

SSARG 100 Bronze Age connections

My first introduction to archaeology was a history teacher at secondary school – enlisted as volunteers for an excavation on Salisbury Plain in 1961, our objective was a Bronze Age round barrow within sight of Stonehenge! - I was hooked right away. Pursuing an archaeology degree at the University of Wales, Cardiff, was a next step, where among other inspirational teachers was Leslie Alcock, just embarking upon his South Cadbury excavation campaigns. As an undergraduate I should have joined him as part of my course for the 1970 season but through an earlier involvement with and invitation from Philip Rahtz I ended up at the other Cadbury – Cadbury Congresbury. There was a degree of friendly rivalry between these two contemporary excavations, both seminal for the development of Dark Age studies and our understanding of the late and early post-Roman period in Somerset and Britain as a whole.

At the time of my graduation, the concept of rescue archaeology was about to revolutionise British archaeology. Government money was coming on stream and local organisations were being set up to fund excavation and survey projects, as responses to what was at last being recognised as the threat to our past of Britain's rapidly developing infrastructure. One of these was set up as the Committee for Rescue Archaeology in Avon, Gloucestershire and Somerset (CRAAGS – later the Western Archaeological Trust), employing me from 1974 to undertake programmes of excavation in response to the developmental threat to Somerset's historic towns. Of these the most pressing at that time were at Ilchester, initially through an extensive town centre development and subsequently the construction of the A303 bypass – from then on Somerset's archaeology and especially the Romans beckoned!

The following decades saw a programme of excavations in Taunton, periodic returns to Ilchester, and a move to the University of Birmingham Field Archaeology Unit. This brought me finally back to South Cadbury and my involvement with the Environs Project and subsequently with SSARG. It also brought me to Shepton Mallet and our discoveries in 1990 and thereafter of the small Roman town there. My career in commercial archaeology has provided the bread and butter, but working with volunteers has always given me the greatest stimulus and enjoyment. In my opinion SSARG is by far the best exemplar of voluntary archaeology in Somerset, as amply demonstrated through its 100 newsletters – and counting!

Coincidentally, Shepton Mallet also brought me to Beacon Hill Wood – a survey of its archaeology for owners The Woodland Trust, involvement with another inspirational volunteer group (The Beacon Hill Society), and finally, back to the Bronze Age! Thanks to the enthusiasm of local volunteers, support from The Woodland Trust, and some financial backup, we initiated a programme to test by excavation some of the archaeological features preserved in the wood. Earlier post-war forestry had damaged some remains but identified features included a section of the Roman Fosse Way, ancient stone quarrying (Iron Age and Roman), and part of a prehistoric round barrow cemetery. Through a series of small trial excavations begun in 2005 we hoped to assess the surviving condition of these remains and to gain more evidence of their date and use. Prehistoric pottery was collected during the forestry planting operations in the 1950s and it was hoped that trenching across one of the damaged circular mounds would be illuminating.



Two seasons in 2007 and 2008 were needed in the end to get the full story. The 18m diameter mound was indeed a Bronze Age round barrow, raised somewhere around 2000 BC and built largely of turf. Thanks to its semi-waterlogged condition and survival in an acid soil environment, the mound preserved clear evidence of its turf construction, palaeoenvironmental plant and pollen remains, and material for radiocarbon dating. Unfortunately, the poor summer weather conditions of 2008 restricted our work and it was not possible to

excavate a suspected intact primary burial. As a bonus, however, our trench did find what proved to be a secondary grave in the body of the mound.

A small cairn of sandstone blocks laid above a flat stone slab proved to be the cover for an intact Middle Bronze Age burial urn of Deverell Rimbury type, set vertically within a small pit and containing the cremated remains of a young woman aged 18-22. Radiocarbon dates from her bones suggest internment around 1600BC, with no surviving accompaniments beyond some traces of her funeral pyre. The urn and details of the project have been on display in the Wells Museum, while full details of our discoveries can be found within the report published in the Somerset Archaeology and Natural History Proceedings Vol. 156, pp.18-40. As a postscript to this discovery, some of our volunteer group participated in making and firing a hand-made pottery urn and plaque with details of the burial, at Shute Farm, Downhead. This we reburied with the surviving remains of our Bronze Age ancestor in the barrow mound with a brief ceremony on Midsummer Day 2009.

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