

The Five Knolls and Associated Barrows at Dunstable, Bedfordshire

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INTRODUCTION

Information concerning the Five Knolls and neighbouring barrows is somewhat scattered, and arte-

facts recovered from the barrows have not been reported on fully before. It is thus worth summarising what is known about them. The Five Knolls

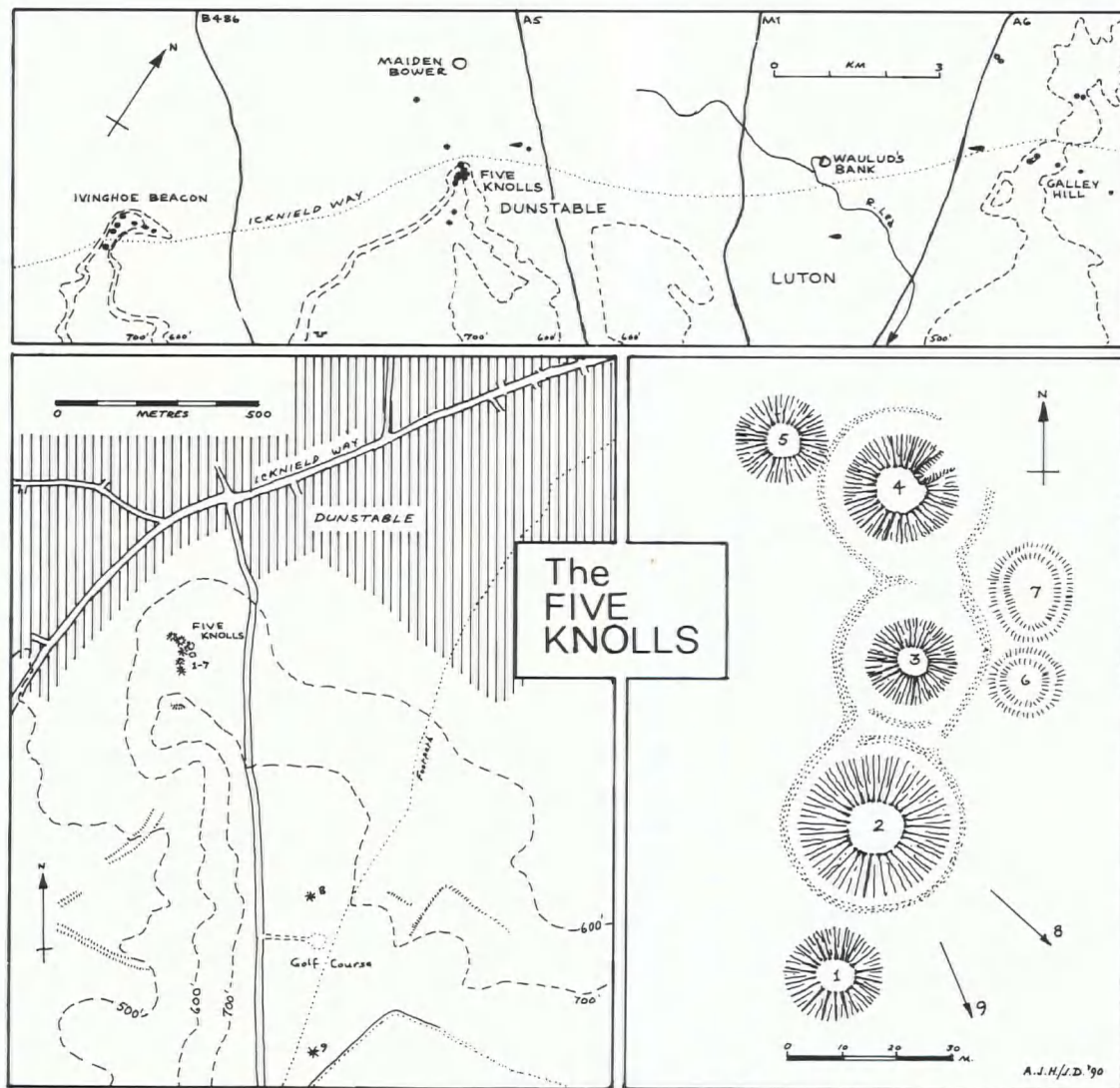


Fig 1 The Five Knolls: location maps and plan of barrows

group of barrows is situated 1.4 km west of Dunstable, on a projecting spur of the Chilterns, once known locally as "Fig Hill", overlooking the traditional course of the Icknield Way (see Fig. 1). In his *Itinerarium Curiosum* (1724, p. 109), William Stukeley wrote: "A high prominence of the Chilterns overlooks all, called the Five Knolls, from that number of barrows or Celtic tumuli, round, pretty large, and ditched, on the very apex of the hill." Today we can see seven barrows in the group, three bell-barrows, two bowl-barrows, and two possible pond-barrows. There were at least two other barrows on the escarpment within c1 km of this group, both of which were destroyed a hundred years ago. Since contemporary evidence has come to light concerning the examination of these destroyed barrows, they will here be considered after the main group. About 100 m to the south of Barrow No. 1 is a long, low mound which Worthington Smith called a long barrow. It is more likely to have been a mortuary enclosure or pillow mound (TL 00632086).

BARROW No. 1 (TL 00632098)

This is the southernmost barrow of the main group, and is the second smallest, being only 17.1 m in diameter and 1.8 m high. It is a bowl-barrow and the only one for which there is no evidence of opening in the past.

BARROW No. 2 (TL 00632099)

This barrow lies 6 m north of No. 1. It is the largest in the group, being 24 m in diameter and 2.4 m high. It is a bell-barrow, with surrounding ditch 1.5 m wide and a berm 1.2 m wide. Although the ditch originally appears to have completely encircled the barrow, a more verdant growth of grass, and a probe survey, show that it joined up with the ditches of Nos. 3 and 4 to form a triple-barrow. The barrow was opened in the summer of 1925 by the University College and Hospital (London) Anthropological Society. Other than a brief paragraph (Forde, 1927), no satisfactory report appears to have been published, but it is known that a large central area was cleared in an unsuccessful attempt to find the primary burial. Two secondary cremations were found, with some sherds of beaker and neolithic pottery, animal bones, some worked "flint chips", two bone pins, part of the antler of a red deer, and three flint arrowheads. Re-examination of the "flint chips" from barrows 2, 3 and 5 by Robin Holgate

(see below) shows a significant proportion of them to be mesolithic. There is no record of their stratification, but we must assume that they were on the ground surface when the barrows were erected.

BARROW No. 3 (TL 00642101)

This bell-barrow, which is the smallest in the group, is 15.8 m in diameter and 1.8 m high. Its surrounding ditch lies outside a 3.0 m wide berm, and joins the ditch of barrow No. 2 to the south and almost certainly 4 to the north. It was opened for the Bedfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society on 27th August, 1850, apparently in one day, with many members of the Society and townsfolk gathered on the Downs to watch the spectacle. According to their report "It was opened longitudinally" with a trench four feet wide, "and excavations made through the side to the very centre of the barrow, and quite down to the native chalk. It appeared that in the chalk a few holes had been dug but nothing deposited in them" (Fisher, 1971, 6; AASR 1850-51).

The barrow showed distinct signs of having been opened before, and the only objects found were a fragment of deer antler, the bones of part of a boar, the teeth of an ox, a fox and a rat. The barrow was reopened in 1922 by the University College Society (Forde, 1927), when three hollows, identified as empty grave cists were found cut in the chalk, together with a secondary cremation, just below the turf in the centre of the barrow. There was a bone awl of bronze age date (50 mm in length), and some flint scrapers and mesolithic implements (see below).

BARROW No. 4 (TL 00622104)

This is the third of the bell-barrows. It is 18.3 m in diameter and 1.8 m high: it has a berm approximately 3.0 m wide and a narrow ditch, approximately 0.8 m wide, which is invisible on the north-eastern side, where a large rectangular depression marks the outline of an unrecorded "rifling".

