

Tarrant Launceston: Survey and excavation of a long barrow with secondary burial on Race Down

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Abstract

In March 2003, it was noted that rabbit burrowing had uncovered possible human remains close to the centre of Race Down long barrow. In order to determine whether the bones were human and/or of forensic interest, the School of Conservation Sciences (now the Department of Archaeology, Anthropology & Forensic Science), Bournemouth University, carried out a limited investigation on behalf of Dorset Police and the landowner, Defence Estates. The spoil heap of the rabbit burrow was excavated and this process revealed other displaced human bones, including long bones. A human osteologist examined the recovered bones and determined that the disturbed remains were human and ancient. Consequently, Dorset Police concluded that, although the bones were human, they would not be carrying out a criminal investigation due to the antiquity of the remains.

In March 2004, a small excavation team from Bournemouth University returned to the site to fully recover any in situ human remains, together with recording the burial context and stratigraphy. A wider topographic survey of the long barrow was also carried out. This paper reports on the results of this field survey and excavation.

Site Location & Description

Race Down neolithic long barrow (a designated Scheduled Ancient Monument; No. 86/33578) is situated on the eastern side of Race Down (NGR ST 92940884), part of a chalk ridge which runs parallel with the River Tarrant (Figure 1; Plate 1). It is the only long barrow listed by L.V. Grinsell occurring within the parish of Tarrant Launceston (1959, 81), although another long barrow occurs 800m to the northwest in the neighbouring parish of Tarrant Hinton (Telegraph Clump Long Barrow; NGR: ST 92280933). The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments surveyed the barrow in the 1970s and recorded it as being 35m long and 15m wide (1977, 106). It was possibly opened in 1840 by JH Austen, who found an extended inhumation 0.75m from the top that was interpreted as an intrusive deposit (*i.e.* post-dating the construction of the long barrow) (Grinsell 1959, 81).

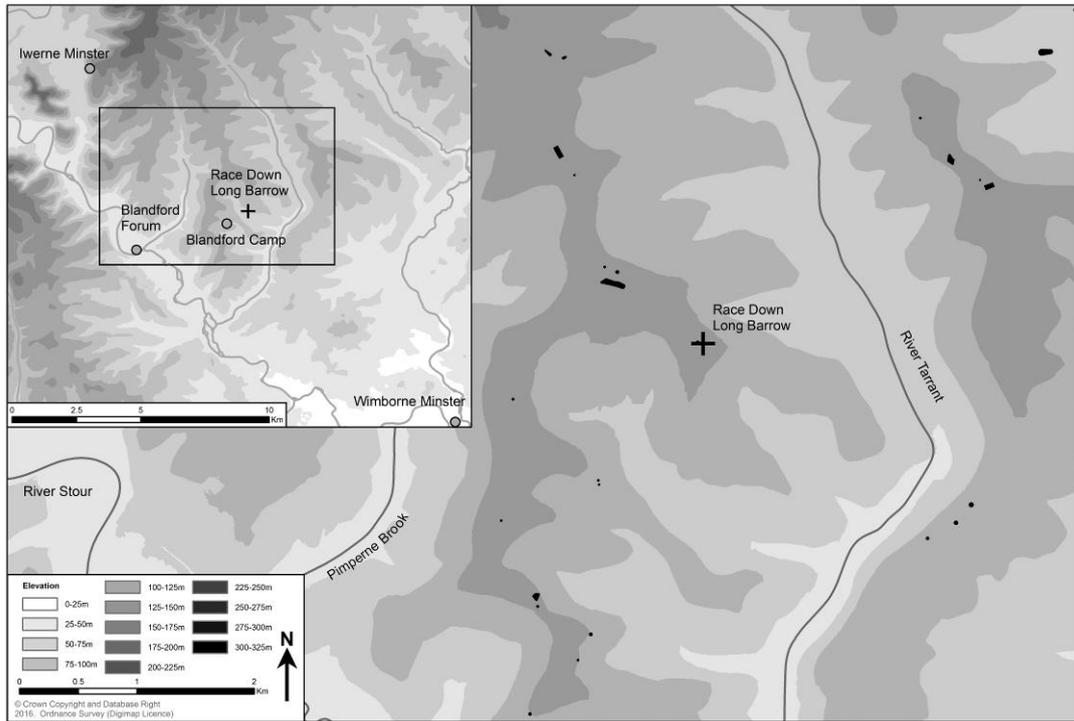


Figure 1: Location of Race Down long barrow also showing location of Neolithic and Bronze Age barrows on either side of the Tarrant valley.



