

AN ANGLO-SAXON BARROW CEMETERY IN GREENWICH PARK

An Archaeological Survey

March 1994



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**A new survey by the
Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England**

INTRODUCTION

In September 1993, staff from the RCHME Cambridge Field Office commenced an archaeological field survey of Greenwich Park, as part of an ongoing commitment to record the archaeology of London's Royal Parks. The survey is now complete and will be available for consultation at the National Monuments Record Centre, Swindon. One of the more important sites recorded by the survey was a cemetery of thirty one barrows (NAR TQ 37 NE 6), which antiquarian excavation suggests may be pagan Anglo-Saxon grave mounds.

SITUATION

NGR TQ 3882 7712

Topographically, Greenwich Park consists of two distinct areas, divided by the Greenwich escarpment; the low-lying ground adjacent to the river Thames and the higher ground to the south. The escarpment, which rises some 25m in gradients as steep as 1:2, is cut by a series of dry valleys which provided natural routeways to the south.

The cemetery is situated on the high ground on the west side of the Park, roughly 150m south-west of the old Royal Observatory. The barrows are set back from the edge of the Greenwich escarpment, on a small natural rise 0.9m high; to the north-east, the ground falls steeply into a deep valley cutting the scarp edge.

The subsoil is gravel of the Blackheath Beds. The remains of small-scale quarrying activity survive on Crooms Hill and on the valley slope north-east of the barrow group (NAR TQ 37 NE 96). The individual quarries are connected by a network of paths and hollow ways, one of which cuts north-west to south-east through the cemetery, impinging on at least four barrows.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL HISTORY

Antiquarian sources make frequent mention of barrows on neighbouring Blackheath from the sixteenth century onwards, but the first mention of the cemetery within the Park appears to date from 1719¹. The earliest depictions are a watercolour made in 1784² and a drawing from the *Illustrated London News*³, which shows the barrows as steep-sided, flat-topped mounds. Plans of the cemetery were produced in 1840⁴ and by the Ordnance Survey in 1871⁵.

In January 1784, the Reverend James Douglas opened at least twenty barrows, of which eight are described in his *Nenia Britannica* of 1793⁶. The burials were primary inhumations, some of which had been placed in wooden coffins, the graves excavated one and a half feet below the old ground surface. Recorded grave goods were few, but typically Anglo-Saxon in character; the largest barrow produced an iron spearhead, 0.38m long, an iron knife and a shield boss. Swanton identified the spearhead as belonging to his type H3⁷, but the other artefacts appear to have been lost. Two graves were supposed to contain woollen textiles of a distinctive herring-bone weave, 'discoverable almost throughout the extent of the grave', and linen may also have been present⁶.

Douglas noted that some of the barrows had already been opened and recorded the tradition that, seventy years previously, a park keeper named Hearne had carried out his own excavations in the cemetery. Unfortunately, no further record of this investigation survives.

In June 1844, the barrow cemetery was threatened by the proposed construction of a reservoir within the park. Twelve barrows were levelled before the scheme was halted by the weight of public opinion. In September 1845, construction of the reservoir recommenced on the present site, south of Great Cross Avenue⁸.

Antiquarian interest in the cemetery during the late nineteenth century resulted in a number of requests for permission to excavate the surviving barrows. In October 1884 the application of the British Archaeological Association was declined, on the grounds that any disturbance of the Park would be bound to arouse popular indignation. However, in March 1898, George Payne of the Kent Archaeological Society investigated the barrows and concluded 'that it would add greatly to our knowledge of the early history of that district if they could be systematically explored' - with the inevitable suggestion that he should be the one to undertake the excavation⁹. There is no record of any excavation resulting from this application.

In 1927, Martin produced a plan and description of the surviving barrows¹⁰. The plan is reasonably accurate, though not complete, but the dimensions, given in terms of circumference, are extremely confusing. For clarity and continuity, this report has adopted and extended Martin's numbering system.

RCHME has recorded the barrow cemetery on two previous occasions; in 1930, a brief description was published in the inventory of East London¹¹, where their condition was described as 'poor', and in 1980 a series of aerial photographs were taken¹². All the barrows recorded were located by the 1993 RCHME field survey.

