

Round barrows: Background information for teachers

Round barrows are, almost without exception, Bronze Age burial mounds. They can be found right across Britain, although where they are constructed of stone rather than earth, they are called round cairns.

The practice of heaping up a round mound over a burial is the hallmark of the first metal-users who arrived in Britain about 2300 BC. They are known as the Beaker people from the distinctive handleless drinking vessel that they buried with their dead. Barbed and tanged arrowheads (presumably all that remain of a bow and arrows) were also commonly put into their graves, along with stone wrist guards that protected against the arm from the impact of the bowstring. Quite a few of their graves also contained the new metal in the form of a bronze dagger. Richer graves might include hammered gold: small 'sun discs' about the size of a modern £2 coin, or gold tubes, often called earrings, but probably used to hold tresses of hair.

Burial of such items with a complete skeleton is quite unlike the earlier long barrow tradition that involved mass burial and no grave goods. Then, people probably thought of their ancestors as still being with them in a great house of the dead; now, they appear to have believed that the dead were going to an afterlife where they would need the things that had shown their status on earth. If the gold discs have been correctly interpreted as 'sun discs' we could suggest that belief was associated with the sun but, of course, we can never prove that in a prehistoric society.

A few hundred years after the arrival of the Beaker people, even richer burials were being made. They are particularly focussed around [Stonehenge](#). The finest of these was under a mound known as [Bush Barrow](#). This forms the main subject of the Power Point presentation. The sheet gold ornaments that accompanied this burial are so thin that they have a low value in weight terms, but the quality of the craftsmanship is truly exceptional. The scored lines of decoration never go through the thin gold sheet and never cross, however difficult the pattern being produced. Nor are there mistakes in measuring out the geometric shapes. Simply to accurately copy in pencil the pattern of the great gold lozenge from Bush Barrow is a real challenge.

Such burials are very unusual and mostly to be found in the counties of Wiltshire and Dorset, often referred to as Wessex. By about 1500 BC burials with grave goods had ceased to be made. Round barrows now just covered cremations mostly, but not always, in pots.

The grave goods from Bush Barrow are very well displayed in the [Wiltshire Museum](#), Devizes, which runs a range of programmes for schools.

Further reading

Parker Pearson, M. 2005. *Bronze Age Britain*. London: English Heritage

Needham, S. 2009. Rethinking Bush Barrow. *British Archaeology* 104, 13–17

Lawson, A. 2007. *Chalkland: An archaeology of Stonehenge and its region*. Salisbury: Hobnob Press



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