



THE  
PREHISTORIC  
SOCIETY  
SINCE 1935

Petersfield Heath  
Barrow cemetery

## Signposts to Prehistory

**Location:** Petersfield Heath lies on the east side of the town (SU 755 230)

**Main period:** Neolithic, Early Bronze Age

**Access & ownership:** The main car park is immediately south east of the lake, entered from Sussex Road; a smaller car park lies beside the nursery school on Heath Road. Most barrows are easily visited, but some are currently (2015) still overgrown with scrub. There is a level walkway around the lake suitable for wheelchairs, but this only allows one barrow to be closely inspected.



Fig. 1. Barrow 11 from the west 11

Petersfield Heath is home to one of the largest and most diverse Early Bronze Age (2200–1500 BC) barrow cemeteries in south-east England. Early maps and accounts (Anon 1856) suggest a more extensive cemetery before housing encroached on the northern side. After early plotting of the more obvious

monuments by the Ordnance Survey, Stuart Piggott undertook a more detailed survey in 1924 whilst a 14-year-old school boy at Churcher's College, Petersfield (Mercer 1998, 414; Institute of Archaeology archives, Oxford). Even at that tender age he discovered some barrows of low profile although he initially interpreted them as 'hut-circles'. He returned to the site five years later with a more mature eye and later gave Leslie Grinsell permission to publish his 1932 plan of the whole group (Grinsell 1939, 228, fig. 7). The cemetery then received little attention for 80 years as it slumbered amidst a growing multitude of leisure-seekers including cricketers, golfers and dog-walkers, but has recently become the subject of a community-based project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the South Downs National Park Authority (2014–2018) and overseen by Petersfield Museum. Twenty-one sites on the Heath are Scheduled Ancient Monuments, but there are additional sites including a rich Mesolithic flint-working site (Site 23). There is no record of antiquarian excavations, but partial destruction of an unidentified barrow in the mid-19th century yielded a large block of polished stone (Anon 1856).

The majority of barrows are of the common *bowl* type. Excavation on Barrow 13 revealed an enclosing ditch that has been obscured at ground surface by landscaping and there are also traces of such ditches around nos 3 and 5; others will be checked through geophysical surveys (soil resistivity). Rarer types include one *bell barrow* (no. 1), although its ditch and bank are now difficult to find, and one certain *disc barrow* (no. 4). The latter has two low mounds in the interior; the more central one is now extremely low, the other occupies the western sector. Uncharacteristically, when compared to classic Wessex examples, an encircling ditch lies outside the bank. Monument no 19 may have been similar but no mound survives, possibly due to disturbance. Alternatively, this was a *ring-bank barrow*, with little or no internal elevation. Piggott and Grinsell called no 19 and four other monuments in the complex (nos 12, 14, 16 and 17) '*saucer barrows*' (Grinsell 1939, 228) – but these have not fared well in recent decades, one being now totally masked (12), one lying under impenetrable scrub (16) and one virtually imperceptible in rough

grass (17). However, detailed topographic survey of 14, followed by excavation, have shown it too to have no internal mound.

The final two (nos 8 & 21) appeared to be oval barrows, or 'short long barrows', although some past recorders have tried to interpret them as twin bowl barrows. However, excavations in June 2015 showed that no 21, a low mound outlying the main distribution, is entirely natural and partly a dune formation. No 8 is much more substantial and will be investigated in 2016.

Site 24 was first identified on early aerial photographs and its plan has since been clarified through geophysical survey (Fig. 3). An excavation trench located the ditch to west and east in 2014 and found a very low spread of iron-rich material which appears to be the remnants of a well spread internal bank. Waterlogged deposits were encountered in the base of the ditches and contained fresh twiggy material. Despite its unusual flattened-oval shape, this enclosure has been dated to the Early Bronze Age using one of the twigs.

Fig. 1.  
Perforated  
whetstone  
from Barrow



Sections have been cut through Barrows 11, 13 and 18. Except where modern intrusions have disturbed their tops, the mounds are largely made up of turves with variable amounts of interleaved sand. At the centre of 11 and sitting on the old land surface the excavations revealed the stains of a decayed wooden 'coffin'. There were a number of associated grave goods – fragments of a bronze dagger, a perforated whetstone, a flint fabricator, nine partially worked flints, most being blanks for arrowheads and two small unworked sandstone blocks – but no bones were found within the excavated part of the coffin. Barrow 13 was found to have a substantial antiquarian cross-trench in the middle. However, this had just missed an important grave containing a cremation deposit and various grave goods including a large coarse-grained whetstone and worked flints; again there were a good number of arrowhead blanks. The most important find was a mineral-replaced object, almost certainly originally of wood, which appears to have served as a handle for a bag containing the cremation.

### References

- Anon. 1856. [Untitled account of exhibit of an object]. *Archaeological Journal* 13, 412–3  
 Grinsell, L.V. 1939. Hampshire Barrows. *Proceedings of the Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society* 14, 9–40, 195–230, 346–65  
 Mercer, R. 1998. Stuart Piggott, 1910–1996. *Proceedings of the British Academy* 97, 413–42  
 Up-to-date news of surveys and excavations, research and educational activities can be found on the *People of the Heath* website <http://www.peopleoftheheath.com/>

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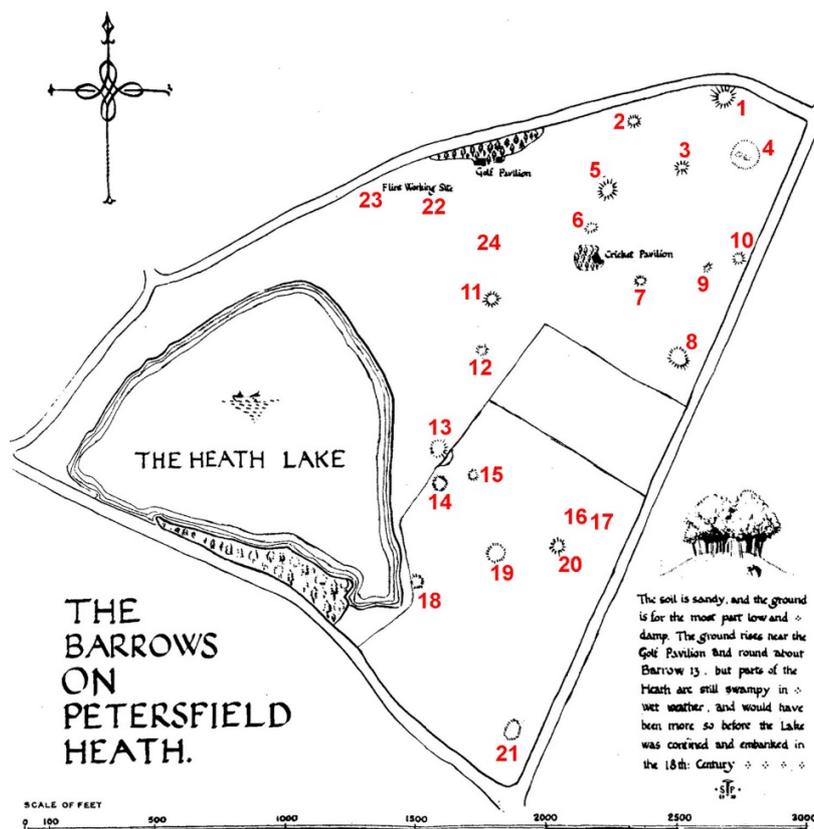


Fig. 3. Piggott's plan of the Petersfield Heath cemetery, published by Grinsell. Piggott's numbering has been followed, except that 22–24 are additional sites