



Historic England

Megalithic Chamber Tombs

Introductions to Heritage Assets



Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which have previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to megalithic chamber tombs, often dating to early in the Neolithic period around 3500 BC, they are referred to here for simplicity as 'tombs' whatever their true function. Descriptions of megalithic chamber tombs and a brief chronology from 3755 BC to 1500 BC are included. Radiocarbon dating along with the presence of artefacts indicates that they were in use at the same time as [causewayed enclosures](#) and similar monuments and it has been suggested that there may have been a functional connection between the two types of monument. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

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Front cover

Spinsters Rock chamber tomb in Devon, surviving as a free standing dolmen. It is now thought that such sites in south-west England were built as freestanding monuments, never covered by a mound.

Introduction

Megalithic Chamber Tombs, often dating to early in the Neolithic period around 3500 BC, occur in those parts of England where large stones and boulders are naturally available. The large stones (mega-liths) were placed in certain arrangements or settings that invariably form a kind of chamber which often contain human bones. It has therefore been widely assumed that their purpose was for burial, but they may equally have served other functions such as shrines or repositories for the remains of bodies disposed of elsewhere, but they are referred to here for simplicity as ‘tombs’ whatever their true function.

Like wooden settings beneath earthen long barrows, the stone versions were in some cases covered with mounds either of earth, other soft materials such as chalk and clay, or sometimes with stones. In the last case, the mounds are referred to as cairns, but frequently mounds comprise a mixture of earth and stones and are difficult to place in one category or another. Many of these mounds have been destroyed, the stone in particular being used for road metalling or for wall construction and the chamber left exposed. Such exposed chambers were often referred to as cromlechs in the 18th and 19th century antiquarian discussions, a term that is still encountered in some of the modern literature, and in places like Cornwall is the medieval and earlier name.

The stone settings are separated into different types by archaeologists in order to assist with analysis, but without careful study it is invariably difficult to place field remains into one category or another. The problem is not helped by the fact that some tombs are exposed while others are covered by mounds.

Upright stones are sometimes referred to as orthostats. These are placed in an arrangement that forms a rectangular box or chamber. In addition a number of other elements occur. Stones often form a passage or corridor

leading to the chamber and there is frequently a monumental façade at the entrance. Where boulders or upright stones have been used to define the edge of a cairn they are referred to as a kerb or peristalith. Sometimes spaces between the large stones are infilled with dry stone walling.

When freshly encountered, stone monuments of this nature invariably occur as a simple tumble of large stones. In some cases it is difficult to tell whether such clusters were deliberately placed together in antiquity or whether they are a naturally occurring group. Further confusion can arise as natural outcrops or mounds were sometimes enhanced and adapted during prehistory and can on occasion have prehistoric stone settings arranged on them. After the weathering of, perhaps 5,000 years, and the activities of animals and humans during that time, few stones can be expected still to stand upright (Figure 1). Sometimes, stone cleared from adjacent cultivated areas during historic times was used to enlarge the pile (walkers in upland areas often add stones to cairns), or stone from cairns may have been taken for use elsewhere, in buildings, or as road metal, leaving the original arrangement disfigured and almost unrecognisable.



Figure 1
The tumble of large fallen sarsen stones, Little Kit's Coty, near Maidstone in Kent, is thought to have once formed a burial chamber similar to others nearby.

It might be expected from this that megalithic tombs occur mainly in those areas where stone is abundant. For the most part this is so, and Cornwall, Devon, Herefordshire, the Cotswolds and Derbyshire figure prominently on distribution maps of these monuments. However, limestone and sandstone blocks occur further afield,

particularly the well-known 'sarsen' boulders that lie on or just below the surface on the chalk downs across southern and eastern England, and here too megalithic tombs or tombs with megalithic elements are found with some frequency.

1 Description

The 'simple chambered tombs' of west Cornwall are the simplest of tombs consisting of three or four upright stones that define a roughly rectangular space and on which a further stone, referred to as a capstone, rests.