Plate 1: Race Down long barrow looking west. Note the stumps from recent tree felling.



Plate 2: Rabbit burrow spoil heap on top of long barrow.

Cartographic evidence indicates that the place name “Race Down” is derived from the use of the ridge plateau, where the monument is located, as a racetrack for horses. However, by 1880 the race track appears to have become disused and a rifle range had been established on the southern flank of the ridge (Ordnance Survey, 1888). Dudley Stamp's 1930s Land Utilisation Survey (1935) shows the monument within a coniferous woodland plantation, but by the mid-twentieth century barracks of Blandford (Army) Camp surrounded it (Ordnance Survey, 1961). The barracks were later demolished (Ordnance Survey, 1976) although remnants of the conifer trees were only removed from the summit of the long barrow at the beginning of the twenty-first century (authors' field observations).

Excavation

The aim of the archaeological investigation was to determine the date, circumstances of deposition, and the context of the inhumation that was first observed as having been disturbed by rabbit burrowing at Race Down long barrow in March 2003 (Plates 1 and 2).

A 2m x 3m trench was located over the partially exposed bones on the south-western flank of the long barrow (Figure 2). Approximately 0.08m of topsoil (context 001) overlay the outer shell of the barrow that comprised a degraded chalk layer (context 002). The chalk layer had a maximum thickness of 0.45m and was cut by feature 001, interpreted as a roughly rectangular grave. Orientated east-west, the grave (F001) was 2.0m long, 0.65m wide, with a

maximum depth of 0.45m (Figure 3). The grave (F001) contained one inhumation burial, extended west-east (with the head to the west). The entire left side of the skeleton was missing, having been disturbed by rabbit burrowing (Figure 4). No other artefacts were recovered although an iron stain considered to be the remains of a knife was noted adjacent to the right femur. The grave cut extended down into a layer consisting of silty clay loam (context 004) interpreted as barrow matrix which had been highly disturbed by rabbit burrowing (Figure 5). The skeletal material was recovered and taken to Bournemouth University for further analysis and conservation.

