thought to have been a former tree root hole.

On the north side of the mound, cutting through the ditch and part of the mound, was a linear depression. This was aligned approximately north-south, with traces of upcast soil on its west side. This trench was interpreted to be the small excavation recorded by Copsey (*ibid*).

Discussion

The Longcross barrow was confirmed as one of the better preserved of the larger round barrows on the Surrey heathlands. There is no formal record of it having been excavated, and the possible excavation trench seen on its north side does not appear to have been noticed by Grinsell on either of his visits. This might be explained by the barrow being more overgrown at those times. Nevertheless its omission by Grinsell is strange. During the 1960s two other visits were made to the site: one by the Ordnance Survey in 1961, and one by Fred Aldsworth, an Ordnance Survey Field Inspector, in August 1966. On the latter visit it was noted that large conifers were growing on the mound (SCC SMR no 1856). On neither occasion was the excavation trench noted, although Copsey (1964, 25) refers to a 'recent' small excavation during fieldwork in 1963. It is unlikely that the excavation recorded by Tringham (1934) in his 'grandfather's time' was the same trench.

There are possible clues to the origin of the trench recorded by the present survey, although these should be treated with caution as they may be coincidental. It was noted that the trench appeared to be approximately 6m x 1m, and that it was aligned roughly north-south. Both might suggest a systematic laying out of the trench along the lines of more recent archaeological methods. Although the metric dimensions might be more apparent than real, this could suggest, as does Copsey, that it was of relatively recent origin in 1963. If the trench was the result of antiquarian work, it might be expected that the alignment would be more haphazard, and the trench not so neatly dug. In fact, it is possible the trench was backfilled, and the depression caused by subsequent settling. This evidence seems to suggest that it may have been excavated shortly before Copsey's 1963 visit. If this is the case it is surprising that there is no record of this excavation. The isolation of the barrow could have led to many years passing without the site being visited, allowing an unauthorized excavation to go unnoticed. However, the systematic nature of the trench suggests that it was carried out by a person or persons with some archaeological experience.

The landscape of the Longcross barrow

Needham (1987, 106) considered the Longcross barrow to be the most notable of a dispersed group of ten barrows centred on Flutters Hill to the north, although only eight could be located on the county SMR in this area. Nearly all the barrows in this group except the Longcross barrow, may be of later origin or natural formations. Even the scheduled site (SM no 20198, SCC SMR no 1862) could not be found by Aldsworth in 1966, and the only mound he found nearby he considered to be a natural feature (see Appendix). Needham (*ibid*, 105), warned of the propensity for natural barrow-like mounds to be formed on the sandy Surrey heaths. The present author has noted this phenomenon throughout west Surrey, but has also noticed that spoil heaps from the small-scale quarrying that was frequently undertaken on

Surrey commons has also resulted in false ‘barrows’ being formed (pers obs). However, recent investigations at Frensham Common (Graham & Graham 2002) and at Thursley Common (Graham 1996) have shown that mounds that had been thought to be natural in origin were artificial prehistoric features; caution is therefore needed before such features are dismissed entirely.

In contrast to Dorset, Hampshire and Wiltshire, Surrey barrows do not tend to form concentrated groups or ‘cemeteries’. Where concentrations occur they tend to be linear, such as the four barrows on King’s Ridge at Frensham Common. Otherwise, they tend to occur in widely dispersed groups, of which the Flutters Hill group was once considered an example. Now that doubt has been expressed about this group, it is possible that the Longcross barrow may be an isolated example, with the parish boundary passing close by.

The parish boundary requires some discussion in its own right because it lies in an area traversed by a number of parallel linear features, with the Longcross barrow on the edge of them. It has long been considered that the boundary between Chobham and Chertsey at this point follows the bounds given in a 7th century Saxon charter whereby Frithuwold, under-king of Surrey, granted various lands, including Chobham, to Chertsey minster, later Chertsey Abbey (Sawyer 1968, no 1165). These bounds are discussed by Gover *et al* (1934, 114–15) and Currie (2002a), and although the charter is suspected to be a Late Saxon forgery, it is thought to be based on a genuine document, now lost. It is generally agreed that the present parish boundary, marked by a bank, is roughly on the line of these Saxon bounds, even if the exact line might have varied. To the north-east of the present boundary bank, between the bank and the barrow, is a large linear ditch-like feature that is up to 2m deep, and about 6m across. It diverges slightly from being parallel with the parish boundary. To the north-west it gradually fades and seems to disappear entirely beyond the track at the bottom of the ridge on which the barrow sits. To the south-east it disappears at the fenceline of Pipers Green Stud. Landscaping beyond this fence seems to have destroyed any traces that may have existed there. Ascending the hill to the north-east of this feature is a second linear hollow. There are a number of other shorter linear features in the vicinity. These latter bear resemblance to the linear quarry earthworks found on a number of sandy Surrey commons during recent surveys (Currie 1997; Jackson *et al* 1999, 218–9, fig 1; Currie *et al* 2001; Currie *et al* 2002).

Although it is possible that some of these hollows are the result of linear quarrying, the longest feature described in detail above may be an earlier boundary. It is uncertain whether this is of Saxon origin, marking the bounds referred to in the charter, or if it survives from an even earlier period. There is, therefore, the possibility that the Longcross barrow has some relationship to this boundary.

