

## **The New Forest's Prehistoric Past: Excavating a Bronze Age Monument on the Beaulieu Estate** *by Hilde van der Heul* held on 13<sup>th</sup> April 2021

Hilde took over her current role as community archaeologist with New Forest National Park Authority (NFNPA) once the excavation had ended, after some three years' experience in commercial archaeology. She was most involved in the post-excavation phase, information sharing and outreach work connected to the project. The excavation was part of the Heritage Lottery funded project **"Our Past, Our Future"** in the New Forest National Park, a five year project now about to end, which aimed to identify and conserve archaeological sites, provide training for local groups and volunteers, and share information with members.

Prior to the excavation, an extensive LiDAR survey of the New Forest had been carried out, followed by 'ground-truthing' walkovers to confirm previously unknown archaeological features. Other projects undertaken as community excavations and volunteer training include work at Buckland Rings, Bucklers Hard and 'Dig Burley'; and a graveyard survey was carried out using the photographic technique of Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI), enabling many inscriptions to be deciphered and recorded online. Information and results on these projects can be found on the **New Forest Knowledge** website.

**Definitions:** a Ring Ditch is a cut ditch of circular or penannular (with a gap) plan, frequently identified through aerial photography as cropmarks, interpreted as ploughed out remains of a round barrow where the barrow mound has disappeared, leaving only the ditch infill. A Round Barrow describes a circular mound made up of soil and/or bedrock heaped over a central burial – either inhumation or cremation. Secondary burials are often added, sometimes centuries later.

The site on Beaulieu Estate was identified as a round barrow on an aerial photo of 1999. It was situated on the edge of a temporary WW2 airstrip, located in a rich archaeological landscape which includes a Roman temple. A geophysical survey was undertaken with Bournemouth University, which confirmed the presence of industrial sites and World War 2 archaeology.



*Bournemouth University students and volunteers at work on the later ring ditch.*

*Photo: Bournemouth University*

A planned excavation took place in 2018, following geophysical survey which revealed the ring ditch with a dark area in the centre, thought to be a burial or grave goods. Preliminary investigation confirmed prehistoric activity and revealed two separate ring ditches, both early Bronze Age but different phases. It was thought the first phase was a continuous ring ditch from ~2100BC, incorporating Mesolithic material from around 5700BC. The second phase, from ~2000BC was revealed as a larger and deeper ditch with an entrance gap. The ring ditch was recut several times over more than 150 years. It contained a small cluster of middle Bronze Age burial urns but no evidence of a central burial within the geophysical anomaly.

Excavation continued in 2019 when another cremation urn was discovered. A post-medieval lane runs across the middle of the ring ditch which had disturbed the prehistoric archaeology. Its presence could indicate either that no central burial existed, or that any burial may have been removed earlier. Three cremation urns were taken for investigation and two left *in situ*. The urns were CT scanned at Salisbury Hospital and a micro-excavation was undertaken. Only two of the three included cremated bone, possibly since the site had been disturbed by ploughing. One of the urns contained the remains of an individual child, while the other contained cremated bones of a female and a young child. Within the urn were the remains of two pots which had disintegrated and the bone fragments had become mixed.

In the base of the earlier ditch Mesolithic materials were discovered, including fragments of hazelnut shells carbon dated to 5700 BC, together with two later Mesolithic blades, also including an early Bronze Age knife. This residual material probably remained from an early campsite, and its presence generated a great deal of press coverage and speculation. The ring ditch fell out of use and gradually filled in, becoming part of the agricultural landscape. There was no evidence of an internal mound, and the gap in the second ditch may suggest later use of the site perhaps as a meeting place: the site may have changed in use over time but it continued open for many generations.

### **What's next for the New Forest?**

The excavated cremation urns will be reburied in their original locations, probably during summer 2021, and the area will become a scheduled monument. It is planned to carry out vegetation clearance on other possible barrow sites as root systems may damage the archaeology, and this would make them less 'at-risk'. There are over 400 barrows/ring ditches known in the New Forest to date. Geophysical surveys will be undertaken across the New Forest through the LoCATE project, where landowner permission is obtained. Aerial photos indicate the presence of Iron Age enclosures and further ring ditches. Any work must be undertaken after the bird nesting season ends probably from September, but groups may be restricted to six people due to Covid regulations. If you wish to volunteer please contact [archaeology@newforest.org.uk](mailto:archaeology@newforest.org.uk).

**Questions:**

*An audience member asked whether the gaps in the ring ditches were orientated in a certain way, but Hilde advised that comparison with others throughout the New Forest show they are not uniform.*

*Another questioner asked whether barrows/ring ditches are found in clusters or are they widespread throughout the New Forest. Hilde advised that some clusters are known such as four barrows in Franchises Wood, and clusters on Beaulieu Heath and other places. Peggy Piggott apparently excavated many barrows during WW2 prior to airstrip construction, and records are available regarding distribution, which include ten barrows in the area of Beaulieu aerodrome.*

*Professor Tony King said he has investigated the distribution of barrows and ring ditches in the southern coastal fringe of the New Forest, and a report will be published in Hampshire Field Club newsletter later in the year. Another participant advised that he has marked up barrows which were destroyed at the aerodrome and there looks to be a linear distribution across the two heaths, which could form a routeway.*

The lecture was well attended with 47 devices registered, a large number of whom were not members of SAS, who were invited as this was the last lecture of the 2020/21 season.

Many thanks to Mandy Kesby for her detailed notes on the lecture.