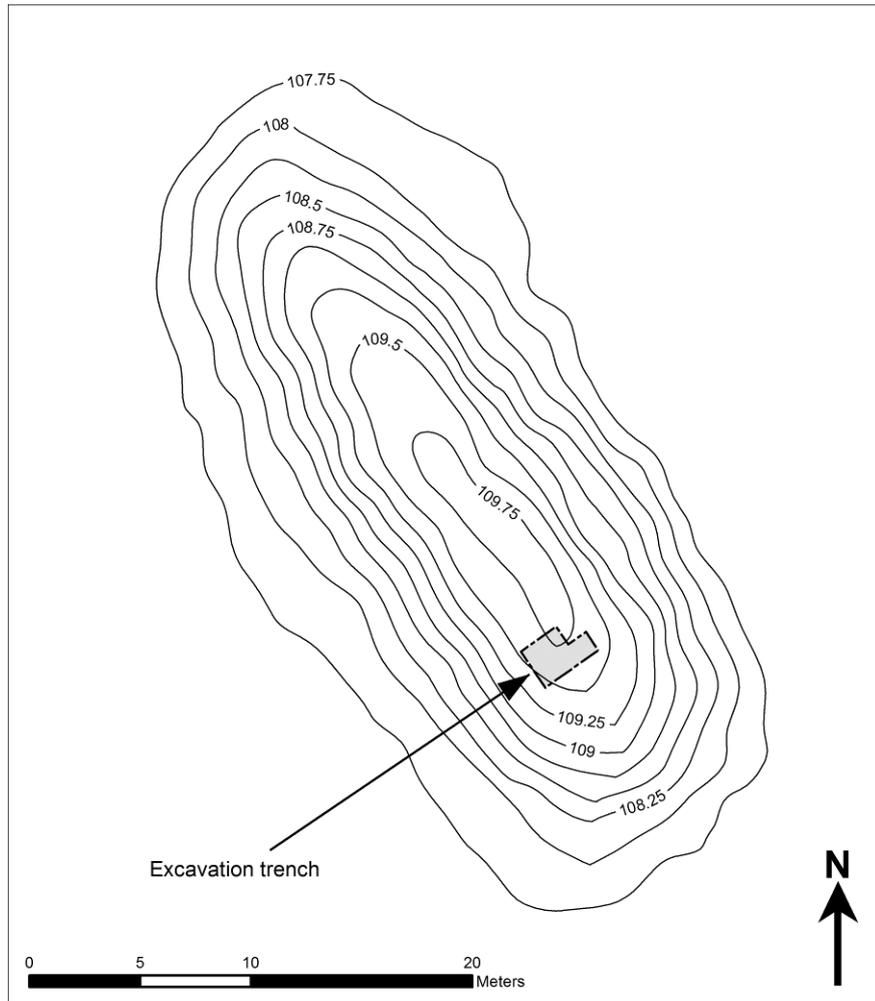


Figure 2: Location of excavation trench.

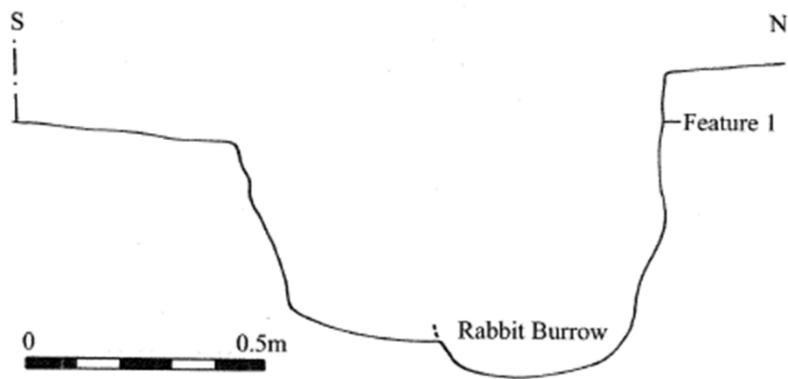


Figure 3: Cross-section of grave cut. Drawn at 1:10 scale.

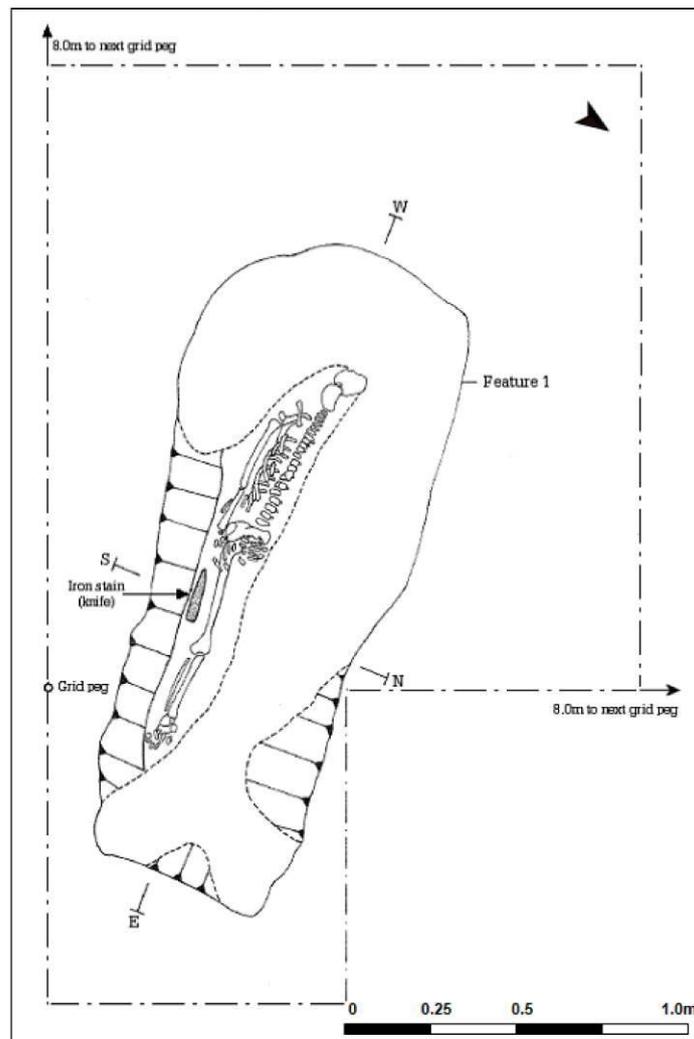


Figure 4: Plan of grave showing skeletal remains and rabbit disturbance. Drawn at 1:10 scale.