DESCRIPTION

The cemetery presently comprises thirty one barrows. Each is a low, roughly circular mound, commonly having the appearance of an inverted saucer. They vary in size from 3.4m to 9.5m in diameter and from 0.1m to 0.7m high. Twenty two barrows have traces of an encircling ditch, between 0.6m and 1.9m wide, but this is never more than a very slight hollow or 'cropmark' of lush, green grass.

Almost all the barrows show signs of disturbance. Some, such as 6 and 15, certainly have been excavated, while in other cases the hollows may be tree-holes; trees are still growing on barrows 28, 29 and 31 and a large conifer partly overlies 22, 23 and 24. Four barrows were slighted by the course of a path associated with the nearby gravel quarries, and modern tarmac paths have partly infringed another four.

Several barrows, including the largest, have rather steep sides and flat summits, as opposed to the rounded profiles exhibited by most members of the group. In one case (barrow 15), the mound is separated from the ditch by a berm roughly one metre wide. This description accords well with a mid-nineteenth century view of the barrows³ and may be closer to the original appearance.

The surviving barrows are very tightly clustered, some being less than one metre apart. Based upon the plan, it is possible to suggest the existence of three or four broad groups. There are two linear alignments, oriented roughly north to south, which converge on the two largest barrows, 15 and 16. Immediately to the north, the remaining barrows form a cluster; 6, 7 and 11 appear to continue one of the north - south alignments, while barrows 2, 4, 5, 6 and 8 comprise yet another linear group, oriented north-east to south-west. This arrangement suggests a radiate development, with barrows spreading outwards from a central cluster, and it may be significant that this cluster includes the largest barrows.

On the eastern edge of the barrow cemetery, between the main cluster and barrow 30, there is an oval hollow (NAR TQ 37 NE 96e). Oriented north to south, the hollow is 40m long and 10m to 14m wide. The pit appears to have been entered from the south and cut down in steps, reaching a depth of 0.9m at the northern end. Both the method of excavation and the location, on level ground, distinguish the hollow from the gravel pits on Crooms Hill.

GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY

In January 1994, a geophysical survey was carried out on behalf of RCHME, with the twofold aim of defining the extent of the cemetery and identifying any associated features ¹³.

Unfavourable conditions militated against both magnetic and resistance survey, but, despite high levels of background resistance, the survey was able to identify most of the upstanding barrows and fragments of associated ditches. Three destroyed barrows were also rediscovered; two small anomalies (34 and 35), situated between barrows 16 and 21, and a larger example (36), located immediately to the east of barrow 25. No other archaeological features were identified and the full extent of the cemetery remains unclear.

DISCUSSION

The full extent of the cemetery is uncertain. The RCHME survey identified a total of thirty one barrows. However, most commentators, quoting Douglas, suggest that the original number of barrows was about fifty and this at first seems credible if we add the twelve barrows allegedly destroyed during the construction of the nineteenth century reservoir to the present total.

There is no doubt that some barrows, at least, have been completely destroyed; the OS First Edition map shows two barrows (32 and 33) immediately south-west of 1 and 2⁵, but no trace of these survives on the ground. The geophysical survey¹³ identified three anomalies within the area of the surviving barrows which almost certainly represent levelled mounds (34 - 36). In addition, Webster states that five barrows were situated on Crooms Hill and three more 'by the path side nearer to the Royal Observatory' ¹⁴. The latter are probably to be identified with spoil tips associated with the gravel workings (see TQ 37 NE 96), but the Crooms Hill barrows are unknown.

The Sayer plan shows the barrow cemetery in 1840⁴, four years before the proposed reservoir construction⁸. The plan marks thirty four barrows, forming a rectangular cluster measuring roughly 85m north-east to south-west by 40m wide. The proposed site of the reservoir, in the angle formed by the Great Cross and Conduit Avenues, is shown as a pencil annotation enclosing nineteen barrows. Thirty years later, the OS First Edition map depicts only twenty two barrows⁵, apparently confirming that twelve were levelled in 1844. However, the 1993 RCHME survey recognized thirty one barrows, seven of which (21 - 28) lie within the area of the proposed reservoir, but were not shown by the Ordnance Survey in 1871. Since at least one of the barrows (36) discovered by the geophysical survey must be added to this total, four barrows, at most, were lost between 1840 and 1871.