Recent work by the author in the south-east of the Isle of Wight has noted that prehistoric barrows seem to have some relationship with conjectured minster boundaries of the Saxon period. As at Chobham, it is uncertain whether the barrows had been located on pre-existing boundaries or if the boundaries were made to respect the barrows. In the case of the Isle of Wight landscapes, the barrows were located on downland commons that were marginal land (Currie 2001; 2002b). Although there has been much discussion over the years concerning the relationship between barrows and parish boundaries, the conclusions drawn have been based on the relationship of secondary Saxon burials in barrows, not on Bronze Age barrows themselves (Bonney 1966; Goodier 1984). A number of the examples that this author has studied do seem to suggest that later Saxon boundaries often follow earlier alignments, and that barrows were often deliberately sited in relationship to them. The Longcross barrow seems to be an isolated barrow situated on marginal land, close to a later parish boundary.

When might the barrow and the boundary have been formed? Needham (1987, 108) considers that the barrows of Surrey, although difficult to date, had largely been formed by 1400BC. This is based on work in Wessex and elsewhere. At present, the dating of barrows in south-west Surrey is based on the expectation that a parallel situation might be found here, but at least there seems to be some evidence of a chronological sequence, even if the exact

dates are as yet unknown. Pollen samples taken from a barrow at West End suggest that there was some woodland regeneration between arable cultivation and the construction of the mound (*ibid*, 130). What little evidence there is suggests that Bronze Age settlements were located in the river valleys adjoining the commons. Thus, in the case of the Longcross barrow, Deverel-Rimbury pottery of the Middle Bronze Age has been located at Chobham Park Farm (Gardner 1924). This might suggest that the barrows in the area may only have been constructed after the commons had been abandoned to rough grazing.

One final point needs to be discussed that may be of relevance. Needham (1987, 131) has suggested that the impressive earthwork enclosure in Albury Bottom, known as the Bee Garden, might be a Bronze Age stock enclosure, thereby suggesting the use of the area for rough grazing at that time. The dating of these enclosures in Surrey has long vexed local archaeologists. Gardner (1927) was the first to suggest a medieval date, based on a second enclosure near Gracious Pond on Chobham Common. This was triple banked, whereas the Albury earthwork has a single bank and ditch. However, both have been given the local name 'Bee Garden', a name that is possibly fanciful and does not relate to any primary association with bees. Gardner also cites similar earthworks on Banstead Heath. Likewise, the triangular earthwork on Ashtead Common, long considered to be prehistoric, is now thought by some to be of medieval date despite its close proximity to an early Roman villa (Currie 1999).

There may be some grounds for agreeing with Gardner on a medieval date for such features, but in the case of the Albury enclosure, the place-name evidence needs to be considered. Here 'Albury' seems to derive from the OE meaning 'old bury' or old fortification or earthwork. This might suggest that the Saxon settlers who gave this place its name recognized an ancient nearby feature that they took to be a 'bury'. The obvious answer is that the Albury earthwork already existed when they came to the area.

In the winter of 2001–2 the author noted faint banks to the east-north-east of the Albury earthwork (Currie 2002a). Interpretation of such ephemeral features is difficult particularly as there is also evidence of linear quarrying in this vicinity, possibly a small turbary. However, it is possible that these banks may have been the last remaining traces of an earlier field system. Community Archaeology work at Banstead recently found traces of low banks in the vicinity of the Roman villa on Walton Heath in an area now much disturbed by the famous golf course (Currie *et al* 2001), so the discovery of pre-Saxon field systems on former common land is not entirely unexpected.

Although some of the suggestions made here are speculative, the scope for further fieldwork to elucidate early prehistoric farming and settlement on Surrey heathlands is highlighted by this work.

APPENDIX

'Barrows' in the Flutters Hill group

According to the Surrey County SMR many of these mounds are now thought to be natural, or non-barrow, features. Barrow numbers from Grinsell 1987.

| | | |
|------------|--------------|---|
| Chertsey 1 | SU 9886 6568 | Tree-covered mound supposedly recorded on a Saxon charter, but now thought to be a natural mound or tree-planting mound. Now destroyed. SCC SMR no 1861a. |
| Chertsey 2 | SU 9888 6575 | Tree-covered mound supposedly recorded on Saxon charter now thought to be natural mound or tree-planting mound. Now destroyed. SCC SMR no 1861b. |
| Chertsey 3 | SU 9909 6577 | Tree-covered mound supposedly recorded on Saxon charter now thought to be natural mound or tree-planting mound. Now destroyed. SCC SMR no 1861c. |
| Chertsey 4 | SU 9912 6466 | The Longcross barrow. Thought to be a genuine bowl barrow. SCC SMR no 1856. |

| | | |
|------------|--------------|--|
| Chertsey 5 | SU 9918 6513 | Possible remains of a ploughed-out barrow. Now destroyed. Considered doubtful by Aldsworth. SCC SMR no 1862. |
| Chertsey 6 | SU 9912 6456 | On Chobham boundary; small mound identified by Copsey (1964) as a possible site. Thought to have been levelled to make a footpath, but traces of a mound are still visible at this grid reference. Could be a natural mound or related to nearby quarry earthworks. SCC SMR no 4078. |
| Chertsey 7 | SU 9932 6470 | A damaged mound within a circle of trees. Copsey 1964, no 22. On private land; it was not possible to obtain access to verify. SCC SMR no 4079. |
| Chobham 1d | SU 9836 6476 | Shown by OS before 1934 as a mound, it has been identified by Copsey (1964, 24) as an overgrown pit. SCC SMR no 1854. |

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