Portal dolmens are slightly more complex, with entry to the chamber through two upright 'portal' stones. Sometimes the terminal stones to the rear are small or non-existent so that the capstone slopes at an angle or leans on the floor. Best

known are massive monumental versions such as Arthur's Stone, at Dorstone in Herefordshire (Figure 2), which has two large orthostats at one end placed at right angles to the axis of the tomb that form the 'portal', with a third orthostat marking the terminal, all supporting a massive capstone almost 6m long. Closer inspection reveals the presence of further stones that may once have formed a façade or *cedilla* along with the remnants of a cairn.



Figure 2
Arthur's Stone, Herefordshire. Note the two portal stones set at right angles to the axis of the chamber. The leaning stone on the right may have formed part of a *cedilla* or passage.



Figure 3
Remains of a burial chamber known as Kit's Coty House, near Maidstone in Kent. This was once encased in a massive long mound of chalk.

Variations in the configuration of the setting of exposed chambers can be found. At Kit's Coty House, in Kent (Figure 3), uprights reach almost 2.5 m and form an H-shaped arrangement surmounted by a large slab.

Whether the mound originally completely covered the chamber is uncertain. One view is that the mound was constructed to the top of the orthostats in order to assist with sliding the capstone into place. It has also been suggested that the mound provides a structural base that encases and secures the stones in position but so few have been excavated in modern conditions that great uncertainty prevails. Archaeologists in Cornwall and Devon no longer insist that the simple chambered tombs and portal dolmens had a mound covering them at all.

Passage graves comprise a narrow corridor defined by upright stones leading to a wider polygonal or rectangular chamber, the whole arrangement being covered with flat roofing slabs or other methods of providing cover.

The length of the passage can vary greatly. In England it is often relatively short, particularly when compared to the long passages of megalithic tombs in Scotland, Ireland and France. In some cases, other chambers line the passage sides and these are often referred to as transept chambers. At the well-known West Kennet chambered tomb in Wiltshire, there are four such chambers, two on either side of the passage, each more or less rectangular and formed by massive upright sarsen slabs infilled with limestone dry stone walling. At Stoney Littleton, in Somerset,



Figure 4
An entrance grave with façade (including a cup-marked stone) set into a cairn at Tregiffian in west Cornwall.

there are six, three on each side. Some, such as Waylands Smithy in Oxfordshire, take on a cruciform shape with a single transept on each side of the passage. Here and in other places, upright stones set at right angles separate the entrance passage and restrict access to the chambers.

In the south-west, in Cornwall and in the Isles of Scilly, are a number of tombs that consist of simple passages without an obvious chamber. Instead the passage widens out to form a wedge-shaped gallery which is wider and higher at the inner end of the chamber than at the entrance. These are referred to as Entrance graves. For the most part they are incorporated into round mounds that have kerbs or façades with cedilla (Figure 4).

Many passage graves have a monumental façade with cedilla that helps funnel attention towards the passage. Often comprising large orthostats placed side-by-side these can often appear more dramatic than the tomb itself (Figure 5). At some sites, such as Waylands Smithy, the façade is relatively straight, but in others such as Belas Knap in Gloucestershire it assumes a horned shape with the projecting arms helping to define the area immediately in front of the passage. It is this part of the site, the forecourt, that is thought to be the focus for ceremonial activity and consequently the archaeological deposits here are likely to be particularly sensitive and fragile.



Figure 5

West Kennet chamber tomb, Wiltshire, is covered by a massive long mound mostly comprised of chalk. The passage and chambers lay at the wider east end and a façade of large upright sarsen stones focuses attention on the entrance to the passage. In this case, a large stone has been placed across the entrance blocking or at least restricting access.



Figure 6

The mound at Hetty Peglers Tump, Uley, Gloucestershire, which covers a passage and several burial chambers, is set on the lip of the escarpment which (were it not for the trees) would have extensive views across the Severn valley.

