



Historic England

# Prehistoric Barrows and Burial Mounds

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 prehistoric barrows and burial mounds - mounds of earth and/or stone of various shapes and sizes that are characteristic earthwork monuments of the prehistoric periods from about 5,800 until 3,400 years ago (3800-1400 BC). A small number are later, the practice ending around AD 800. While barrows are often isolated, many occur in groups, sometimes of just two or three, but occasionally of up to thirty or more. Groups of barrows are sometimes found in association with other monuments that are also often assumed to have served a ceremonial or ritual purpose during the Neolithic and Bronze Age. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

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## Front cover

An aerial view of a group of round barrows and a long barrow at Winterbourne Stoke, Wiltshire. The earliest round barrow on this site dates from about 2100 BC.

# Introduction

Barrows, sometimes described as tumuli on early maps, are mounds of earth and/or stone (stone examples are often called cairns) of various shapes and sizes that are characteristic earthwork monuments of the prehistoric periods from about 5,800 until 3,400 years ago (3800-1400 BC). Less intensive and intermittent construction and use of barrow mounds also occurred in later times up until about 1,200 years ago (AD 800). The origins of each site invariably lie in different combinations of timber, turf, rubble, small platforms and enclosures or ditched structures, which sometimes incorporate deposits of stone artefacts, pottery, animal and human bone.

Each site utilizes combinations of these components in an individual manner, with regional factors, including the availability of stone or certain soil types, a primary factor in the choice of construction materials. Sometimes the visible portion, the covering mound, signals the end of what has often been a long period of activity on the site and which effectively must have denied further access to the activity area. Its construction may not have been part of the original design or purpose.

Throughout their life, these monuments may have been modified and portions added laterally or vertically and at each stage deposits of cultural material or human burials may have been inserted and this has led to a widespread opinion that they are burial monuments. However, the best way to consider barrows may be by analogy to a parish church where, over the centuries, additions of aisles, towers, porches etc have all but obscured the original structure, while burials and memorials of various date placed both inside and out, serve to mask the original function.

Barrows were amongst the earliest of monuments recognised by antiquarians who dug into many during the 18th and 19th centuries in the mistaken belief that they contained treasures. In fact, rich grave goods are rare and when excavated most barrows contain a few relatively mundane objects.

Human burials were sometimes encountered and consequently these mounds were often considered to be the burial places of prominent people. There was a focus on this burial aspect throughout the 20th century but, increasingly, the complexity of the features beneath the covering was revealed that rendered any simple explanation of function inappropriate.

Few barrows survive in an undamaged state. Far greater numbers have been partly or completely levelled by over two thousand years of agriculture and now appear merely as shallow swellings on the ground surface, or are visible from the air as soil or vegetation marks that indicate the position of buried ditches or spread mounds. Almost every parish contains at least one and often more.

# 1 Description

Surviving barrows are traditionally divided into types according to often subtle features of their surface appearance, that is, their final present day visual manifestation. A number of schemes have been proposed in archaeological literature but there are always some barrows that defy categorisation. Nevertheless they are commonly separated into long and circular types.

Long barrows (Figure 1) can generally be assigned to the earlier part of the time scale, being present from as early as 5,800 years ago (3800 BC). Externally, they comprise a large mound of material rarely more than about 50 m in length

and up to 25 m in width, but sometimes in a slightly trapezoidal or oval form, often with one end wider and higher than the other. Invariably there are ditches alongside from where the construction material may have, in part, been



**Figure 1**  
Chettle Long Barrow, Dorset, with vegetation encroaching on one end of its mound. The field has been cultivated up to the edge of the mound but darker soil alongside betrays the location of the side ditches.



**Figure 2**

Round barrows in the Normanton Down barrow group, Wiltshire, photographed from the air and showing the variety of barrow shapes and sizes that can occur, some with elaborate surrounding ditches and others as simple mounds. Three disc barrows can be easily picked out, while a number of other types including bell and bowl barrows can be identified with a little more scrutiny. Some are tightly clustered together, while others are more widely spaced and single examples such as those outliers in the upper right of the picture can be easily overlooked.

derived. These ditches are often distinctive on aerial photographs and can help to identify the location of examples in which the mound has been levelled.

Additions to the length and height effectively make some mounds much larger and monumental in nature and some excessively long mounds appear to be the product of two long barrows placed end to end. Such mounds are almost indistinguishable from bank barrows, a rare type of very long sinuous and parallel sided barrow in excess of about 100 m in length, nearly 400 m in the Roughtor bank cairn, Cornwall. At the other end of the scale are oval forms, most of which have flanking ditches but which on some continue around one or both ends. Also related are forms referred to by archaeologists as long mounds and long mortuary enclosures, rectangular banked, or once palisaded enclosures, some of which have been found beneath long barrows.

**Round barrows** (Figure 2) have a considerable pedigree with origins dating to before 5,000 years ago (3000 BC), and which cover similar complex sequences of activity to that of long barrows. Size varies quite dramatically from examples of only 5 m or 6 m across to those that take on monumental proportions of over 50 m diameter and 6 m in height.