A revised estimate of the size of the cemetery would place the original number of barrows at about forty, as opposed to the fifty suggested by Douglas. The identification of regular, linear arrangements within the cemetery makes it likely that it is, in fact, substantially complete. The twelve barrows 'destroyed' in 1844 may be accounted for largely by flattened barrows recognised in the present survey.

AN ANGLO-SAXON CONTEXT FOR THE GREENWICH BARROWS

The iron spearheads and knives reported by Douglas would seem to date the cemetery to the pagan Anglo-Saxon period. The burials he describes appear to be primary inhumations and not secondary interments in an existing prehistoric barrow group.

The phenomenon of barrow burial in Anglo-Saxon England dates from the period AD 550 - 750¹⁵; literary sources, such as the later land charters, refer to such mounds as a *hlaew*¹⁶. Where recorded, the dimensions of Anglo-Saxon barrows are invariably 'small' or between 3m and 10m in diameter and this prompted Grinsell to distinguish them with the separate term 'grave-mound'¹⁷.

A search of records held by the National Monuments Record Centre shows that Anglo-Saxon barrows are most common in eastern and midland England. Most are found in isolation, in pairs, or as part of a larger flat grave cemetery - barrow cemeteries, such as Greenwich Park, account for only a third (33 examples) of recorded sites. Of these, the great majority are found in south-eastern England, particularly in the counties of Sussex, Surrey, Kent and Greater London. As at Greenwich, these cemeteries tend to enjoy upland locations on scarp edges or promontory spurs. Such areas were also used as cemeteries during the prehistoric period and, in at least five cases, the Anglo-Saxon cemetery clusters around between one and four Bronze Age barrows.

The number of barrows in each cemetery ranges from three (the lowest figure accepted for a 'cemetery') to about two hundred, recorded in three closely spaced clusters on Barfriston Down, Kent (NAR TR 24 NE 2). Greenwich, with at least thirty one barrows, is quite large in this respect - half the recorded cemeteries consist of less than twelve barrows.

Recorded excavations at these sites are few and generally of poor quality - only four sites have been excavated since 1945 - but surviving records are sufficient to show that the graves were often poorly furnished, with only pottery or iron knives accompanying inhumation burials, and sometimes were not furnished at all. Weapons were recovered from several sites - at Farthing Down (NAR TQ 25 NE 12) spears and a shield were found while at Barham (NAR TR 24 SE 14) there were three sword burials. Richer grave goods were recorded from Beddingham, East Sussex (NAR TQ 40 NE 14), and Barfriston Down, where disc brooches, glass vessels, garnet and amethyst jewellery were recovered.

Recent work has suggested that barrow construction is concerned less with status than with the ideological struggle between Christianity and paganism¹⁵. Local pagans, threatened by the incoming religion, chose to emphasise their own beliefs both by associating burials with prehistoric barrows and by imitating the latter with barrow cemeteries of their own. Barrows may have been built in prominent locations to rival Christian churches, which, it is suggested, pagans viewed as elaborate funerary structures.

