

From the *Transactions* of the  
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

## **Belas Knap Long Barrow. Report**

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1930, Vol. 52, 295-299

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BELAS KNAP LONG BARROW,  
GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Report on the work carried out during the winter 1930-31

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THE urgent measures taken to secure the dangerous parts of Belas Knap have already been described\* by Mr W. J. Hemp, F.S.A., under whose supervision they were carried out. In 1928 the general work of preservation, which had been begun at the same time, was suspended until the excavation of the monument should have been completed. The state of the structure uncovered during this investigation showed what further measures would be needed to remedy the decay of the preceding sixty years, while the light thrown on the history and plan of the barrow dictated the lines on which these should be carried out. It was therefore decided to include Belas Knap in the Increased Employment Programme of 1930-31. The work was begun in September 1930 and continued throughout the following seven months. During the first four weeks it was carried on concurrently with the excavations, so that the continuous supervision of Sir James Berry was available during the removal of the accumulated debris covering the original work. I should like to express my thanks to Sir James Berry both for this supervision and for much advice and assistance during the treatment of the barrow. Our debt to the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society and to all who assisted in the excavations is also heavy, as their work provided the essential information which

\* *Trans. B.G.A.S.* LI, 261-72.

enabled Belas Knap to be permanently preserved and kept open as an example of this class of prehistoric monument, and this opportunity is taken to record our gratitude.

The main stages in the history of Belas Knap may be shortly summarized. As completed the barrow consisted of an elongated mound covering the burial-chambers. The sides of this mound were formed by a battering wall of small slates (the revetment) and the surface was probably covered with a sloping roof of flat slabs. The gradual decay of the structure displaced this roof and allowed the weather to attack the core of the mound, which began to slip. The consequent pressure destroyed the upper part of the revetment, which, together with the displaced core, fell outwards, disguising the plan of the barrow. The irregular surface of the stones thus exposed to the action of frost and rain disintegrated, forming a layer of 'oolite gravel'. The discovery of Iron Age pottery under this fallen debris suggests that the decay was not far advanced at that period, while the presence of Roman coins under the 'oolite gravel' shows that that layer had not assumed its present compact form in the 3rd century A.D. This gradual decay of the structure determined the general appearance of the barrow prior to 1863, although the collapse of the chambers and the ploughing of the adjacent fields must have contributed to its disfigurement. In 1863-5 the site was examined. The chambers were cleared and left open, the dry walling forming the sides of the entrance passages being rebuilt on the old lines. (Chamber E probably forms an exception as the existing reconstruction does not tally with the description of the original discovery). Except for two short stretches the whole of the revetment was exposed by means of a narrow trench (the 20-inch trench). This was left open and allowed to silt up, as were the large holes dug into the main body of the mound.

The principal objects of the work undertaken during

the past winter were the preservation of the existing remains and the restoration of the outlines of the barrow. The methods employed may be described under three headings: the chambers, the revetment and the restoration of the mound.

Chambers C and D are formed of large megalithic slabs of oolite set on edge. The space between these was originally filled with dry-walling, which supported the roof. As the slabs would not stand exposure to the weather the chambers had to be covered. The new roofs are constructed of reinforced concrete and are supported on independent walls carried down to ground level at the back of the megaliths. In chamber C the stones at the back of the southern and western slabs had already been removed. The lower courses of the core, which remained in situ behind the northern side, consisted of large blocks sloping away from the chamber. The highest point to which these reached was considerably below the top of the megalith and it was not found possible to retain them in position. On the south side of chamber D the backing of dry-built masonry rises above the top of the slabs. The new retaining wall is bridged over, tying the original work into position, and showing the remains of the corbeling which supported the roof. The area behind the north and east sides of this chamber had been cleared during the 19th century, at which time the missing slab on the left side of the entrance was replaced with dry walling. This, and the reconstructed sides of the two entrances, have been secured and retained. The only original backing behind the megaliths forming chamber B was a small patch on the south side, which has not been disturbed. Elsewhere the independent wall supporting the new roof is carried down to ground-level. The 19th century dry-walling surmounting the sides has been left in position. The modern walls and the underside of the roofs can only be seen from inside the chambers. They are constructed of roughly hewn blocks of local

stone laid with mortar, and cannot be confused with the thin slates used by the original builders. The southern end of the mound is too low to allow chamber E to be roofed and this has been left as a shallow depression with the turfed surface of the mound folded down on to the top of the walls.

Except for a space of thirty-six feet on the west and about six feet on the opposite side the whole of the revetment was exposed in the 19th century. In many places, especially where the body of the mound had been disturbed, the dry masonry was forced outwards and overhanging. In these cases it was necessary to re-bed the revetment and to insert a hidden retaining wall to take the thrust of the mound, but where the connexion between the core and its outer face remained intact it has not been disturbed. The whole of the eastern side has been cleared but the undisturbed space on the west is preserved for future students. The revetment, which had been forced outwards, has been re-set with a vertical face, as any attempt to have restored the original batter would have been purely conjectural. Above the existing remains the sides of the barrow are carried up as a steep bank of turf, the only re-constructed dry-walling being that at the entrance to the chambers and beside the false portal, where it was necessary to secure the lintel-stone.

The contour of the mound is restored in accordance with the outline suggested by the surface of those parts which were not disturbed during the 19th century. These reproduce the appearance which the barrow assumed after the partial collapse of the revetment, but an examination of the sections across the best preserved parts of the barrow shows that this collapse had not seriously affected the outline of the higher parts of the mound. At the southern end, where the damage was more severe, it is probable that the restored contour is too low. The uncovering of the revetment wall was necessary to appreciate the original plan, and the fact

that this area had already been disturbed removed the archaeological objection to the work. The re-opening of the 20-inch trench has left the base of the original side walls of the monument at the bottom of a small ditch. Once the meaning of these strata had been established it might have seemed more logical to remove the fallen material forming the outer bank of this ditch, and fully to expose the original plan of the barrow. But this course would have involved the clearance of a large amount of material which had been undisturbed since the Roman period or even earlier, and would effectively have prevented any future attempt to confirm the conclusions reached in the recent excavations. It therefore seemed preferable to risk the possible misconception which the retention of this material might cause and only to re-open those areas which had been exposed during the 19th century.