The main period of round barrow construction occurred between about 4,000 and 3,500 years ago (2000-1500 BC). Subtleties on the surface only rarely allow different forms to be distinguished and most occur as simple amorphous swellings. The most common type is referred to as a **bowl barrow**. These are inverted pudding bowl-shaped mounds with slopes of varying profile, sometimes with a surrounding ditch and occasionally an outer bank. They might reach over 40 m in diameter and as much as 4 m in height, although much smaller versions can occur that measure just 5 m or 6 m across. Many have



**Figure 3**

A group of at least eleven former barrows at Damerham, Hampshire, long since levelled by cultivation but clearly visible from the air and depicted by soil parching and differential crop growth. The variety in terms of size and complexity is clear. Such groups of levelled mounds are widespread across the country and although the mounds themselves have disappeared, the buried ditches, pits and other features contain important archaeological deposits.

received at least one episode of cultivation and this serves to both lower and spread the bulk of the material so that it covers a much larger area than the original mound.

Better preservation can allow identification of **bell barrows**, which comprise a bowl-shaped mound that is separated from its surrounding ditch by a level berm and in profile, therefore, presents a slightly flattened bell-like shape. Like bowl barrows, the size range is considerable but peaks at about 30 m in diameter and 4 m in height. Just light cultivation or weathering of profiles can easily obscure the berm and give the impression of a bowl barrow.

**Saucer barrows** are quite rare, although this may be because their lack of bulk has allowed them to be easily levelled. Here the mound is very low but it is defined by a surrounding ditch, the spoil from which appears to have been placed to form an external bank rather than using it to enhance the mound.

Pond barrows dispense with the mound completely; the surrounding bank is sometimes coupled with a ditch thus defining the central area which is left level or dished. Despite the name they have rarely been sunk below ground level.

Of all prehistoric monuments, disc barrows are the most aesthetically perfect, with their defining ditch and external bank that describes circles of 40 m or more. The level interior is sometimes occupied by one or occasionally two very small mounds just a few metres across, although larger examples are known in which case the monument begins to take on the form of a bell barrow with a very wide berm. It has been suggested that disc barrows are associated with female burial but this is based on a tiny number of excavations and a perhaps biased interpretation, itself based upon gendered views of certain types of archaeological artefact.

**Bell, saucer, pond** and **disc barrows** have in the past sometimes been referred to as ‘fancy

barrows' or 'Wessex barrows', as it was originally understood that it was unusual to find them outside this geographical area, however, aerial photography has demonstrated that levelled examples can be found across the country. These types, however, are only rarely encountered. Of far greater frequency is the simple inverted bowl-shaped mound.

When levelled, the most striking feature recorded from the air is the ditch which occurs as a circular vegetation or soil mark and is sometimes referred to as a **ring ditch** (Figure 3), although it should be noted that not all ring ditches are necessarily the remains of barrows.

The original form of barrow mounds and the processes of use and decay that they have undergone can sometimes be determined through excavation. The underlying structures revealed can comprise stone platforms, pits, stone cairns or turf mounds, various timber structures including mortuary enclosures, wooden and stone chambers, timber or stake circles, pits and post-holes that might have formed rectilinear shrine-like features. One excavated barrow at Amesbury, Wiltshire, for example, revealed a sequence that involved the consecutive construction of four separate concentric stake circles and three encircling ditches. They can also conceal earlier ceremonial structures such as small henges, or be built within larger henges. Indeed the link between henges and barrows, particularly of disc barrows with their internal ditches and large diameter, can be particularly pronounced.

Building material for the covering mound varied widely. In some instances there were small central mounds of stones or gravel covered with sand and earth; in others piles of turf were revetted around the circumference by hurdle fencing to form circular cake-like structures. There are some indications that building material, sand for instance, might have been brought some distance, so that the mound stood out from its surroundings. Such features might be observed

on the surface as concentrations of stones or coloured or organic material. Chalk cappings are also frequently noted in areas where the rock is available and this would have ensured that the mound stood out in gleaming white.

Little is known of the superstructure of barrows and the events that might have taken place on top of them. At least one is known to have had a stake circle placed on top of the turf mound.

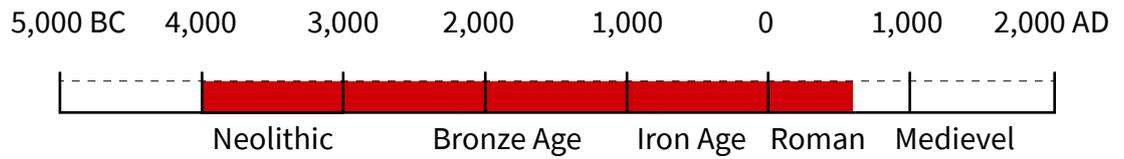
Complexity of use and construction can also be demonstrated by the number of sites that are surrounded by two or three ditches, the process of filling in an old ditch and re-cutting it seems to be an important element in the use of some sites.

