

CONFESSIONS OF A MODERN DAY BARROW DIGGER

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My interest in archaeology was first kindled in the early 1960s when, as a comparatively young history teacher working in Chesterfield, I came across a book written in 1847 called *Vestiges of the Antiquities of Derbyshire*. It was written by one Thomas Bateman (see *Treasure Hunting* February 2000 issue), a country squire from Middleton-by-Youlgrave, and described his widespread digging among the burial mounds of my native county.

This work stimulated me to learn more about the Prehistoric period in Britain and Derbyshire, and in due course I read his follow-up volume *Ten Years' Diggings in the Counties of Derby, Stafford and York*, published in 1861, the year of Bateman's early death. I learned that Bateman and his confederates had dug some 400 tumuli between 1843 and 1860, and that Bateman's score alone amounted to some 200 barrows.

My first task was to visit and examine the many burial cairns scattered across the county. Many examples still survive on the western limestone plateau, where intensive cereal farming has been long absent, and on the grit

stone moors to the north. Other barrow groups on the River Trent gravels to the south have in general been obliterated by centuries of ploughing, and only exist as crop marks when viewed from the air. Following the lead of other investigators I decided that my prime undertaking was to complete an inventory of all the burial mounds I could locate in Derbyshire, something never attempted before, and over a number of summers I set off in my car armed with a selection of 2.5 inch Ordnance Survey maps covering the areas in question. I tramped many miles in search of tumuli, discovering many not marked on any maps and gradually assembling a schedule of many hundreds, which I listed by parishes and pinpointed by eight figure OS references. I also included full measurements, details of any excavations and excavators, with dates, and added all the published references I could find. The completed work, entitled *The Burial Mounds of Derbyshire*, was first published by myself in 1977, with updated versions as more information came to hand; some 750 copies of this gazetteer have so far been sold.

I discovered that Derbyshire had

been an important settlement area in the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age periods, though small groups of humans had lived in the county as long as 50,000 years ago, the earliest being Neanderthals who had occupied the Creswell Crags cave systems in the north-east of the county during the last Ice Age. My amateur curiosity became focussed on barrows; having completed my inventory of them I began to think of the next stage, the excavation of a few selected examples. In the main the tumuli of the county were constructed over two periods, the Neolithic and Early Bronze Ages (4500-1500 BC), though there are a few much later Anglian examples.

Neolithic mounds are generally larger than the later round ones, and consist of two types, earthen long barrows and the slightly later megalithic chambered cairns, and both these types date to the 4th and 3rd millenniums BC. They both boasted chambers, accessible via passages, where the bones of their important dead could be stored. They are best regarded as houses for the dead, the focus of ceremonies for the groups who built them, and places where remains could be removed from the tombs for ritual purposes, as well as being deposited there. The earthen types had burial chambers of wood, whilst those in the megalithic tombs were constructed of stone. Both types had entrance passages, but most of these early sepulchres had been badly damaged by stone robbers seeking material for walls during the enclosures of the 18th and 19th centuries, and the chambers had largely been looted of their contents. Only one example of each type has so far been found intact, an earthen long barrow near Creswell excavated in 1988-89, and an undisturbed chamber discovered at Long Low, near Wetton in Staffordshire, opened by Bateman's proxy digger in the county, schoolmaster Samuel Carrington, in 1849. Both contained the collective remains of some 15 persons, of both sexes and all



Fig.1. The author at work 1967.

ages; several skulls were missing, and all the crania found were of the long-headed (dolichocephalic) form invariably found in Neolithic tombs and indicating a racial type common across Europe. Grave goods are rare in these structures and usually consist of crude round-bottomed pots, and leaf-shaped flint arrowheads.

Derbyshire's Bronze Age cairns are far more numerous than the dozen or so Neolithic mounds so far located. These tumuli were introduced between 2500 and 1500 BC and the burial rite in these mounds is usually single interment crouched up in a rock cut grave or a cist (pronounced "kist"), a box of stone slabs usually covered by a capstone. These burials usually boasted round (brachycephalic) craniums, again indicating a separate racial type, perhaps Bronze Age traders, ore prospectors or settlers, entering Britain during the 2nd millennium B.C. It is now known that in the Derbyshire Peak these burial sites originated as circles of large stones (kerbs) defining a central sacred area in which important bodies, accompanied by grave goods, sometimes including valuable and state-of-the-art copper and bronze artefacts, plus pottery were interred from time to time. This pottery included the newfangled beakers, introduced from abroad, superbly decorated globose vessels filled with mead for the journey to the afterlife, or food vessels, squat pots believed to have contained food, and most commonly found in Derbyshire and East Yorkshire.