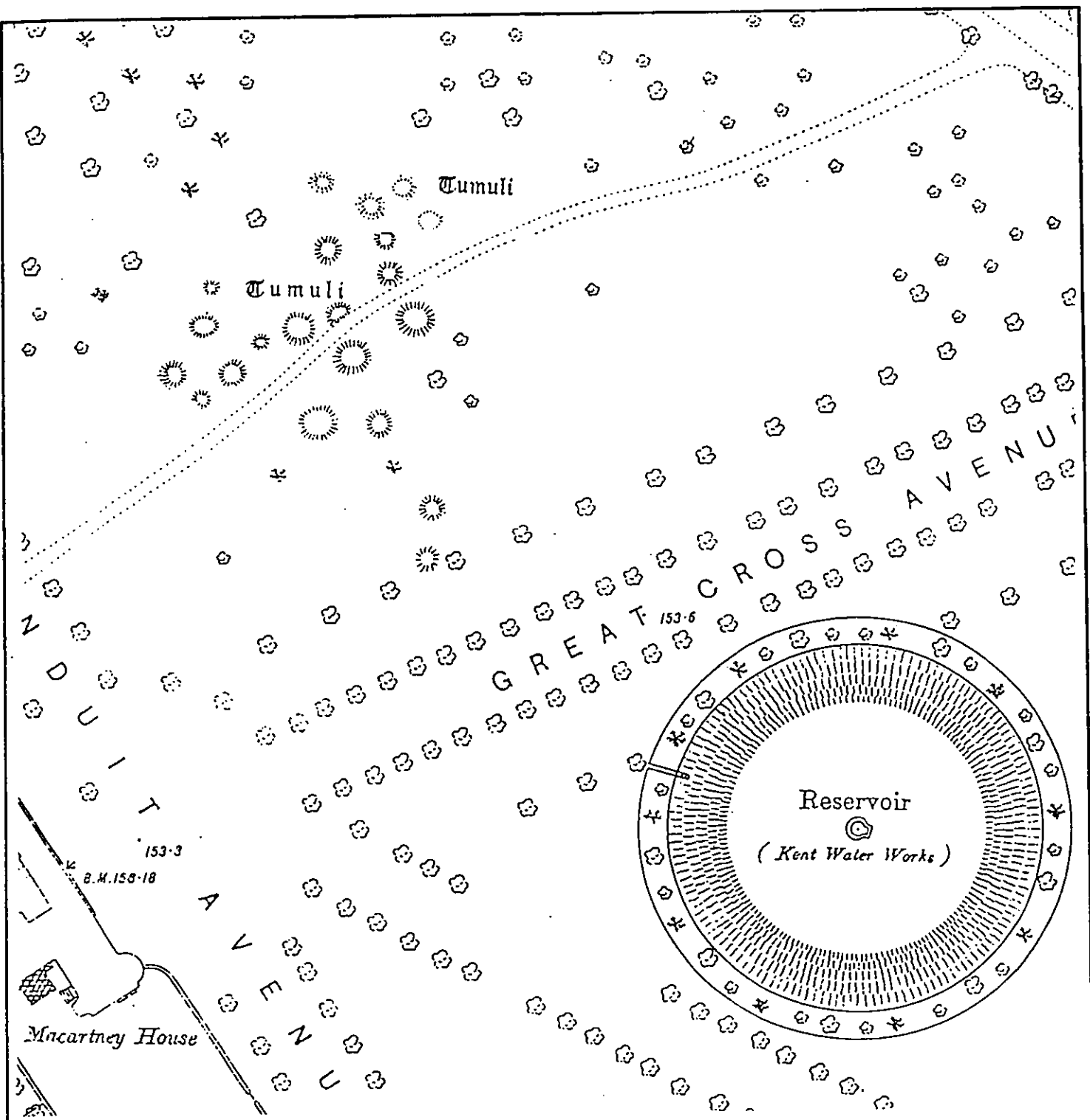
METHODOLOGY


The survey was carried out by Paul Struth and Paul Pattison of RCHME using a Wild TC1610 Electronic Theodolite with integral EDM, the data captured electronically on a Wild GRM 10 Rec Module. This data was subsequently transferred to a PC, and a plot at 1:500 scale was obtained on a Calcomp 3024 plotter. The details of the earthwork plan were supplied at 1:500 scale with Fibron tapes using normal graphical methods. The report was researched and written by Paul Struth and edited by Paul Pattison. The site archive has been deposited in the National Monuments Record Centre in Swindon (NAR TQ 37 NE 6).