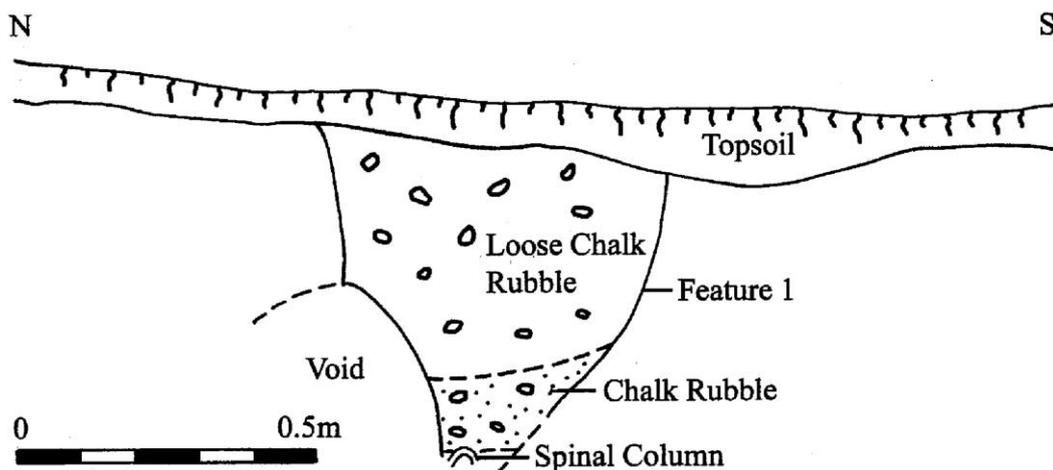


Figure 5: Schematic interpretation of grave fill. Drawn at 1:10 scale.

Topographic Survey

The long barrow and its immediate vicinity were surveyed using a Leica SR530 differential Global Positioning System (GPS). Nearly 2000 unique topographic points (each with a three-dimensional accuracy of $\pm 3\text{cm}$) were collected in WGS84 format and were later converted to British National Grid coordinates (OSGB36) using Ordnance Survey RINEX data. The resulting data were gridded and interpolated in *Golden Software Surfer V.8* to produce a 3D surface plot (Figure 6).

The results of the topographic survey indicate that the barrow was constructed on a north-west / south-east orientation. It is approximately 2m high, 37 m long and has a maximum width of 17m, which tapers to a width of 13m at the north-west end (Figures 7, 8 and 9). The shape and size conform to the group of long barrows commonly referred to as trapezoidal (or "wedge" shaped), where the wider end faces roughly east, an alignment that is assumed to have cosmological implications (Field 2006, 69). The profile along the barrow length indicates that the south-eastern end is the higher, a general pattern recognised in other trapezoidal barrows (Ashbee 1984, 19), and possibly emphasising the importance of the eastern end of the barrow. Along the south-western side of the barrow a shallow ditch could be seen. The ditch did not show on the opposite length, although the ground surface is generally lower here. This is probably the remains of the quarry ditch that was dug at the time of the long barrow's construction and since then has been gradually backfilled by natural and / or anthropogenic activity. Without further excavation little more can be determined.

