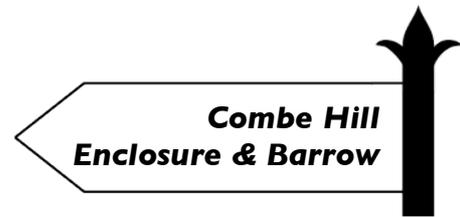




THE
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Signposts to Prehistory

Location: Near Eastbourne, East Sussex (TQ 574 022)

Main period: Neolithic causewayed enclosure and Bronze Age barrows

Access & ownership: A 'pay and display' car park at the end of Butts Lane, on Butts Brow, can be reached from the A2270 at Willingdon via either Coopers Hill or Church Street. The car park is suitable for all vehicles but Butts Lane is very narrow in places and not suitable for coaches. From the section of the car park north of the road a gate leads onto open downland and Combe Hill is sign-posted. Combe Hill causewayed enclosure (TQ 574 022) is approximately 800 m away, over level grassland, but the gate is not accessible to wheelchair users. Walk northwards along the spur, Cold Crouch, keeping to the left (west) of a small copse. Swing westwards following the track along a narrow ridge with steep-sided valleys on either side; here you will see the earthworks of the causewayed enclosure, with the bank about 0.6 m high, cut by the track.

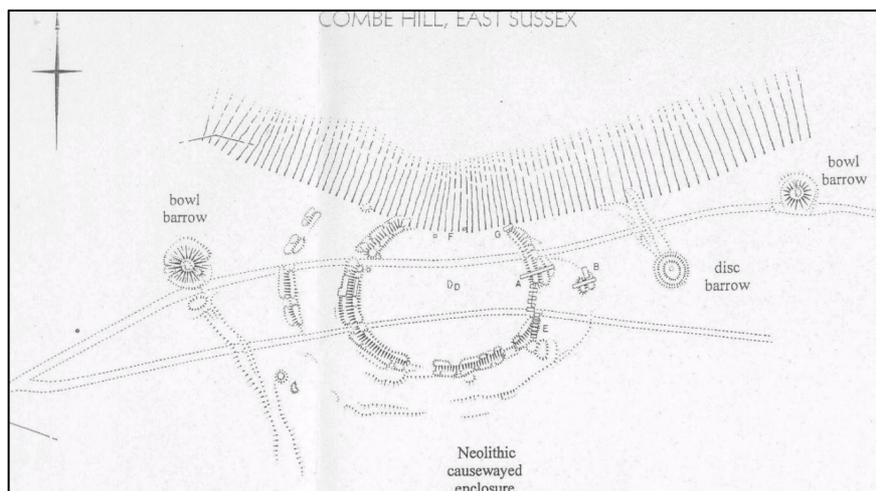


Fig. 1. Analytical survey of Combe Hill (reproduced by kind permission of Historic England)

Combe Hill Causewayed Enclosure comprises an oval ring of interrupted banks and ditches with traces of an outer ring to the east and west (Fig. 1). The northern portion of the oval ring is incomplete, either because the steep slope was deemed sufficient or because it has been lost to erosion. Excavation in 1949 and later produced charcoal from the primary silt of one of the ditches which gave a radiocarbon date of c. 3400 cal BC together with evidence of flint-working and a relatively large amount, some 1000 sherds, of impressed pottery in the Ebbsfleet ware tradition. Also recovered were bones from cattle and pigs, and two fragments of quernstones used for grinding grain, indicative of a mixed farming economy in the area; however the finding of a leaf-shaped arrow head might suggest that hunting was also part of the food production strategy. The site was first described by the local antiquary Arthur Raistrick in 1929. He described it as an enclosed cremation cemetery – a type of monument associated with human cremation burials and dating to the earlier part of the Bronze Age (c. 2000–1400 BC). Raistrick does not record any previous excavation at the site.

Analysis of the snail shells found in ditch sediments and of the habitats preferred by the different species suggests that the enclosure was built on grassland only recently cleared of trees. It may be that clearance specifically related to the monument construction, a situation echoed by the evidence recovered at two other causewayed enclosures in Sussex (Bury Hill (Houghton), Offham

and Barkhale (Arundel)) but not by that at Whitehawk (Brighton) and Trundle (Lavant, near Chichester). The topographical position of Combe Hill gives it a long viewshed to the north over the 'Low Weald' (or vice versa, Fig. 2) towards the Ashdown Ridge of the 'High Weald' but, assuming intervening woodland had been cleared, the interior of the enclosure would be best seen from the nearby heights of Bourne Hill and Willingdon Hill to the south, and from the approach along the ridge from the south-east.

There is little evidence of permanent occupation of any of the Sussex causewayed enclosures and it is probable that they served as centres for intermittent, possibly seasonal, gatherings. Farming necessitates a relatively settled existence, at least for a few years, and the workforce on an individual farm may have been limited to an extended family. Gatherings for ritual observance, trade, feasting, marriage arrangements and gossip could have been an aid to social cohesion over a wide area.



Fig. 2. Combe Hill from the Low Weald to the north-east. The causewayed enclosure is directly above the pylon in the foreground (Photo: David Lea)

Combe Hill and Cold Crouch barrows: a large number of Bronze Age barrows stud the high points of the South Downs in this part of Sussex and in some cases earlier monuments appear to attract clusters. There are three round barrows on Combe Hill, two bowl barrows and a disc barrow, and a further bowl barrow on Cold Crouch.

- Bowl barrow (TQ 5768 0227): situated on a high point some 200 m east of the causewayed enclosure.
- Bowl barrow (TQ 5736 0223): situated on a low crest of a west of the causewayed enclosure. Three flanged bronze axes and part of a fourth (late Early Bronze Age, Arretton tradition) were found in 1908 lying below a stone weighing about 150 kg.
- Disc barrow (TQ 5762 0224): an almost circular disc barrow about 120m east of the causewayed enclosure, its situation is unusual in that it lies below the adjacent high point and is set back from the northern scarp slope resulting in an inconspicuous position.
- Bowl barrow on Cold Crouch (TQ 5795 0207): returning towards the car park take the track to the east of the small copse, about 30m to the north-east of the northern end of the scrub is a bowl barrow with a World War II bunker dug into its eastern side destroying a section of the surrounding ditch.

Round barrows can contain burials dating to the Chalcolithic/Early Bronze Age, Romano-British or Anglo-Saxon periods but these are most likely to be prehistoric in origin. The bowl barrows occupy highly visible positions and when newly made that visibility would have been enhanced by the white of the chalk up-cast, if this formed the top layer of the mound. Their association with the causewayed enclosure probably represents continuing respect for the location rather than coincidence, and the finding of Roman pottery and coins close to the enclosure and barrows again hints that the area, with its dominant position and long views northwards, remained 'special'.

References

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