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Signposts to Prehistory

Location: Whiteleaf Hill oval barrow (SP 8222 0398) is situated on the western edge of Whiteleaf Hill chalk escarpment NE of Princes Risborough in Buckinghamshire.

Main period: Neolithic

Access & ownership: The barrow is a Scheduled Monument. There is a public car park and level walk to the barrow above Whiteleaf Cross.



Fig. 1. Whiteleaf Hill oval barrow and view over the Vale of Aylesbury. By Waysider 83 [CC BY-SA 4.0]

Whiteleaf Hill Neolithic barrow (Fig. 1) lies just SE of the giant Whiteleaf chalk cross. The barrow was considerably disturbed by explorations by Lindsay Scott between 1934 and 1939, and the present form of the mound is a result of subsequent reconstruction. Scott died before he could complete his work but his notes were published posthumously (Childe & Smith 1955). The original barrow is described by Scott as kidney-shaped, with a forecourt on the east, and surrounded by a 2 m wide ditch. The mound now measures 21 m NE–SW by 23 m NW–SE and stands to a height of 2 m. The top now has the form of two lobes separated by a narrow neck, which was the position of the burial chamber. The ditch, which provided material for the original construction, survives as a shallow earthwork, 4 m wide with a maximum depth of 0.3 m. The excavation revealed that the barrow was built from earth around a rectangular wooden chamber constructed from large tree trunks laid horizontally. The corners of the chamber were marked by four post-holes giving a maximum length of 2.4 m and width of 1.7 m. A single burial of a middle-aged man was found. Only the left foot and one tooth were found inside the chamber, the rest of the skeleton being scattered outside it. Based on the length of his femur, the man was 1.68–1.75 m in height. He had badly worn teeth with large abscess cavities, and evidence of arthritis in his joints, especially his feet.

A large amount of pottery was recovered from the site, representing between 55 and 60 individual vessels of Neolithic date. Some pottery sherds had imprints of wheat grains. The bowl shown in Figure 2 is c. 260 mm in diameter and 190 mm tall. The rim is decorated with a lattice pattern; the lower part has horizontal panels of six lines of small, sharply pointed stabs applied obliquely, interrupted by enclosed panels of channelled chevrons. A smooth black deposit was found on the inside surface.

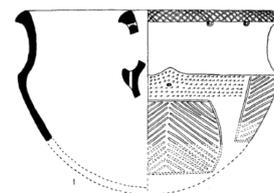


Fig. 2. Decorated Neolithic bowl. Image by permission of The Prehistoric Society from Child & Smith 1955, fig. 5-1. Copyright reserved.

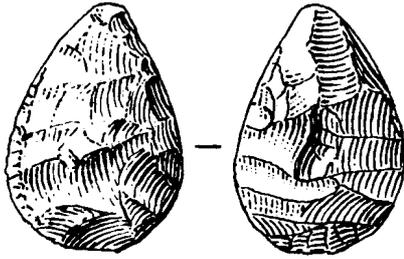


Fig.3. Worked flint arrowhead. Image by permission of *The Prehistoric Society* from Child & Smith 1955, fig. 4-1. Copyright reserved.



Fig.4. Bronze Age cremation urn. Image by permission of *The Prehistoric Society* from Child & Smith 1955, pl. XXV-3. Copyright reserved.

Other finds included 570 worked flints (Fig. 3), and animal bones including 38 from red deer, 23 from pig, 12 from sheep, and 10 from ox. An inverted urn covering cremated human bones was found just under the turf in the southern lobe of the barrow. The urn stands 133 mm high, diameter 127 mm at the rim and 102 mm at the base (Fig. 4). It is of very coarse clay heavily mixed with angular grit. The rim is simple but just below is a shallow horizontal groove about 5 mm wide. The urn contained the cremated remains of a child aged 3–4 yrs.

More recently an investigation was carried out in 2002 by Buckinghamshire County Council's Countryside Initiatives Team and Oxford Archaeology, helped by local volunteers, school children, and the Princes Risborough Countryside Group (Hey *et al.* 2007). The new excavation found that the barrow had first been built between 3660 and 3520 BC and then enlarged between 3370 and 3100 BC. The skeletal remains were radiocarbon dated to 3760–3640 BC. The project also determined that two nearby 'Bronze Age burial mounds' were in fact a natural tump and a medieval windmill mound.

The Ridgeway ancient track passes close to the barrow, and the Icknield Way runs along the foot of the steep slope. There is also a Cross Ridge dyke, dated to the Bronze Age. Other earthworks and ditches amongst the beech woods at the top of the hills are the remnants of first world war 'practice' trenches. The date of the cross itself is undetermined. Speculation that it represents a Christianised fertility symbol remains just that: there is no mention of the cross until 1700.



Fig. 4. The Whiteleaf Cross with the Neolithic barrow above. Google Maps.

References and further information

- Childe V.G. & Smith, I. 1955. Excavation of a Neolithic Barrow on Whiteleaf Hill, Bucks. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 20, 212–30. doi:10.1017/S0079497X00017680
- Hey, G., Dennis, C. & Mayes, A. 2007. Archaeological investigations on Whiteleaf Hill, Princes Risborough, 2002-6. *Records of Bucks* 47(2), 1–80

A series of leaflets is available for download from the Buckinghamshire CC website:
<https://ubp.buckscc.gov.uk/SingleResult.aspx?uid=TBC720>

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