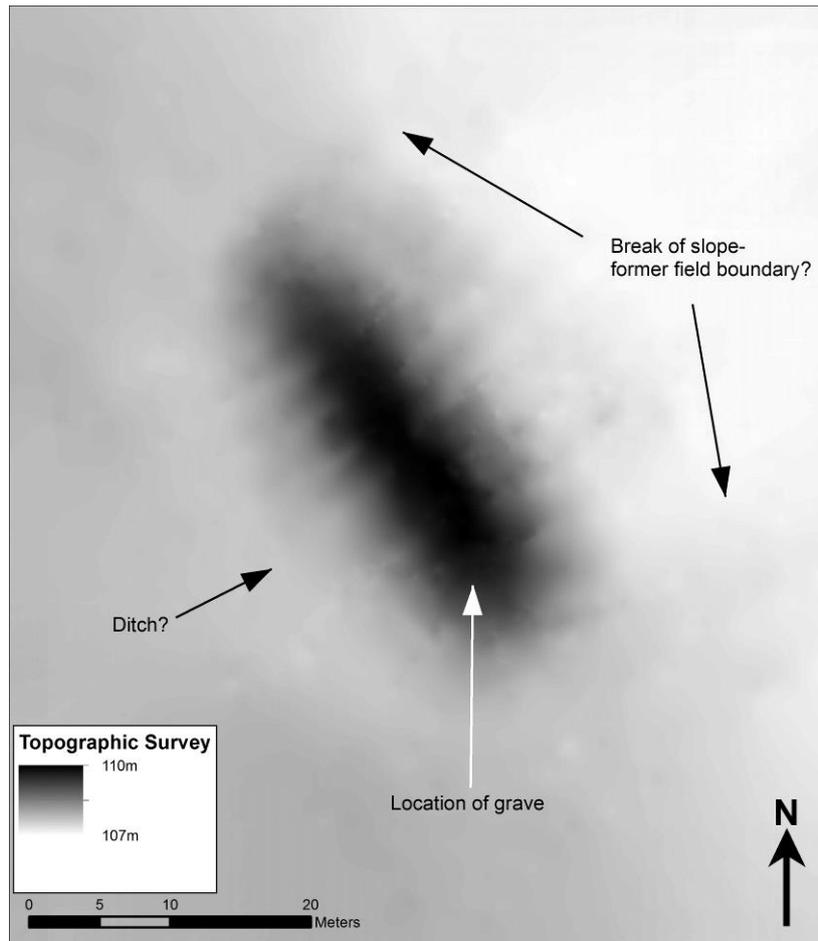


Figure 6: Interpreted topographic surface elevation plot.

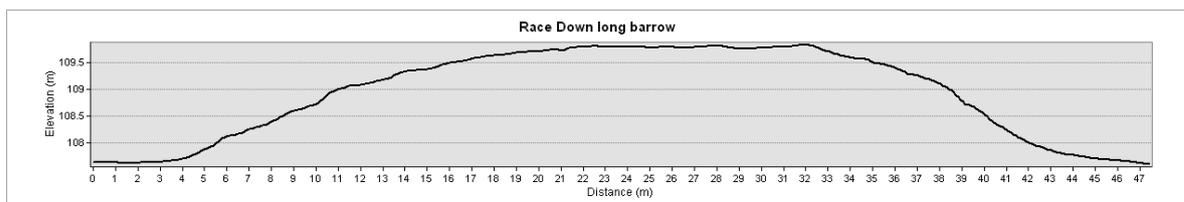


Figure 7: Longitudinal profile of long barrow (NE to SW).

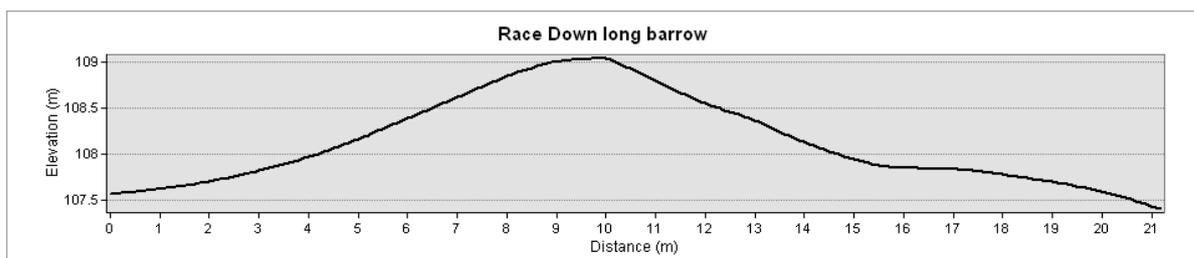


Figure 8: Cross-section profile across long barrow (NW end, W to E).

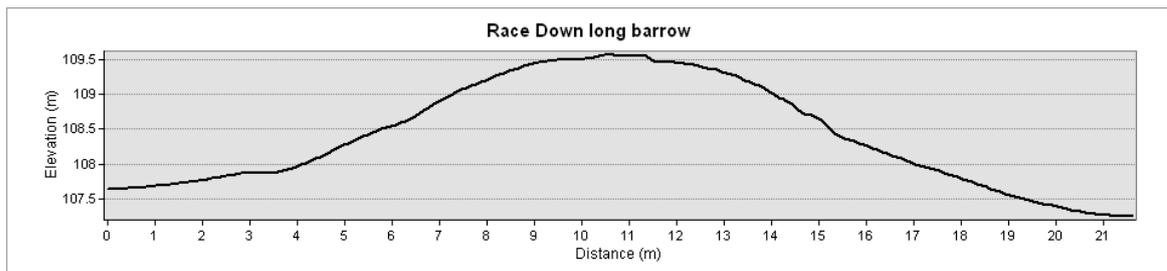


Figure 9: Cross section profile across long barrow (SE end, W to E).