As noted, mounds of stone, earth or other material were frequently placed over the stone settings, sometimes forming a conical or dome-shaped round mound, in others a long rectangular or trapezoidal mound (Figure 6). In their original form these comprised coherent architectural structures, compared to other piles of stone that aggregated as a result of clearance of land for cultivation. However, the distinction between them is often difficult to ascertain, particularly when in the field they are encountered as simple tumbles of stone. Sometimes a greater amount of the superstructure survives but in others it may have been disturbed, denuded or has long been dispersed. Where stone has been taken in historic times for other purposes, some of the larger earthfast stones may be left standing proud. In some cases it is by no means certain that the chamber was covered with a mound and there may be some examples where cairn construction was never completed.

In some cases, regional characteristics have led to the identification of distinct types, in particular, the numerous long mounds in the countryside on the flanks of the Severn Estuary are known as the Cotswold-Severn type. These are long,

often trapezoidal mounds with a distinctive inturned entrance at the wider end and which cover a passage and one or more chambers. Occasionally, the entrance is a false one, and instead the real passage and chambers are found in the sides of the mound.

Belas Knap in Gloucestershire is a good well-known example where the imposing entrance is entirely false but its monumental form distracts from the real passages that are placed in the sides of the mound. The cairn known as Windmill Tump, Rodmarton, Gloucestershire (Figure 7), is also typical. At over 60 m in length, the now grass and tree covered stone mound reaches over 20 m in width and 2 m in height at its more prominent eastern end. Here there is a forecourt defined by horned extensions to the mound on either side of the entrance, which, however, is false. Excavations have demonstrated that portal stones mark this 'entrance', while a third blocks it. Instead, two chambers are accessed from the sides of the cairn. They are set back-to-back and each is approached via a narrow passage that leads down several steps to a rectangular chamber. Access to the chambers is restricted by stones set at right angles with a porthole or small window in them.



Figure 7

The false entrance at Windmill Tump, Rodmarton, Gloucestershire. Two portal stones are visible amongst the vegetation. The dry stone wall to the left is of modern construction.

These long cairns often encase an earlier, smaller, round mound that covers the passage and chamber. Other structural components are sometimes visible, for example dry stone walling. Many, such as that at Randwick in Gloucestershire, appear to have been constructed using a spinal wall with walled compartments set at right angles to it, but such elements may only be visible where cultivation or excavation has revealed the underlying deposits.

Round cairns also invariably display structural components either externally as revetments or internally where there may be rings of stone. They appear to be the equivalent of the earthen round barrows that can be found in much of the southern and eastern parts of the country where stone is less easily obtained. They may be bounded by a kerb composed of boulders or upright stones.

Circular banks of stone are referred to as ring cairns or ring banks. These sometimes define the edge of a raised platform or area that may or may not have a mound within. Such raised circular platforms are often over 10 m in diameter and referred to as platform cairns. Ring cairns might have uprights embedded into the circular bank in which case they are known as embedded or embanked stone circles. Within the cairn may be one or more cists, a small chamber formed of stone slabs, sometimes standing proud, but alternatively buried below ground level and often just large enough to contain a burial, pottery vessel or other artefact. Occasionally there may be a central or offset standing stone. Sometimes, such cairns incorporate or enhance a natural rock outcrop. On the moorland of the south-west these are referred to as Tor cairns.

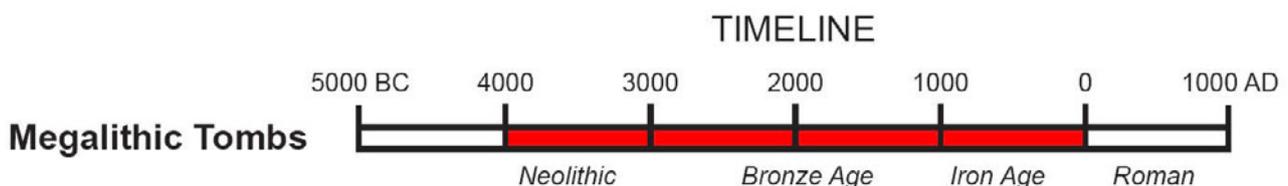
2 Chronology

Analysis of radiocarbon dates taken from bones recovered from chambers in several Cotswold-Severn type cairns has provided dates of between about 3755 BC and 3400 BC for the major phase of use of the chambers, but indicated that use of them at some sites took place over a short period of 10 to 30 years. The sites, however, may have had much longer lives for there is often evidence of activity at the site both prior to construction of the chambers and after they have gone out of use.

