

BARROW C. ROUND BARROW CEMETERY AT HOLDEN FIRS, MORTIMER, BERKSHIRE.

DAMAGE ASSESMENT



OXFORD ARCHAEOLOGICAL UNIT



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Introduction

In August 1992 a damage assessment and reinstatement were carried out by the Oxford Archaeological Unit (OAU) on behalf of Berkshire County Council who were acting for English Heritage. A robber shaft had been dug into a scheduled Bronze Age round barrow at the Round Barrow Cemetery at Holden Firs (Scheduled Ancient Monument 12073, Barrow C, Berkshire SMR no. 1020), in Mortimer, Berkshire. Grid reference SU 64386496.

Method

The sides of the robber shaft were cleaned and the section drawn, the location of the shaft was planned and levels taken to locate the trench in relation to other surveys. Soil micromorphological samples were taken in order to determine whether the trench had revealed either the original ground surface or old turf layers within the mound which might indicate episodic barrow construction.

Results

Finds

No cultural evidence was recovered.

Archaeology

The cleaned sections of the shaft revealed a possible old ground surface, layers of the barrow construction, an old shaft dug into the barrow, tree disturbances from the present tree plantation and a recent make-up layer to restore the profile of the barrow mound.

The open shaft was 2.10 m long NW-SE and c. 1 m wide and was situated in the centre of the mound (fig.1). It penetrated the barrow to a depth of 2.10 m (see section fig.2). Context number 1 was given to the monument as a whole. The top layer (3) was a modern turf and topsoil layer up to 0.40 m thick. This overlay a tree disturbance (5) on the SW side of the shaft and a large cut (19) on the other two faces of the section. Cut 19 was approximately the same profile as the open robber shaft and cut into the supposed original ground surface (13). The fills of cut 19 were very homogenous; 16 was similar to layer 3 but with 30% gravel and 17 was a mid grey sandy silt loam with 20% gravel. Under these two recent disturbances were layers of compact dark grey gravelly silt loam (4 and 7) alternating with compact grey silty loam (6 and 8). Underneath 8 was a compact very dark grey silty clay loam with suggestions of laminations (9). This overlaid a compact light grey silt loam with frequent white mottles (10). These two soils

were repeated in layers 11 and 14. Under layer 14 was a friable grey silt loam with 40% gravel (12) which was up to 0.35 m thick and similar to layer 15 but this was unclear in the confines of the trench. This overlay a compact laminated white/grey clay (13) which was the supposed old ground surface.

Comments on the results

Reliability of field investigation

The size of the shaft restricted any definite interpretation of the deposits but it was still clear that the construction of the mound was visible as was a large pit or shaft dug into the mound on almost the same alignment as the open shaft. The samples taken for thin section analysis should determine whether the layers of dark material are in fact turf layers or dumped topsoil. The distinction between these two possibilities was indiscernible within the confines of the shaft.

Overall Interpretation

The archaeological deposits within the open shaft were disturbed. Whether this was by a recent or 19th century shaft was unclear. The presence of an old shaft which almost entirely occupied the void of the open shaft means that the recent destruction of the barrow mound, by the open shaft, was limited as the archaeological deposits had already been disturbed. The top of the mound had been eroded and this may have included a depression left by the earlier robber shaft.

The presence of a supposed old ground surface (13) at a depth of around two metres from the top surface of the barrow is interesting as the ground surface immediately outside the ditch is around 0.4 m lower than the supposed ground surface under the barrow (see levels on Fig. 1). This may indicate that the surface around the barrow has been eroded although whether this is due to ploughing or weather erosion is uncertain.

The two layers of turf-like material (10 and 11) may indicate that the construction of the barrow was episodic or that the upcast material from the ditch and the covering turves were deposited sequentially by work-gangs as different portions of the ditch were excavated. The soil samples taken for micromorphological analysis may be able to differentiate between the two types of deposit.