Race Down is one of thirty-six long barrows collectively known as the Cranborne Chase group which stretches for approximately 20 miles across the chalk upland of Dorset and Wiltshire (Ashbee 1984, 9). This group of long barrows is peculiar as within it the dominant barrow orientation is north-west / south-east, whereas of the other long barrows found in Britain, more than four-fifths are orientated east-west (or within 45° of this). Race Down long barrow, situated at the south-western end of the Cranborne Chase group, fits this anomalous pattern, possibly the result of the barrow being located on the interfluvial ridge between the Tarrant and Stour river valleys.

In its wider landscape context, Race Down long barrow is situated towards the south-eastern end of a chalk ridge that runs for approximately 8 km inland between the River Stour and River Tarrant. The ground surface drops away immediately to the east of the long barrow (on about the 108m contour line) with the barrow orientated parallel with this break of slope. It is unclear from the survey if this is a localised change in height, but evidence from Ordnance Survey contour data indicates that the barrow is located where there is a general topographic change from the ridge top to the valley side. Gale (2003, 34-35) has noted the vast majority of long barrows are found on, or slightly to one side of, ridges allowing them to dominate the landscape and be seen from long distances away. Woodward (2000, 138-139) has studied the landscape positions of long barrows on the South Dorset Ridgway, and has suggested that varying angles of inter-visibility between different long barrows and other contemporary monuments could have played an important role in the siting and ceremonial use of the monuments. Further analysis of the barrow's relationship with the natural topographic and other contemporary monuments is outside the scope of this paper, but may provide useful insights as part of a future research project.

Skeletal analysis and dating

The skeletal remains were analysed by Dr Patricia Phurphy. Approximately 50% of the skeleton was present within the burial context with much of the left side of the remains missing (with the exception of the left hand and the distal radius). The majority of the remains suffered post-mortem damage in the form of breaks and loss of bone around the right knee and foot which appears to be as a result of animal activity.

Skeletal analysis indicated that one individual was represented within the burial, aged between 10-11 years at time of death. Estimating the sex of the individual was not possible as the dimorphism between males and females occurs around the time of puberty and this individual has not yet reached that stage of development.

There was no indication from the bones recovered of the cause or manner of death, and there is no indication of pathology or disease. Trauma was, however, noted on the first metacarpal of the right hand in the form of an ante-mortem fracture. A 2cm region of new bone growth and callus formation was seen on the midshaft of the metacarpal, consistent with healing (Roberts and Manchester 2001) causing the bone to look slightly swollen on the lateral section when compared with the left metacarpal. The fracture may have occurred as a result of direct force to the specific location of the hand, a fall, or an underlying pathology which weakened the bone making it more susceptible to fractures (Ortner 2003).

A sample of clavicle was submitted for C14 dating by Rafter GNS Science, New Zealand, using an Accelerator Mass Spectrometer. The result, 1511 ±20 BP, (NZA-32571) calibrates to cal AD 440-610 at the 95% confidence limit (2 σ), and cal AD 530-610 at the 90% confidence limit. The result was calibrated using the curve of Reimer et al. (2004) used in OxCal v4.05 (Bronk Ramsey 1995; 2001). The calibrated date range cited in the text is that for 95% confidence and is rounded outwards to the nearest 10 years following the form recommended by Mook (1986). The ranges given are derived from the probability method (Stuiver & Reimer, 1993). The radiocarbon probability distribution clearly shows the result is more likely to be the second half of the sixth century AD.

Discussion

The radiocarbon date of the skeleton and the possible association with an iron knife indicate that the inhumation was an Anglo-Saxon (early medieval) secondary insertion into the earlier, neolithic, long barrow. There was no evidence that the grave had been opened before and it is therefore unlikely that the inhumation is the one discovered by Austen in 1840 (Grinsell 1959, 81). As such, it appears that the long barrow has at least two intrusive inhumations.

