

Signposts to Prehistory

Location: Belas Knap long barrow (SP 021 254) lies just below the summit of Cleeve Hill, 3 km south of Winchcombe in Gloucestershire.

Main period: Neolithic

Access & ownership: This scheduled ancient monument is in the care of English Heritage but managed by Gloucestershire County Council. The site is on the route of the Cotswold Way and the Winchcombe Way. From a small layby at SP 020 262 on Corndean Lane between Charlton Abbots and Winchcombe, a signpost for the Cotswold Way points up through the trees. The 20-minute walk includes a steep climb.

Belas Knap is a heavily reconstructed example of a Neolithic chambered long barrow, set just below the crest of a prominent ridge (Humblebee How) with panoramic views over the surrounding countryside. The name derives from the Old English words 'bel' meaning a beacon and 'cnaep' meaning a hilltop.

The monument belongs to a group known as the Cotswold Severn Cairns, all of which have a similar 'wedge' shape, and are found along the River Severn. The mound is now about 55 m long, 20 m at its widest, and 3–4 m in height; excavations indicate that it was once longer, wider and taller.



Fig. 1. Aerial view of Belas Knap. Illustration by Adam Stanford



Fig. 2. The false entrance. By Pahazzard [CC BY-SA 3.0]

Details of the original cairn structure are vague and the present appearance of Belas Knap (Fig. 1) is largely the result of restoration carried out from 1929 to 1931. The external ditch is a product of this work; the bank is material that has weathered from the mound. The revetment wall that edges the monument is partially rebuilt and the four burial chambers are restored and consolidated, three with concrete roofs. Excavations revealed large numbers of slate-like pieces of limestone. These are thought to have once formed a covering over the monument giving it a very different appearance to the grassy mound seen today.

At the northern end of the mound two projecting 'horns' form a concave 'forecourt' defined with drystone walling. Two standing stones with a lintel (restored – not original) framing a large upright slab appear to mark an entrance (Fig. 2) but neither passage nor chamber was found behind

them in 1863. They perhaps marked a symbolic entrance but the finding of skeletons of a young man and 5 children in the rubble immediately behind suggests they may be the remains of an earlier portal dolmen tomb like the Whispering Knights at Rollright, Oxfordshire (Darvill 2004, 50–2) Note: only the lower stone courses and the upright megaliths are original. In the 1860s destructive explorations of the mound revealed a circular arrangement of stones (Winterbotham 1864–7); subsequent investigations found no trace (Hemp 1929).

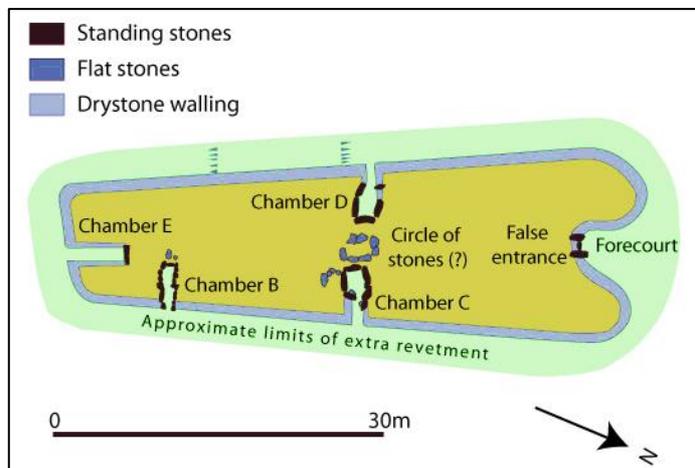


Fig. 3. Plan of Belas Knap showing chambers.

Subsequent excavations clarified the overall picture (Hemp 1929; Berry 1929; 1930). In total the remains of 38 individuals were recovered. A visitor to the 1860s excavation was John Thurnam, a psychiatrist, archaeologist, and ethnologist with an interest in the study of human skulls—craniology. Thurnam had found that skulls divided into two types: long and narrow from the Neolithic, and broad and rounded from the later Bronze Age. He identified an anomaly at Belas Knap: the male skull from behind the false entrance was *rounded* - usually found only in *round* barrows. This caused much debate at the time (Parsons 2002) with some suggesting that the man, from a distant tribe, had been captured and sacrificed by the long barrow builders!



It has since been shown that skull shape varies and can slowly change over long periods (Brodie 2004). Violence has, however, been indicated by recent examination of another skull from Belas Knap. It showed unusual evidence of massive trauma, caused by an instrument with a broad impact area (Schulting & Wysocki 2002).

Based on the dating of tombs of similar plan in the Cotswolds, it is likely that Belas Knap was in use between 3750–3650 BC.

Fig. 6. Entrance to Chamber C. By Pahazzard [CC BY-SA 3.0]

References and further information

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Belas Knap on Megalithics: www.megalithics.com/england/belas/belamain.htm

Belas Knap on Digital Digging: <http://digitaldigging.net/belas-knap-long-barrow-sudeley-gloucestershire/>

Finds are held at the Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum: www.cheltenhammuseum.org.uk

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