In other, more fertile parts of Britain, the kerb was replaced by a ditch, and the hallowed nature of the centre often reinforced by a circle of wooden stakes to warn passers-by of the holy nature of the monument. Burials of both sexes, and sometimes children, were interred from time to time, usually in separate graves, and the last rite was the heaping up of a large mound over the site, bounded by the earlier kerb. Sometimes the tumulus was dug into by later Bronze Age settlers who deposited their own remains, usually cremations either in urns or skin bags, into the no-doubt venerated stone heaps. These tumuli were usually, but not always, placed on high ground where the white limestone cairns could be seen from a considerable distance, and would represent a constant reminder of the tribal ancestors.

On the north-east moors of Derbyshire later groups of cairns are found, the sepulchres of Bronze Age groups who moved from the tribal heartlands.

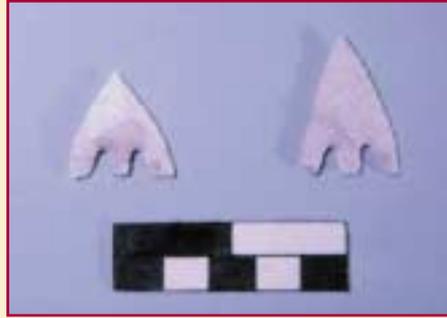


Fig.2. The two superb white flint barbed-and-tanged arrowheads found in Bateman's infill in the Green Low grave pit.

This was perhaps as the result of a population growth, which led them to cultivate the less fertile borderlands. Their method of interment was cremation, which gradually ousted inhumation as the preferred form of disposal of the dead. Cremated remains, in urns or organic containers, needed less space than inhumed ones, hence mounds became smaller and were concentrated in large cairn fields spread across the uplands; Stanton Moor, with its 70 plus tumuli is the best example of a later Bronze Age burial complex, and excavations there have again shown that the barrows contain numbers of cremated bodies. These barrow groups are connected with small stone circles and earth rings, places where rituals were performed, and replaced the massive, earlier banked and ditched henges with interior stone rings such as Arbor Low near Youlgrave, the Bull Ring at Dove Holes, or the massive circle called the Nine Stones at Harthill.

Having decided to conduct the archaeological excavation of at least one Derbyshire burial cairn, I felt that the best way to introduce myself into a difficult and skilful occupation was to re-excavate a previously dug mound. On Alsop Moor I had relocated one of Bateman's sites, a diminutive pile called Green Low. Here a mere afternoon's work on 25 April 1845 had uncovered a male skeleton laid in a

crouched position in a rock grave (perhaps imitating the foetal position symbolising rebirth), together with an infant, and a fine series of grave goods which would be needed by the occupant in afterlife. These included a superbly fashioned beaker, doubtless once filled with mead, and a weapon kit consisting of a flint dagger, three fine barbed-and-tanged arrows in white flint, seven other flints, three bone "spatulae" and a bone pin. The organic quiver for the arrows, and the accompanying bow, had disappeared although the lengths of bone from the grave may have been the only survivals of a composite version of the latter made of bone and wood.

Bateman drew attention to the similarity between this burial and one in Wiltshire, excavated by Sir Richard Colt Hoare (see **Treasure Hunting** May 2000 issue) and located in the pages of his monumental **Ancient Wiltshire**. Incidentally the prenomem "low" applied to so many Derbyshire and Staffordshire tumuli is derived from the Anglian "hlaew" meaning a burial mound.

I was given permission to excavate the tumulus by the owner, and approached the task with some degree of excitement. The mound, which had been sited in a locality of great scenic beauty, looking over Dovedale to the west, measured 40ft across and stood just over 3ft high. It was dug over the summer of 1963 with assistance from students of a teacher training college not far distant. I found that the cairn had been raised over a rise in the limestone bedrock into which a rock pit had been cut. Proof of the rather slack standards of Bateman's operations was provided by the unearthing of two superb barbed-and-tanged arrowheads of white flint (Fig.2.), overlooked by the opening party, which brought the number of arrows deposited with the body to five. The arrowheads were a good



Fig.3. The pile of discarded bones left by Bateman in the grave after his removal of the skull and long bones.