BARROW No. 5 (TL 00612105)

This is the best known barrow in the group. It was selected for excavation by the Bedfordshire Architectural and Archaeological Society in 1850, but, fortunately, "no sooner had an incision been made, than a considerable number of scattered fragments of human skeleton were found within about six

inches of the surface of the ground. It was, therefore, self-evident that this barrow had been disturbed at no very distant period, and further excavation was pronounced useless" (AASR 1850-51).

It was opened again between 1926 and 1929 by members of the University College and Hospital (London) Anthropological Society, under the various directions of C. Daryll Forde, J. Perry, G.C. Dunning and R.E.M. Wheeler. (Dunning and Wheeler, 1931.) It is the most northerly of the group, and is bounded on the western side by the steep slope of the Downs. It is a ditched bowl-barrow, about 18.3 m in diameter and 1.5 m high. The primary burial which seems to have been of late neolithic date, lay in an oval grave cut about 0.9 m deep into the chalk, and measuring 1.0 m by 0.6 m. The skeleton, which was sharply flexed, lay on its right side, with its knees drawn up to its face and its right hand at its jaw. Professor Elliot Smith wrote that the bones were those of a slenderly built woman of Mediterranean type, about 152 cm in height, and of middle age. The only grave good was a ground edged flint knife placed under the left shoulder (Thomas N., 1964). There were two secondary cremations, one contained in an inverted collared urn, and the other in a slight hollow about 1.8 m east of the primary burial (Dunning and Wheeler, 1931).

The southern half of the barrow was covered with 98 intrusive burials of possible late Roman, Saxon or later date. (See Morris, 1962, for a discussion of the possibility that the mass burials were those of gallows victims.) These are adequately described and illustrated by Dunning and Wheeler (1931). They may be compared with the intrusive late Roman burials found in Barrow No. 3, Galley Hill, Streatley, which is situated on a similar spur of the chalk, 10.5 km north-east of the Five Knolls along the Icknield Way (Dyer, 1974).

BARROW No. 6 (TL 00662101)

This barrow and No. 7 are possibly pond-barrows, and were identified by L.V. Grinsell in 1932 (unpublished) and the present writer in 1952. They are on the eastern side of the main group. Barrow No. 6 has an interior flat area with a diameter of 5.5 m. It is surrounded by a bank 2.7 m in width, giving an external diameter of 10.9 m.

BARROW No. 7 (TL 00652102)

This is a larger possible pond-barrow, and it is oval in shape. The interior flat area is 11.6 m long and

10.4 m wide, whilst its exterior measurements are 21.3 m and 19.5 m. Although these pond-barrows have not been previously excavated they were observed by William Stukeley, who wrote "close by are round cavities often observed in Wiltshire" (Stukeley, 1724, 109) and by Worthington Smith, the Dunstable antiquary, who thought they were hut-remains (Smith, 1904, 43).

BARROW No. 8 (TL 00952040 ?)

We come now to the barrows situated close to the main group, but not actually in it. Barrow No. 8 lay under 1 km south of the main group on the summit of the Downs. When the hills were cultivated, perhaps as early as 1860, the barrow was almost flattened by a "steam cultivator", and all traces have been completely obliterated in recent years by a golf course. Worthington Smith recorded that before its destruction it was about 3.0 m high and 14.0 m in diameter (Smith, 1887). The last remnants of the mound were removed by a farm labourer in March, 1887. Worthington Smith was not present when the first burial was found, but was to hand when the grave was enlarged and the rest of the mound material removed. At the centre was a large grave about 3.6 m long and 1.8 m wide, dug through the surface soil, and 0.75 m deeper into the solid chalk. On the bottom of it lay a modern nail, indicating that the centre of the barrow had been previously opened. Surrounding it were "six or seven other graves, each about three feet (0.9 m) deep from the surface. All were comparatively shallow and small, irregular in shape and measuring three or four feet square". Two of these graves were quite empty; one contained a human jaw-bone, another, fragments of a human skeleton, a third contained the remains of a human cremation, together with the fragments of an urn, and some burnt earth. In the final grave, on the eastern side, was the "woman and child" burial made famous by Worthington Smith's drawing, which showed the crouched burial surrounded by fossil *echini* or sea-urchins (Smith, 1894, frontispiece). This drawing, however, is not strictly accurate, since Smith did not see the skeletons until they were brought to him in 340 pieces, from which he reconstructed the burial. In the grave with the skeletons were 12 fossil sea-urchins, and 91 others were scattered throughout the mound of the whole barrow, making 103 in all. They were of two kinds, *Micraster coranguinum* and *Ananchytes ovatus*. It should be noted that many of the fossils preserved along with the skeletons in Luton Museum are not