The west / east orientation of the grave and the supine position of the skeleton are typical of Anglo-Saxon burial practice, and knives are near-ubiquitous items in 'Anglo-Saxon' furnished

graves of all periods (Lucy, 2000, 58). The poor preservation of the knife is unfortunate as no comments can be made on its typology.

The re-use of neolithic monuments is rare, with only thirteen examples known in the country (Lucy 2000, 126), three of which occur in Dorset (Grinsell 1959 & 1982). A close parallel exists with the neolithic bank barrow at Maiden Castle, from which Tess and Mortimer Wheeler exhumed a skeleton tentatively dated to the late 6th century (Wheeler 1948, 78-79). In both the Race Down and Maiden Castle cases, the skeletons were buried in shallow graves, with the head to the west. The burial at Maiden Castle was accompanied by a seax (or long knife), also located adjacent to the thigh. A second skeleton recovered from the Maiden Castle bank barrow, initially thought to date from the neolithic, but radiocarbon dated to 1345 +/- 80 BP (c. AD 635), was also excavated by the Wheelers (Wheeler 1948, 78-79). This skeleton, which was male, 1.63m tall and aged between 25 and 35 at death had evidence of extreme trauma on the head, face, right arm and lower body. Brothwell (1971, 240) suggested that these wounds either caused the individual's death, or were inflicted immediately post-mortem, and were perhaps the result of superstitions about the dead and fear of the supernatural. No evidence of trauma was identified on the skeleton recovered from Race Down so further inferences cannot be made about the death or burial rite of this particular individual.

More common is the re-use of Bronze Age barrows for Anglo-Saxon burials and Lucy (2000, 126) calculates a total of 140 examples nationwide. Three kilometres to the east of Race Down, on the other side of the River Tarrant, excavation of a number of round barrows on Launceston Down revealed the presence of seven 'Anglo-Saxon' burials, these being identified as belonging to a distinct group of burial sites within north-east Dorset dating to the sixth and seventh centuries (Piggott and Piggott, 1944, 47-80; Green *et. al.*, 1983, 57; Eagles, 2004). Green *et. al.* (1982) viewed the burials on Launceston Down as family groupings, and if the skeleton recorded by JH Austen (Grinsell 1959, 81) at Race Down is assumed to be a secondary intrusive burial, taken together the two may be interpreted as being part of a family group.

Evison (1968) has argued that these burial sites, together with others found at Bokerley Dyke and Woodyates, represent the western limit of the group of pagan Saxons centred in the Avon Valley and Salisbury area. Eagles (2004) has suggested that the evidence now points to an Anglo-Saxon (early medieval) 'bite' into former Durotrigian lands west and south west of Bokerley Dyke that occurred during the sixth century, penetrating along both Ackling Dyke and the River Stour. The late sixth century date and location of the Race Down burial on the interfluvial ridge between the Stour and Tarrant rivers probably makes it part of this hypothesised intrusion and associated burial culture.

The re-use of prehistoric earthworks for early medieval inhumations is characterised by two different themes. Smith and Brickley (2009) suggest that structures such as long and round barrows were regarded as fearful or otherworldly places and where the socially excluded might be placed. As such, they may have been used for the burial of execution victims, such as the skeleton recovered from Maiden Castle (Brothwell, 1971, 240). Reynolds has noted that two thirds of known execution sites of the early medieval period are associated with prehistoric or post-Roman barrows, the remainder being located upon linear earthworks (1999, 108). All excavated sites appear to have been positioned on boundaries, presumably reflecting the desire to banish outcasts to the geographical limit of a specific territory, in places, such as prehistoric barrows, that afforded a commanding view within sight of important road or river (Reynolds 1999, 109). Williams (1997; 1998) has argued that the practice of placing burials in existing earthworks is a way legitimising an immigrant community's ancestral links to the distant past, and Bonney (1976) has suggested that pagan Anglo-Saxon burials occur on, or near to, boundaries of estates or parishes possibly in the hope of causing such boundaries to receive protection by the spirits of the dead.

The skeletal remains recovered from Race Down long barrow appear to be an early medieval interment probably dating from the second half of the sixth century. These types of interments are rare in neolithic monuments, with few other scientifically dated examples known. Further work may involve the commissioning of a project to scientifically date other secondary interments recovered from prehistoric monuments to determine when they were buried and to try and to further our understanding of this burial practice.

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