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match to the original three, and all had been specially produced, like the beaker and flint dagger, for the burial; they were far too good to have been used in the hunt. In one corner of the grave pit was a pile of human bones discarded by the 'Barrow-Knight' (Fig.3.). He generally removed the skulls and long bones from the interments, the latter to enable him to calculate the height of the individual. Only perfect skeletons were completely removed and rearticulated for the museum at his home, Lomberdale House, and these are rare. Bones generally survive well on the limestone, but are often crushed by the weight of super incumbent earth. Skulls with their sides laid on the bedrock often have the part in contact with the ground decayed away.

One great disappointment was our failure to locate the lead tablet often placed by Bateman in the barrows he dug. His friend and fellow opener the Rev. Stephen Isaacson wrote of the ritual in his *Barrow-Digging* by a Barrow-Knight, based on the squire's activities:-

*A leaden label we enclose
In pity to such late man,
Where one and all may read, who choose,
Inscribed the name T.BATEMAN.*

These small mementoes, copying those left by Hoare and Cunnington, were deposited to warn later diggers that Bateman had been there before them. Earlier in 1963 a local antiquary, Major Thomas A. Harris, then in his eighties and a longstanding digger of Prehistoric sites in Derbyshire, presented me with one of Bateman's

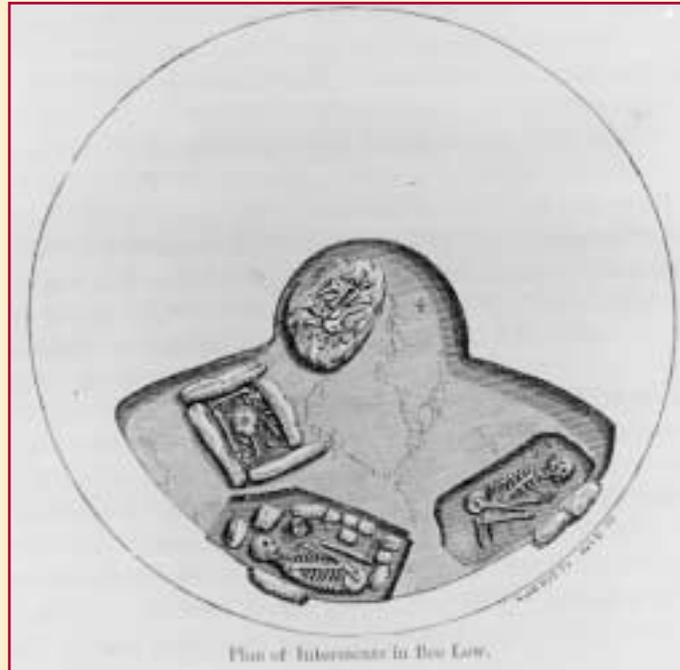


Fig.4. Bateman's plan of Bee Low shows the interments uncovered by him in 1843 and 1851. They included a de-fleshed skeleton in a stone cist, and a beaker burial in a rock grave. The size of the cairn is shown on far too small a scale.

"leaden labels" found by him in a cairn near Longstone. I noticed that the lead slip, imprinted "T.BATEMEN" spelt the squire's name incorrectly, and duly found that all nine examples so far recovered had been incised with the same stamp.

Believing with Pitt Rivers that "A discovery only dates from the time of the record of it" I wrote a paper on the Green Low dig, which was duly published in the *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal*. The following year I carried out an excavation on an unnamed cairn in the corner of a field on the north side of Lathkill Dale, at Haddon Grove. Measuring 50ft across and 2ft high, it

appeared undisturbed. However, the opening produced much evidence of disturbance. A stone kerb was located, but the only finds were a scattered primary skeleton, of which I was able to reconstruct the skull, and fragments of an urn cremation. There were traces of a pre-barrow occupation site beneath the cairn, which produced a series of flints, including scrapers, knives and flakes. The results of the dig were likewise communicated to the county archaeological journal.

My searches for another cairn to excavate led me to Bee Low, sited in a plantation near Youlgrave. I was particularly interested in this low, a conspicuous mound 40ft across and 5ft high, as it was the very first barrow opened by Bateman in 1843. He returned to the mound in 1851, unearthing a most interesting series of burials including one interred as a collection of de-fleshed bones in a cist, a nearby beaker-accompanied crouched skeleton in a rock grave, plus a further contracted skeleton with two bronze awls. Bateman's plan showed that a considerable part of the cairn remained untouched (Fig.4.), so once again I determined to follow in his footsteps and reopen the site, having the advantage of knowing more-or-less exactly what he had found, and where he had found it. The excavation proved that the mound was far bigger than the squire's plan showed. In truth he only hollowed out the immediate centre and left much more for a succeeding "late man" to



Fig.5. The collective cist burial at Bee Low after the removal of the capstone. Note the child skull below the ruler.

locate. The Peak Park Planning Board willingly gave permission for the operation, and later proved most helpful in removing trees growing on the barrow, which impeded our operations.

