



Location: Reigate Heath, Surrey (centred on TQ 237 504)

Main period: Bronze Age

Access & ownership: The barrow cemetery and its surrounding area is managed by Reigate and Banstead Borough Council and there is good access from either of two car-parks, both of which are suitable for minibuses, situated on either side of Flanchford Road (TQ 239 503). Disabled access is possible and the sandy paths are level but can be quite soft. There is a map on the notice board in the western car park and further information is available from the Council website given below. OS Explorer Series (1:25,000) map number 146.



Fig 1. (Left) Reigate Heath showing a group of Scots Pines on a tree mound with a clear view to the windmills before growth of extensive vegetation cover (early 20th c.). Fig 2. (Right) One of the barrows used for tree planting in the early 19th c. (early 20th c. photograph).

Description

The linear barrow cemetery on Reigate Heath comprises seven mounds situated along a sandy ridge running from north-west to south-east. The north-westernmost barrow has been damaged by a cutting for the A25 road but south-east of it are two in good condition situated close together, side by side and a single example close to the path. South-east again there is a single barrow, cleared of vegetation but, like the three to its north-west, bearing a ring of Scots Pines (Figs 1 & 2). The remaining three barrows have been reduced by erosion of their sandy matrix over the centuries. The next to the south-east is nearly invisible and the last example north-west of the road carries the familiar cluster of pines. The last in the line, to the south-east of the road and immediately adjacent to the car-park, is also in very poor condition.

By the 18th century the use of heathland for rough grazing and provision of fuel from turf and brushwood had declined, and the resulting abandoned landscape was regarded as unproductive – William Cobbett described them as ‘miserable’ and ‘rascally’. In many areas landowners planted trees, often clumps of conifers on mounds, to improve views. Excavations are reported to have taken place on the Reigate Heath barrows in 1759 (Sheldon 1982, 3–4) but the basis for this claim is unknown, whereas records exist for the 1809 excavation of the four northernmost ones prior to their being used as tree mounds (Glover 1814). One yielded a Collared Urn used to contain cremated human bone and pyre debris, a pot type (Fig. 5) spanning much of the Early Bronze Age (c. 2000–1500 BC), whilst another contained a bone and charcoal deposit without an urn. Both burials were found in pits cut into the greensand bedrock.

As far as we can tell in their present condition, all the barrows in this cemetery are bowl barrows, the simplest and most common form. The primary burial under a barrow could be an inhumation, usually in a crouched or foetal position, or a cremation – however, no organic material, including unburnt bone, is likely to have survived burial in this acid soil. Burials of this period were sometimes accompanied by grave goods, perhaps to indicate the importance of the person buried and for use in the next world. Such accompaniments would also have been a way for the living to show their respect for the dead person.

Barrows often attract secondary burials, sometimes speculated to be members of the same family or social group, and these could be interred in varied positions within the mound or its vicinity.

Barrow groups can be found in various spatial arrangements, but linear cemeteries are relatively rare. In West Sussex examples can be found on Bow Hill (West Stoke, near Chichester), on Heyshott Down and Treyford Down (both south of Midhurst; Fig. 3). The exact meaning of linear cemeteries has been much debated. They may mark a concern for family groupings, together with concepts of lineage, inheritance and procession. Now that ancient DNA can be studied it may be that some of these possibilities can be addressed.



Fig 3. Six barrows in a linear cemetery on Treyford Down, West Sussex

The Reigate Heath barrows are very precisely placed within the landscape, although today that landscape has changed greatly due to drainage, increased tree cover and golf course development. To the north are the heights of the North Downs whilst to the south is a small, almost isolated greensand hill – Galley Hill on which the windmill (Fig. 1) and golf club house now stand. Joining these two is a sandy ridge which separates two sets of springs, one feeding the Shagbrook to the north-west, the other feeding the Wallace Brook to the south-east (Fig. 4). It is difficult now to say what these areas would have looked like during the Early Bronze Age but there would probably have been marshy land flanking the streams, the dampness varying season to season. Barrows are often associated with water, particularly springs and the short ridge on which these barrows stand protrudes into the area where the spring points of the Wallace Brook emerge.

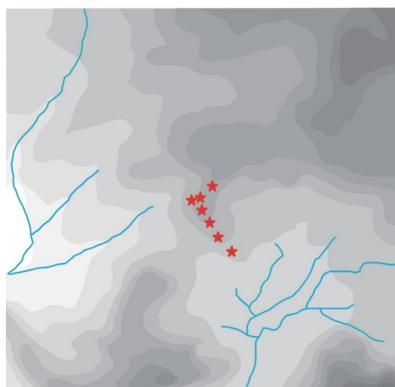


Fig. 4. Position of barrows along a ridge between Shagbrook and Wallace Brook.

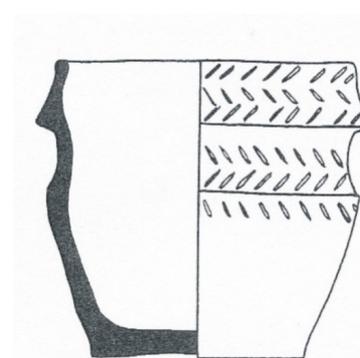


Fig. 5. Collared urn from Cobham (Surrey) similar to the one excavated in 1809 on Reigate Heath

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References and further information

- Glover, A. 1814. An account of the opening of some barrows on Reigate Heath. *Archaeologia* 17, 325–6
- Grinsell, L.V. 1934. An analysis and list of Surrey barrows. *Surrey Archaeological Collections* 42, 27–60. Available at <http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/surreyac/>
- Sheldon, C. 1982. *Reigate Heath and its Golf Club*. London: Straker & Sons
- Reigate Council website: http://www.reigate-banstead.gov.uk/leisure/parks_and_countryside/reigateheath/
- Pastscape: <http://www.pastscape.org.uk>

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