A variety of cultural material is found associated with these mounds and with the structures that they covered. Deposits of pottery and stone tools are not unusual, neither are animal bones, for example cattle skulls. Human bones can also be present. Sometimes these might be as formal burials, with an entire skeleton present, either placed in a grave beneath the mound or cut into it, or even placed in the ditch or, as is often the case with cremations, outside the ditch. Cremations are sometimes placed in pots, but in others just loose collections of cremated bone (which may have been in leather or fabric bags or containers that have rotted) have been placed in the mound or around the periphery.

Some of these interments might have accompanying grave goods of stone, bone, pottery or even metalwork. Where cultural deposits help separate out phases of building they are particularly important for dating sequences of activity and tracing the development of the monument, for example, where a burial is inserted into an existing turf mound and subsequently covered by a further phase of mound construction. Where mound preservation is good, such episodes of construction can sometimes be detected by observation of subtle undulations on the surface.

# 2 Chronology

Prehistoric Barrows and Burial Mounds Timeline



# 3 Associations

While barrows are often isolated, many occur in groups, sometimes of just two or three, but occasionally of up to thirty or more. These are called barrow cemeteries and typically consist of barrows in a variety of forms that have accumulated over many generations. In such cases the land between and around the barrows is important as it may contain evidence of paraphernalia associated with the functioning of the monument such as avenues, burials, pyres and feasting areas. Some barrow groups cluster together in small areas, while others take on a looser arrangement with groups of two or three spaced at much greater intervals. In some instances groups take on a linear form.

Groups of barrows are sometimes found in association with other monuments that are also often assumed to have served a ceremonial or ritual purpose during the Neolithic and Bronze Age. These include avenues, cursuses, henges, mortuary enclosures, stone and timber circles. Such relationships are little understood but the variety of spatial and chronological associations provide invaluable areas for archaeological study, for example, allowing greater precision in the dating of these monuments.

Barrows can occur anywhere within the landscape and large numbers of levelled examples occur in river valleys. Sites in bogs or river valleys where anaerobic conditions might allow exceptional preservation of organic materials are particularly valuable to archaeologists as they provide evidence that has usually perished elsewhere.

A resurgence of interest in barrow construction took place during the Iron Age, Romano-British, Anglo-Saxon and Viking periods, although this never reached its former intensity. Burials were made in some ancient mounds and a number of new mounds constructed. These often appear

to be straight forward burial mounds that have adopted or adapted the ancient form.

Iron Age examples tend to be a few metres square, often with a shallow ditch and little more than 0.5 m in height. These **square barrows** are easily overlooked and soon levelled. Roman examples are rare, but often conical and proudly extant. Anglo-Saxon and Viking barrows, sometimes referred to as *hlaews* assume the inverted bowl form. They are often quite small, just a few metres across and invariably with a shallow surrounding ditch, but much larger examples are also known.

**Ship burials** of Anglo-Saxon and Viking origin, of circular or slightly oval form, also occur in the east of the country, but given the widespread raiding and skirmishing associated with the first millennium, could occur elsewhere.

As it is often easier to re-use existing features within the landscape than to erase them and create new ones, barrows can be utilised in a variety of ways and obscured by later activities. They may be disguised as medieval castle mottes, or simply incorporated into field banks. Barrows have served as markers on parish boundaries and hundred meeting places. They were sometimes used for rabbit warrens during historic periods and have been landscaped and adopted as vantage points, beacons, prospect mounds or mounts in gardens, while association with pagan myths and traditions meant that gibbets were sometimes constructed on them and criminals buried in them. It is also the case that both natural mounds and other man-made structures like windmill mounds and rabbit-warrens can be mistaken for barrows.

# 4 Further Reading

Leslie Grinsell and Paul Ashbee both wrote extensively on barrows in the mid- to late 20th century. In terms of the current literature, the reader is directed to the following three overviews: Ann Woodward's *British Barrows: A Matter of Life and Death* (2000) provides a general survey. For long barrows and associated Neolithic monuments David Field's *Long Barrows: the Earliest Monuments in the British Isles* (2006) is easily available, while for the latest work and ideas covering a variety of regions and perspectives, the essays in Jonathan Last's *Beyond the Grave: New Perspectives on Barrows* (2007) are invaluable.

See also: *Monuments on the horizon: the formation of the barrow landscape through the 3rd and 2nd Millennia BC*, Bourgeois, Quentin and Leiden, Sidestone Press, 2013, and *Going West: ceremony, barrows and cairns in the south west peninsula*, A M Jones, in *Reflections of the past: essays in honour of Frances Lynch*, 2012, 172-193.

# 5 Where to Get Advice

If you would like to contact the Listing Team in one of our regional offices, please email: [customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk](mailto:customers@HistoricEngland.org.uk) noting the subject of your query, or call or write to the local team at:

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37 Tanner Row  
York  
YO1 6WP  
Tel: 01904 601948  
Fax: 01904 601999

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Brooklands  
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Cambridge  
CB2 8BU  
Tel: 01223 582749  
Fax: 01223 582701

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Cannon Bridge House  
25 Dowgate Hill  
London  
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Tel: 020 7973 3700  
Fax: 020 7973 3001

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Bristol  
BS1 4ND  
Tel: 0117 975 1308  
Fax: 0117 975 0701



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