the original ones. When Smith prepared his meticulous drawing, he arranged the sea-urchins in a circle round the burials, to provide a decorative border. Since the drawing was first published in 1894, it has always been accepted as a true representation of the burial as found. Six other sea-urchins were found in the mound of barrow No. 3 on Galley Hill, Streatley, in 1961 (Dyer, 1974).

The woman's skeleton indicates that she was about 25 years of age, and 152 cm tall. F.W. Kuhlicke recorded that the maximum length of the skull was 180 mm, the maximum width 132 mm, and the cephalic index 73.3, "showing that she was of long-headed stock". The child was about five years old. Worthington Smith suggested that it had been buried alive with the dead mother (Smith, 1887). With the skeletons in the grave were the crushed remains of two beakers; also two rough stone axes, six scrapers, a broken sharpening stone, together with many flint flakes, three globular stone mauls and an arrow head (see below).

BARROW No. 9 (TL 00952000 ?)

This barrow was 230 m south of the last and was flattened in 1887. It was originally about 3.0 m high and 14.0 m in diameter. In the centre was an empty grave roughly 1.2 m square, surrounded by a circle of six or seven similar graves. All had been previously rifled except one on the northern side. This contained the crouched skeleton of a boy between the ages of 14 and 16. With the burial were found three flint flakes, a scraper, a nodule of iron pyrites and some fragments of a pottery vessel, which may have contained a secondary cremation, but of which no trace existed (see below). "All the graves were small and shallow, including the central one. None had been excavated into the solid chalk, they had all been merely dug or scraped in the surface, which here consisted of earth and chalk rubble. When the solid chalk was reached by the grave diggers, the dead bodies were simply laid on their sides upon the chalk surface and covered with chalk rubble" (Smith, 1887). It is perhaps reasonable to assume that the circle of graves found in Barrow 9 (and 8) were all contemporary, and evidence of a single funeral ceremony. If this is the case, was the central burial the main one, with those around it, attendant upon it? Without the barrow stratification we shall never know, but it is tempting to speculate on a mass burial of family or retainers, all of whom died at about the same time. Whether this was the result of misadventure, plague, religious whim or tribal dictate, we can only guess.

THE PREHISTORIC POTTERY AND FLINT

by Robin Holgate

This report gives details of the prehistoric pottery and humanly struck flint from the Five Knolls barrow cemetery presently housed at Luton Museum (see Table 1).

The Barrow No. 2 excavations produced a range of pottery fragments from the mound of the barrow. These consisted of 35 earlier neolithic 'plain bowl' pieces, 22 with flint tempering and 13 with shell tempering, including two decorated pieces in the Mildenhall and Abingdon styles respectively (Smith 1956, 14); one Ebbsfleet style sherd (Smith 1956, 76); two Grooved Ware sherds (Smith 1956, 189); eight beaker sherds with whipped cord decoration, seven of which came from one vessel; nine sherds representing the remains of a small collared urn; ten sherds of earlier Bronze Age date; and two Iron Age sherds (LTNMG L/6=10/586/39).

The pottery from Barrow No. 8 included, along with eight Romano-British sherds, 45 fragments of undecorated earlier Bronze Age pottery, five beaker sherds with whipped cord and stabbed decoration, and eight rusticated beaker sherds (Smith 1894, 337 Fig. 237: the top illustrated piece is decorated with finger tip pinching: LTNMG 2/388/40).

Barrow No. 9 yielded three beaker fragments with whipped cord decoration and six sherds of a small biconical urn, tempered with medium and fine grained flint and grog, and decorated with a line of perforations running round the vessel along the carination (Smith 1894, 335 Fig. 235: LTNMG 2/389/40).