I had great hopes that Bee Low would reveal much important information on burial rites in the Peak. It lay in an area of much Late Neolithic-Early Bronze Age occupation, and in 1936 Major Harris had penetrated a rock shelter just to the north of the barrow, in Calling Low Dale which was a wide fissure leading down to the River Lathkill. Among other burials he uncovered two cists, one of which contained the disarticulated bones of four individuals with an arrowhead and a fine round-based Neolithic pot. The other cist contained a crouched female skeleton with a dolichocephalic skull in fine condition. An amusing aside to this dig was that the Major found the cranium of this individual first, late one evening, and fearful of leaving it overnight (all kinds of weirdoes roam the Derbyshire Dales) he took it home and cleaned it up. He cleared the rest of the body the next day, and replaced the skull in situ to take a photograph. The result showed a beautifully shining white cranium with the rest of the bones a rather dirty grey colour!

The Bee Low dig, carried out between 1966-68, proved a most significant and successful operation. Assistance was provided by several friends with archaeological expertise, and students from the college where I lectured. The first cutting leading in from the north side revealed on the old ground surface a scattering of human bones, some in a high state of preservation, plus a barbed-and-tanged flint arrowhead. Beaker shards of Developed Northern (N2) type, were also disinterred and these proved to be of the same type and decoration as fragments found by Bateman in 1843. The edge of a large slab was found in the north-west side of the cutting, and believing this to be the edge of a capstone covering a burial, a wide cutting was laid out to include any possible grave. The mound material, lime stones of various sizes, intermixed with earth, was carefully cleared down to the level of the top of the capstone, which lay some 3ft below the surface of the cairn. It measured nearly 4ft north-south, and 3ft east-west. As I was clearing the north side of the cover stone, the gleam of green appeared, and a beautifully preserved little ogival bronze dagger, highly polished and with two rivet holes, was uncovered lying on top of a deposit of cremated bones, thus strati-



Fig.6. The reconstructed skull of the six-year-old child found in the Bee Low cist.

graphically later than the cist below it, and therefore placed in the cairn later in the Bronze Age.

With the aid of a couple of strong hands from the nearby farm we were able to carefully lift the covering slab, and to my delight we saw, amidst a fine soil infill which completely filled the cist, a number of disconnected human bones, including two skulls, sticking out of the earth (Fig.5.). The great interest in the cist was that it was obviously a collective grave, a Neolithic custom, in what should have been a single grave context. Vigilant and watchful uncovering of the soil led to the discovery of at least six individuals, only two of which were in any articulation, low down on the floor of the grave. One of

these was an aged male. The rest were represented by a scattering of bones, including skull fragments and parts of jaws, whilst on the south side was the well-preserved skull of a six year old child, which was later carefully reconstructed (Fig.6.). Two canine teeth from a large dog were the only grave goods apart from a most surprising find on the west side. Careful trowelling and brushing revealed a small pottery vessel. To my amazement I saw that the decoration on the pot consisted of horizontal rows of twisted cord decoration (Fig.7.). The vessel had broken into several pieces over the course of time, but it was very well reconstructed by Malcolm Dolby, a friend of mine then at Doncaster Museum, who also rebuilt the child skull. The squat little pot was a rare biconical all-over-cord beaker, one of the earliest types represented in Britain, and the first of its kind ever found in Derbyshire. It was obviously in its proper context, an early beaker in association with a late Neolithic funerary rite, perhaps an amalgam of New Stone Age rituals with those representing the new beaker influence in the locality. Although not centrally placed, the burials in this cist may have been the first occupants of the site. (To be continued). **TH**

Fig.7. The rare all-over-cord beaker found in the same cist.



The Burial Mounds of Derbyshire is available from the author at £10 post-free from 120 Otley Road, Eldwick, Bingley, West Yorkshire BD16 3HD. Also available is **The Barrow Knight**, a short history of Thomas Bateman's life and work, at £6 post-free.