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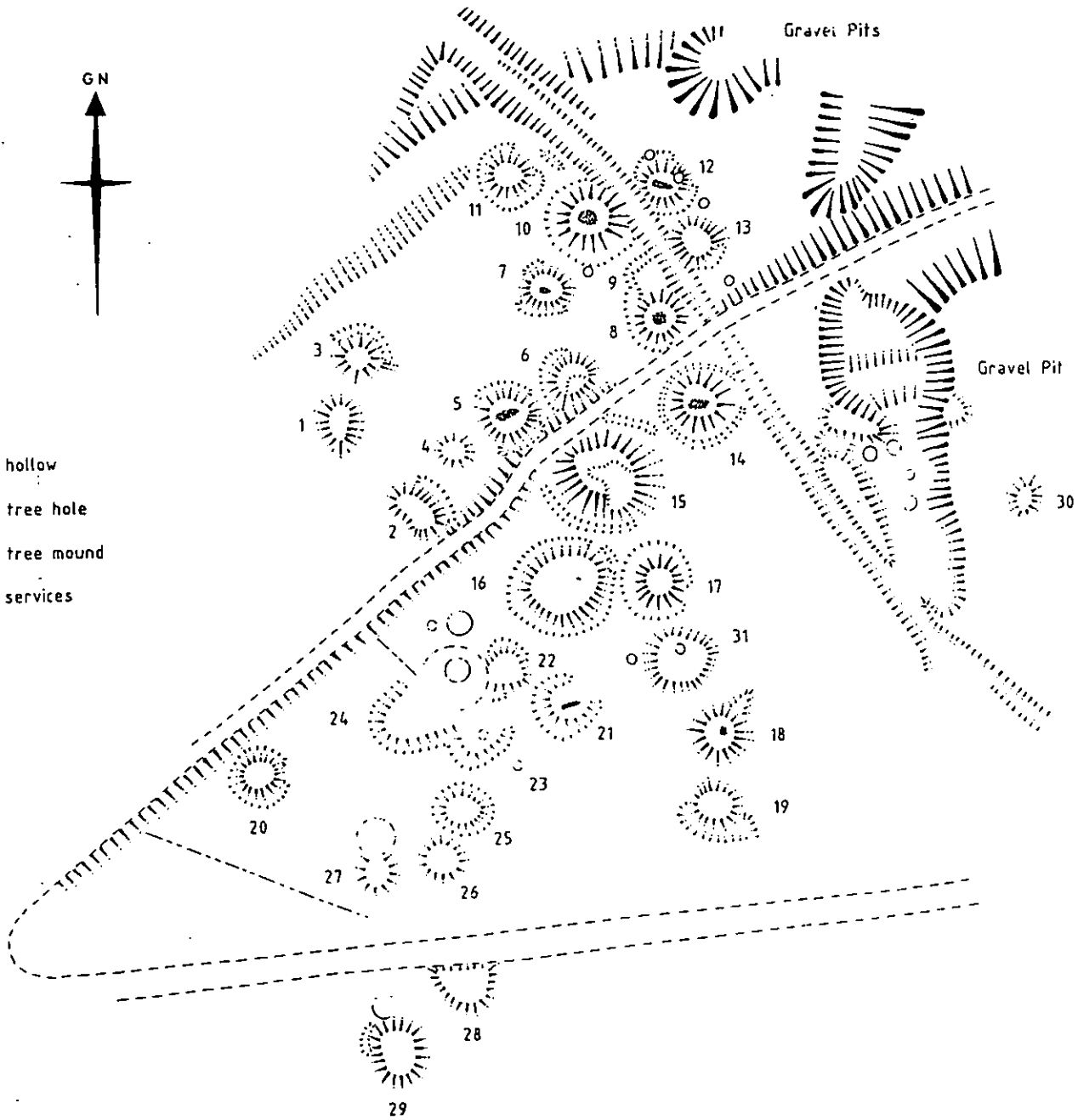
OS Second Edition 1895