The gravelly layer (12 which may be the same as 15) might represent the upcast from the ditch to form the mound and it is interesting that it was very different to the overlying layers which were much less gravelly. This may imply that the mound had different phases of construction and was not built entirely of gravelly material from the ditch but perhaps from turves cut from the surrounding area, which may be one cause of the drop in ground level, or that the ditch was allowed to silt up and the silt was cleaned out to provide more mound material.

OAU

August 1992

Barrow C

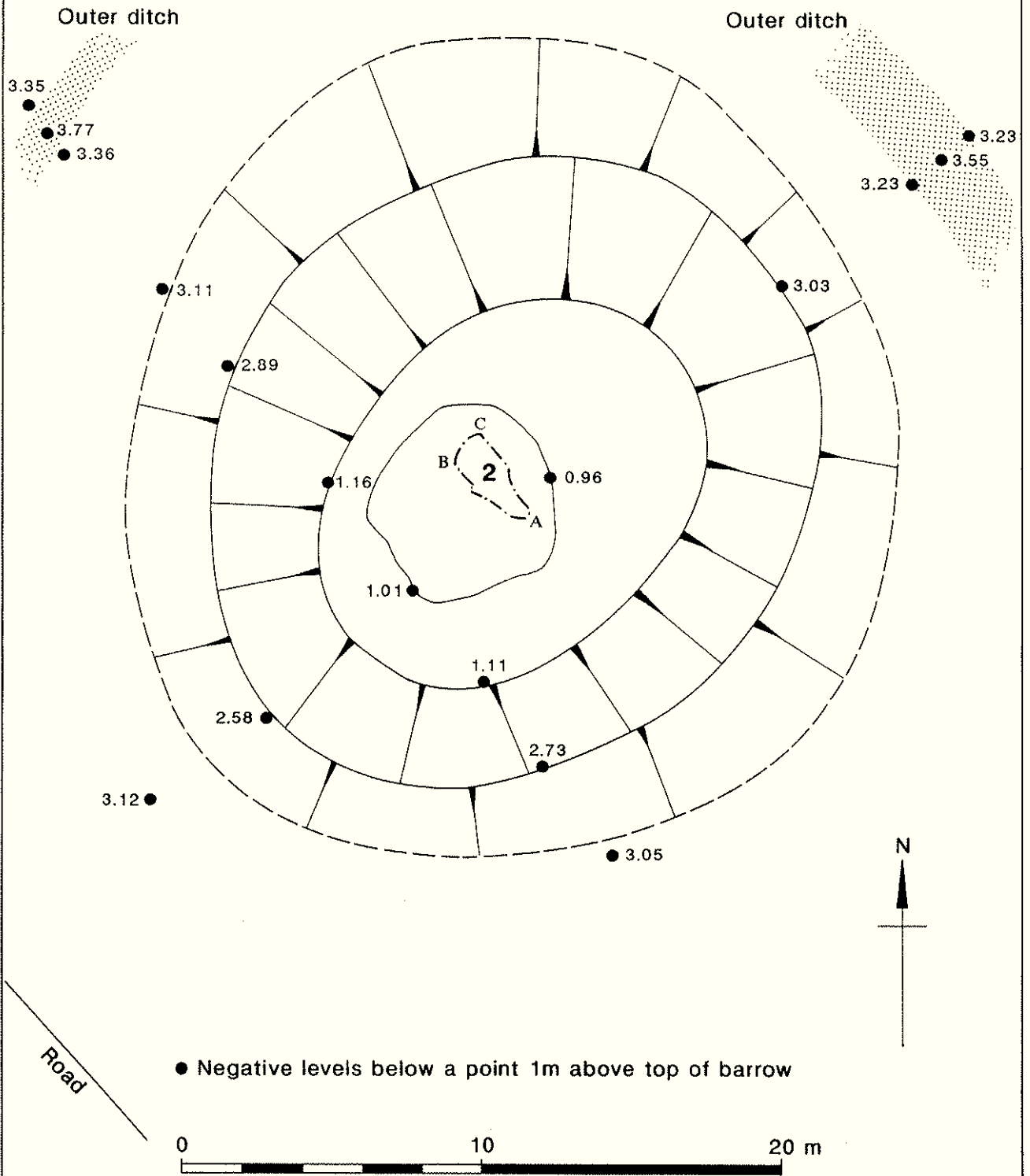


Fig. 1

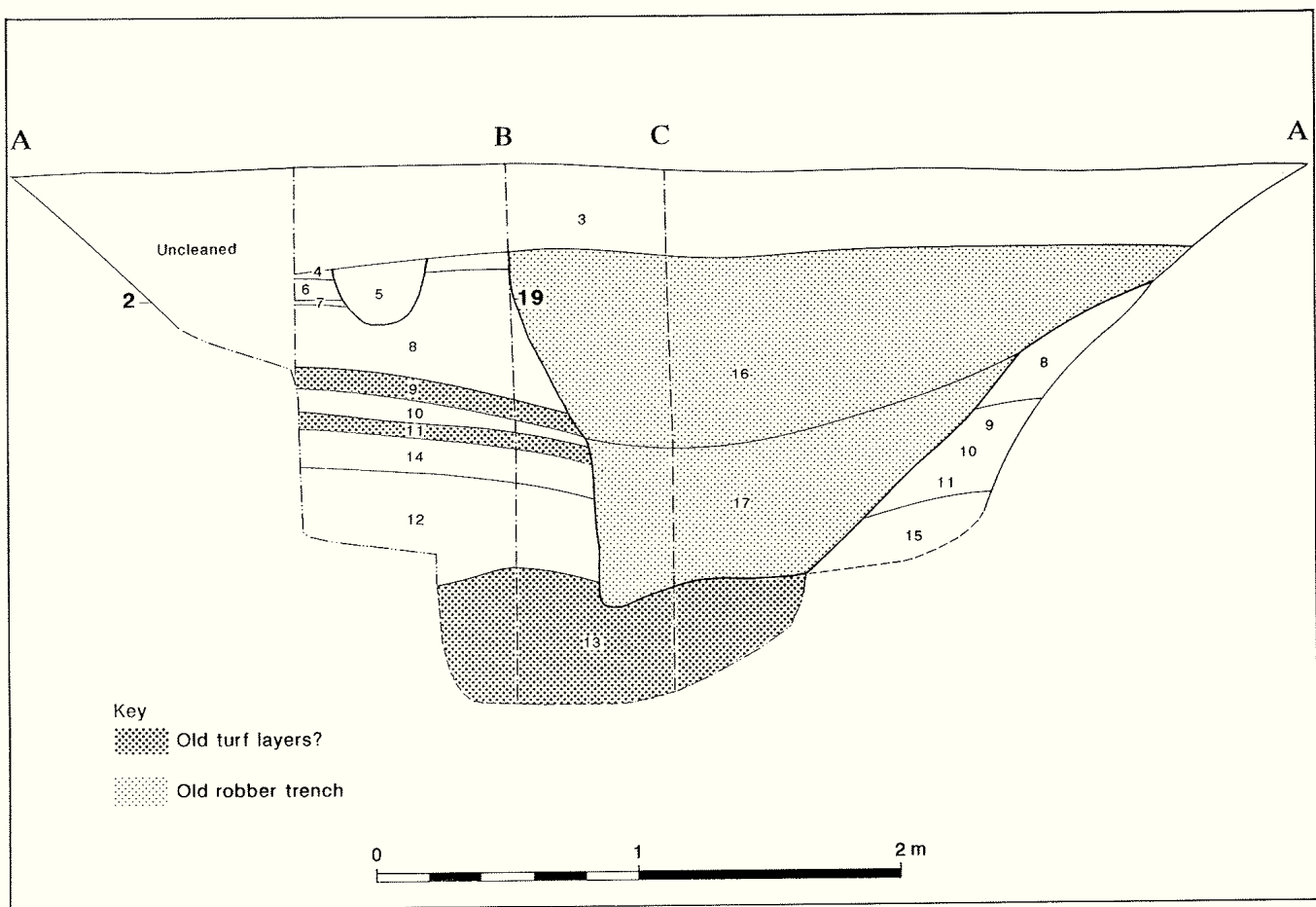


Fig. 2



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