A total of 808 flints was recovered from unspecified contexts during excavations at Barrow Nos. 2, 3, 5 and 8 (Table 1: LTNMG 3=4/388/40; 3/389/40; BL/248/39; L/2=3/585/39; L/1=3, 12=13 & 20=55/585/39; L/7 & 11=12/588/39; 979/39; 980/39; and 982/39). These include a number of flakes, 219 blades and bladelets, five crested blades, 23 blade/bladelet cores, a burin, a cutting blade and four serrated blades of mesolithic or possibly, in the case of some of the debitage, earlier neolithic date. The absence of microliths makes it impossible to give a more precise date to the mesolithic assemblage.

The remaining flints include debitage and a variety of implements of later neolithic and earlier Bronze Age date. Worthington Smith also recovered a substantial quantity of flintwork from cultivated fields on Dunstable Downs (centred on TL 009205), although the precise provenance of this

material is unrecorded. This material includes flakes, cores, scrapers, knives, piercers, flint axe fragments and arrowheads (e.g. LTNMG 216=232/27/27 and 49=50/333/40). Clearly, the Downs in the vicinity of the barrow cemetery was settled and exploited throughout the neolithic period and earlier Bronze Age.

The only flints recovered from the barrows as grave goods include the ground edged knife from the primary inhumation of a middle aged woman in Barrow No. 5 (Dunning and Wheeler 1931, 196 Fig. 2: LTNMG L/116/39) and two flakes, a knife and an end scraper associated with the burial of a boy in Barrow No. 9 (Smith 1894, 333 Fig. 234: LTNMG 4/389/40).

TABLE 1
Flintwork from the Five Knolls barrows, excluding grave goods.

| | Barrow number | | | |
|--------------------------------|---------------|----|-----|----|
| | 2 | 3 | 5 | 8 |
| Flakes | 340 | 6 | 113 | 43 |
| Blades/bladelets | 169 | 2 | 48 | 5 |
| Crested flake | 1 | — | — | — |
| Crested blades | 4 | — | 1 | — |
| Cores (flake) | 4 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Cores (blade/bladelet) | 16 | — | 7 | — |
| Shattered pieces | — | 1 | 3 | — |
| Hammerstones | 2 | — | — | 3 |
| Miscellaneous retouched pieces | 1 | — | 1 | — |
| End scrapers | 4 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| Side scraper | 1 | — | — | — |
| Button scraper | 1 | — | — | — |
| Burin | 1 | — | — | — |
| Rod | 1 | — | — | — |
| Knives | 1 | — | 2 | — |
| Cutting blade | — | — | 1 | — |
| Serrated flake | 1 | — | — | — |
| Serrated blades | 4 | — | — | — |
| Ovate | — | — | — | 1 |
| Chopping tools | 3 | — | — | — |
| Oblique arrowheads | 3 | — | — | — |
| Barbed and tanged arrowhead | 1 | — | — | — |
| Total | 558 | 11 | 180 | 59 |

OTHER BARROWS AT DUNSTABLE

Worthington Smith recorded other barrows within

present day Dunstable (Smith, 1894, 328). One round barrow stood at the junctions of Winfield Street and Edward Street (formerly Mount Street — probably derived from mound). It was destroyed in road construction in the 19th century. It seems to have been quite a large bowl barrow, though its position close to the Watling Street might suggest that it was Roman. Another barrow existed south of London Terrace “behind the Waggon and Horses”. It contained a crouched burial. A third barrow in Albion Street also contained a crouched male skeleton.

In 1724 William Stukeley recorded a long barrow, the Mill Hill, in what is now Union Street (Stukeley, 1724, 109). He was very familiar with chalk long barrows and is unlikely to have been mistaken. Worthington Smith drew a picture of the remains of the mound in April 1907: it is now in the library of the Society of Antiquaries of London. C.L. Matthews saw a surviving remnant destroyed and considered it virgin chalk (Matthews, 1963, 13). For a summary of other barrows, ring ditches and burials known in the vicinity of Sewell and Totternhoe, Matthews, 1976 should be consulted.

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