 RCHM ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF ENGLAND							
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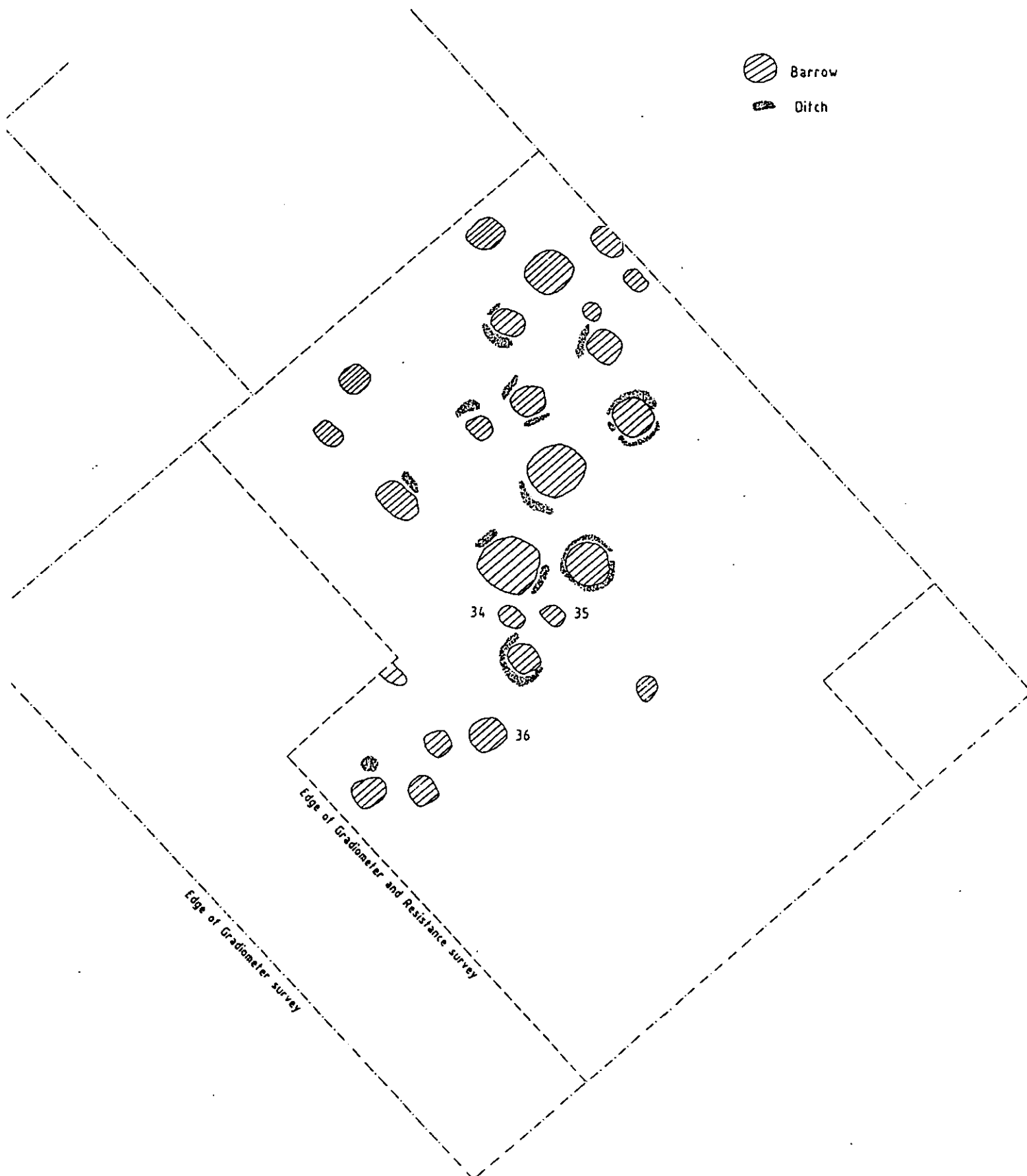


- hollow
- tree hole
- tree mound
- services



10 0 50 METRES

 RCHM ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HISTORICAL MONUMENTS OF ENGLAND					
OFFICE OF ORIGIN	CAMBRIDGE	COUNTY	GTR LONDON	SCALE 1:500	GEOPHYSICAL
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SITE NAME	GREENWICH	PARISH	GREENWICH	JAN 94	6
DOCUMENT STATUS	ARCHIVE	NGR	TQ 3882 7712	SURVEYOR	OVERLAY for 1
				© Crown Copyright	2