Dates from Hazleton chamber tomb in Gloucestershire indicated that the first bones were deposited in the chambers some time, perhaps a decade or two, before 3650 BC and burials continued to be deposited until about 3620 BC. The megalithic tomb and cedula, perhaps with its covering trapezoidal-shaped long mound, at Waylands Smithy, Oxfordshire, appears to have been constructed in the decades either side of about 3430 BC, but the site was built over an earlier monument, a smaller earthen long barrow that was constructed between 3520 BC and 3470 BC. At West Kennet, in Wiltshire, burials were first placed in the chambers between 3670 BC and 3635 BC and the tomb continued to be used for

10 to 30 years. The first bodies were inserted in the Ascot under Wychwood (Oxfordshire) tomb between 3755 BC and 3690 BC. All of these dates point to a major phase of use during the middle and latter part of the fourth millennium BC.

The simple chambered tombs and portal dolmens of west Cornwall were also erected in the fourth millennium BC. Similarly precise dating cannot be offered for the portal dolmens. These are sometimes considered to be an earlier tomb type on account of the simplicity of structure and on the basis of early pottery styles found on a site in Wales. Most of the circular cairns are considered to date to the later Neolithic period or Early Bronze Age between about 2500 BC and 1500 BC. Radiocarbon dates from various cairns in a cemetery at Davidstow Moor, Cornwall, help to illustrate this. In one case, cairns within a kerbed platform barrow were constructed between 2140 BC and 1740 BC, while another set within a cairn ring in the same cemetery was dated to the period 2890 BC – 2550 BC. It is evident that even if this activity was intermittent, traditions of cairn construction persisted over a long period of time.



3 Associations

Excavations within the chambers of many tombs have produced evidence of early pottery, and struck flint work. The radiocarbon dates along with the presence of these artefacts indicates that they were in use at the same time as causewayed enclosures and similar monuments and it has been suggested that there may have been a functional connection between the two types of monument. One view is that bodies were exposed on platforms within the enclosures and the bones subsequently collected and placed in tombs.

The surface of some stones built in to megalithic tombs may contain evidence of having been utilised during prehistory for mundane or spiritual purposes. Some of the massive sarsens at West Kennet have deeply engraved grooves on them indicating that they were formerly used for sharpening stone axes. The Calderstones, a stone setting in Liverpool, contains a number of prehistoric carvings, spirals, concentric circles and engravings of feet, while a stone from a mound at West Harptree in the Mendip Hills, Somerset, also has carved feet on it. There is also a carved stone at the entrance to the Tregiffian tomb (Figure 4).

4 Further Reading

Megaliths and other prehistoric stone monuments have long fascinated antiquaries and archaeologists; John Mitchell's *Megalithomania* (1982) is a well-illustrated compendium about the history of research into all types of megalithic structures.

The most readable and accessible account of current thinking is *Megalithic Tombs and Long Barrows in Britain* by Frances Lynch (1997).

The Cotswold-Severn group of long mounds and the tombs that they encase are well covered by Tim Darvill in *The Long Barrows of the Cotswolds* (2004), while the human bones found during excavations have been covered in a recent analysis by Martin Smith and Megan Brickley, *People of the Long Barrows* (2009).

The most up-to-date work on the dating of Cotswold-Severn chambered tombs is contained in a series of scientifically detailed but highly relevant papers edited by Alex Bayliss and Alasdair Whittle entitled *Histories of the Dead: Building Chronologies for Five Southern British Long Barrows*, being volume 17(1) of the *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* (2007).

Cairns of the south-west are discussed by Andy Jones in *Cornish Bronze Age Ceremonial Landscapes c2500-1500BC* (2005) and in Nicholas Johnson and Peter Rose *Bodmin Moor: An Archaeological Survey* (1994).

5 Where to Get Advice

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