



Location: Gristhorpe, North Yorkshire (TA 09376 83244)

Main period: Bronze Age

Access & ownership: Gristhorpe is a village situated on the Scarborough to Filey road, approximately 2 km north of Filey. The barrow that contained a remarkably preserved burial is the central and most prominent of a group of three barrows on the cliff top and lies approximately 50 m south of the Cleveland Way. It is now within the Blue Dolphin Caravan Park and has to be approached on foot from a stile on the coastal path (Fig. 1) as the caravan park has barriers on its gates. The coffin, human skeleton, and grave goods excavated in 1834 are on display in the Rotunda Museum in Scarborough.



Fig. 1. The log-coffin barrow at Gristhorpe, viewed from the Cleveland Way path, looking inland (Photo: N.D. Melton)

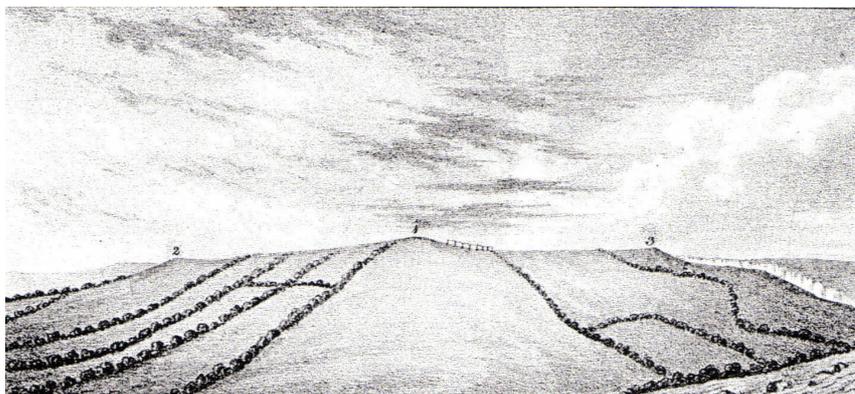


Fig. 2. Vignette of the barrows on the cliff top at Gristhorpe, view looking out to sea (Source: Williamson 1834)

The three **Gristhorpe barrows** (Fig. 2) were dug by the local landowner, William Beswick of Gristhorpe Manor, in the early 19th century. He investigated the northern and southern barrows in the 1820s, but left no account of his findings. The northern barrow was re-excavated in 1887 by Canon William Greenwell (Greenwell 1890). William Beswick commenced his investigation of the central barrow in 1833, but abandoned that initial attempt 'after sinking to some depth' (Williamson 1834, 5). He returned, accompanied by a group of friends and workmen on 10 July the following year. At a depth of c. 2 m they made a discovery that was to become a national sensation – a massive oak log, waterlogged in the deep grave that had been cut into clay. The timber had what the original excavators thought was 'the rude figure of a human face' carved on one end (Williamson 1834, 5–6). The log was too heavy to lift, so William Beswick returned the following day with a number of members of the Scarborough Philosophical Society. They set up a windlass to raise the log and in the course of this process the 'log' split open,

revealing it to be a coffin containing a perfectly preserved skeleton wrapped in an animal skin and with a range of grave goods that included a flint knife, a bronze dagger and its whalebone pommel, and a bark vessel.

William Beswick donated the finds to the Scarborough Philosophical Society's museum in Scarborough the following day, and the skeleton was re-articulated by two Scarborough doctors. An account of the find was prepared within weeks of the discovery by William Crawford Williamson, the precociously talented 17-year-old son of the museum curator John Williamson. This account came to the attention of the eminent scientist William Buckland when he visited Scarborough that year and he recommended it to the editor of the *Gentleman's Magazine* who published it in October 1834. This ensured the rapid dissemination of knowledge of the find, including to C.J. Thomsen at the Museum of Northern Antiquities in Copenhagen. Thomsen published a paper in 1836 that compared the Gristhorpe coffin with a recently discovered Danish example and correctly identified the Gristhorpe find as being Bronze Age in his 'Three Age System'. The Gristhorpe burial thus holds the honour of the first British find to be classified as 'Bronze Age' and it was at the heart of the 'chronology debate' that raged in British archaeology in the 19th century (Rowley-Conwy 2013). William Williamson (1872) published a substantially amended edition of his report in 1872 incorporating many of the subsequent advances in knowledge and thus providing an interesting example of the development of archaeology during the intervening period.

The Gristhorpe skeleton, coffin lid, and grave goods remained on display in the Rotunda Museum (apart for a brief period during WW2) until 2005–2008 when the museum was closed for refurbishment. The opportunity was taken in 2005 to transfer all the finds to the conservation laboratory in the Department of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bradford, for thorough scientific study (Melton et al. 2010; 2013).

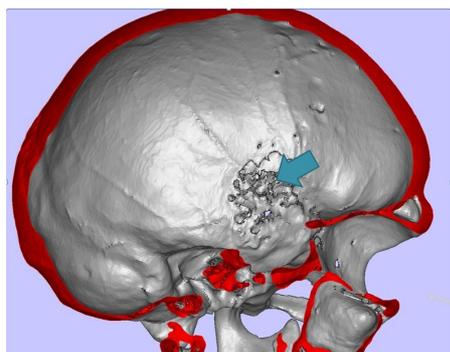


Fig. 3. CT scan showing the tumour in the left parieto-temporal region (blue arrow); the red colour represents a cross-section through the skull (Source: Melton & Montgomery 2011)

Full physical analysis of the skeleton of 'Gristhorpe Man' showed him to be an individual of exceptional stature, age and physique. CT scanning at St Luke's Hospital, Bradford, produced a fascinating and unexpected result – a large intra-osseous brain tumour (Fig. 3). Multiple radiocarbon dating and wiggle-matching on dates from the coffin refined the date of the burial to 2110–2030 cal BC, near the beginning of the Bronze Age. The Gristhorpe Man research project also entailed fresh investigation of the barrow itself, by geophysical survey and excavation.

The project's findings have been incorporated into the new display of the Gristhorpe skeleton, coffin, and grave goods in the Rotunda Museum – including an animated facial reconstruction in which 'Gristhorpe Man' tells visitors of his experiences during the time he was in residence at Bradford University (Melton & Montgomery 2011).

References / Links

- Rotunda Museum website: <http://www.scarboroughmuseumtrust.com/#!rotunda-museum/cv5d>
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- Williamson, W.C. 1834. *Description of the Tumulus, lately opened at Gristhorpe, near Scarborough*. Scarborough: C.R. Todd
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