AN ANGLO-SAXON BARROW CEMETERY IN GREENWICH PARK

No.	Dimensions (m)		Height (m)	Description
1	6.0	5.2	0.5	
2	7.2	4.5	0.4	Oval, disturbed. Ditch on E side, 1.0m wide. Shallow scoop in W side.
3	5.2	5.2	0.5	Disturbed. Ditch on N and E, 0.6m wide.
4	3.4	3.6	0.2	Flattened.
5	6.4	6.4	0.5	Large. Flat summit with central hollow. Ditch on N and S, 0.8m wide, infilled by mound material on the E.
6	4.7	6.0	0.4	Excavated. Truncated on S by modern path. Ditch on N and W, 0.9m wide.
7	5.2	4.9	0.4	Ditch on S and NW, 0.8m wide.
8	5.7	6.2	0.6	Large, with central hollow. Ditch on N and W, 0.8m wide, contiguous with ditch of mound 9. Cut by paths to S and E.
9	3.2	3.6	0.1	Flattened mound, perhaps spoil from barrow 8, but delineated by shallow ditch on N and W, 0.7m wide. Cut by path to E.
10	7.0	7.0	0.6	Large. Flat summit with central hollow. Ditch 1.2m wide, interrupted on E by path.
11	5.4	5.2	0.5	Ditch 0.8m wide, interrupted on NE.
12	5.3	5.4	0.5	Flat summit with central hollow. Disturbed by tree-hole on E side. Ditch on N and S, 0.6m wide.
13	5.0	4.2	0.5	Ditch on S, 0.8m wide, interrupted by path on W.
14	6.9	7.0	0.7	Large, with central hollow. Well defined ditch, 1.9m wide and 0.3m deep, with short break on E side.

No.	Dimensions (m)		Height (m)	Description
15	7.8	9.2 (13.6)	0.7	Large. Excavated on SE side, resulting in outward spread of mound material and flattened profile. Ditch on S and NE, 1.2m wide, separated from the mound by a berm 1.0m wide. Interrupted by modern path on N side.
16	9.5	9.0	0.4	Large, with flat summit and ditch, 0.8m wide
17	6.2	6.6	0.7	Large, with ditch 1.2m wide.
18	6.2	6.6	0.5	Disturbed. Flat summit with central hollow. Mound material has spread outward to the NE; a sweet chestnut planting infringes on the S.
19	5.5	5.5	0.3	Ditch preserved as slight hollow on S side.
20	4.9	5.0	0.4	Ditch, 0.8m wide.
21	5.4	5.6	0.1	Flattened, with ditch on N, W and S, 0.9m wide. Central tree-hole.
22	5.2	4.1	0.4	Partly overlain by tree-mound to W. Ditch on N and S, 0.8m wide; infilled by mound material on E.
23	4.2	4.8	0.1	Flattened and partly overlain by tree-mound to N. Disturbed by sapling tree-hole. Ditch on W and S, 0.8m wide, contiguous with that of barrow 24.
24	6.6	4.2	0.3	Oval, flattened. Partly overlain by tree-mound to E. Ditch, 1.2m wide, contiguous with that of barrow 23.
25	3.8	4.5	0.1	Flattened. Defined by ditch, 0.8m wide.
26	4.7	5.4	0.2	Flattened.
27	4.5	5.0	0.1	Flattened and partly overlain by tree-mound to N.
28	5.5	6.6	0.3	Oval. Truncated on N by modern path. A sweet chestnut tree stands on the summit of the mound.

No.	Dimensions (m)		Height (m)	Description
29	7.1	5.2	0.4	Oval. A large sycamore tree stands at the S end, whose roots have clearly disturbed the interior of the mound. Short arc of ditch on NW, 1.0m wide.
30	3.4	3.8	0.2	Flattened.
31	6.5	6.5	0.2	Flattened. A large conifer tree stands on the mound.
32	-	-	-	Destroyed barrow (Martin A). Shown on OS maps of 1871 and 1895.
33	-	-	-	Destroyed barrow (Martin B). Shown on OS maps of 1871 and 1895.
34	3.5	2.5	-	Destroyed barrow. Detected by geophysical survey 1994.
35	3.0	2.5	-	Destroyed barrow. Detected by geophysical survey 1994.
36	4.5	4.5	-	Destroyed barrow. Detected by geophysical survey 1994.