

## ***How to tell a cromlech from a quoit ©***

As you might have guessed from the title, this article looks at different types of **Neolithic or early Bronze Age megaliths and burial mounds**, with particular reference to some well-known examples in the UK. It's also a quick overview of some of the terms used when describing certain types of megaliths, standing stones and tombs. The definitions below serve to illustrate that there is little general agreement over what we could classify as burial mounds.

Burial mounds, cairns, tumuli and barrows can all refer to man-made hills of earth or stone, are located globally and may include all types of standing stones. A barrow is a mound of earth that covers a burial. Sometimes, burials were dug into the original ground surface, but some are found placed in the mound itself. The term, **barrow**, can be used for British burial mounds of any period. However, round barrows can be dated to either the Early Bronze Age or the Saxon period before the conversion to Christianity, whereas long barrows are usually Neolithic in origin.

### **So, what is a megalith?**

A megalith is a large stone structure or a group of standing stones - the term, megalith means **great stone**, from two Greek words, *megas* (meaning: great) and *lithos* (meaning: stone). However, the general meaning of megaliths includes any structure composed of large stones, which include tombs and circular standing structures. Such structures have been found in Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, North and South America and may have had religious significance.

Megaliths tend to be put into **two** general categories, ie dolmens or menhirs. **Dolmens** are also called chamber tombs and usually contain one or more chambers or rooms in which the dead were buried. Some dolmens also contain long, stone chambers or halls which connect different rooms. These long chambers may be named as long tombs or passage-graves.

**Menhirs** are large standing stones, or groups of standing stones, arranged in circles, cromlechs, and henges. A bank or ditch can surround the circular henges, which distinguishes them. There are usually one or more entrances to them. But, sometimes a dolmen is referred to as a cromlech. Are we clear so far? OK – here are some very rough definitions.

1. A *cromlech* is a megalithic chamber tomb.
2. A *dolmen* is a Neolithic tomb, consisting of two or more upright stones with a capstone, which have been buried in soil at the front of a tomb.
3. A *menhir* is a prehistoric monument, found chiefly in the British Isles and northern France, consisting of a single tall, upright megalith. A dolmen or a cromlech may include an obelisk or menhir.
4. A *woodhenge* is a monument made of concentric circles of wooden posts, eg Stanton Drew and Woodhenge.
5. A *stone circle* is a circular monument made of free standing stones, eg Nine Maidens, Stonehenge, the Rollright Stones, the Hurlers or the Ring of Brodgar.
6. A *henge* is a parallel ditch and bank pattern of construction, generally circular in shape, eg Knowlton or Avebury.
7. A *recumbent stone circle* includes two vertical stones with one horizontal placed between them to watch the moon as it slides along the horizon, eg Aikey Brae or Ardlair.
8. Different types of *tombs* with passages, shafts, chambers may be covered with earth mounds, eg Newgrange or Knowth.
9. A *quoit* is 2 or more stone slabs with a capstone, eg Chun.

Other common features of burial mounds or tombs include:

- a) *Stone rows*, ie paths made by placing two rows of stones on either side of a straight pathway, eg Merrivale
- b) *Cursus*, ie two ditches and two banks, generally straight or with doglegs, eg Stonehenge
- c) *Stone cists or boxes*, ie small square boxes made of stone, which contained human bones, like ossuaries, perhaps parts of larger cairns
- d) *Fogou, souterrains, fuggy holes*, ie underground passageways with stone walls, eg Cornish burial mounds
- e) *Chalk giants*, ie images carved into white chalk hillsides, eg the Uffington White Horse or the Cerne Abbas Giant.

Perhaps some pictures might help here.



Boswens Menhir, Cornwall



Recumbent stone circle at Castle Fraser, Scotland



Cromlech at Pentre Ifan, Wales



Chun Quoit, Cornwall

## Silbury Hill

And so we come to our first case example of a man-made mound, ie Silbury Hill, which forms part of the World Heritage site with Stonehenge. An archæological study by English Heritage in 2010 suggested that this 120ft high mound of earth was created in layers rather than in one go, which refuted the legends that the mound was either a treasure chamber or a massive tomb, but first a few facts about Silbury Hill.

1. It is estimated to have been built about 2400-2300 BCE, ie in the later Neolithic period.
2. The hill consists of stones, chalk, antler bits, gravel and wood.
3. It is similar in size and shape to an Ancient Egyptian pyramid.
4. The hill was damaged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when investigators dug a vertical shaft from the top.
5. In the 1840s, a tunnel was dug into the hill from the edge.
6. In 1968, BBC2 filmed a new attempt to tunnel into the centre of the mound.
7. In 1969, a BBC dig proclaimed the discovery of a new burial chamber, but it was actually part of an earlier tunnel. This digging has now been sealed for fear of a collapse.
8. Silbury Hill suffered a collapse in 2000.
9. After parts of the mound began to sink in 2002, English Heritage reopened the BBC tunnel, took samples of soil and rock, filled in the gaps and sealed the mound for good.



The research by English Heritage revealed several new findings on the actual construction of Silbury Hill, including the idea that it was built in 15 stages over the course of 100 years by 2300 BCE and the flattened top was due to much later additions by the Saxons. It is estimated that the hill itself started as a low mound of gravel, before it became a larger heap of soil and rocks, surrounded by a ditch. As a rough estimate, the archaeologists estimate that some 700 men worked for a decade to create the first mound of gravel and chalk.

It is possible that the way the different layers of antler bits, gravel, stones and chalk occur throughout the hill, are symbolic in some way. What is known is that, by the time work on the hill had started in 2400 BCE, the surrounding area was already used heavily, ie with Durrington Walls and Stonehenge. The book from English Heritage states that, *"What is emerging is a picture of Neolithic people having the same need to anchor and share ideas and stories as we do now, and that built structures like Silbury Hill may not be conceived as grand monuments of worship, but intimate gestures of communication."*

### **West Kennet Long Barrow**

This is one of the largest Neolithic graves in Britain. West Kennet Long Barrow was built around 3650 BCE and used for at least 1000 years.



The huge earth barrow survives to a maximum height of 3.2m and tapers out from the narrower western end to a maximum width of 25m towards the eastern entrance. The picture below shows the huge stones at the eastern entrance to the barrow.



At just over 100m long, the barrow is second only to the nearby East Kennet Barrow in length. Although it is now covered with turf, it would originally have had bare chalk sides and would have stood out against the landscape. It consists of a core of sarsen stones, capped with chalk rubble from the surrounding quarry ditches.

At the eastern end of the mound is a massive structure of five chambers opening off a central passage. This is fronted by a semi-circular forecourt with a façade of huge sarsen stones aligned on a north-south axis. The central passage penetrates about 13m into the barrow, with two of the burial chambers on each side of the passageway and one chamber at the end. The side ditches to the north and south of the mound have been almost buried by ploughing.

It is thought that West Kennet Long Barrow was built in several stages as the barrow is not constructed in a straight line, ie it shifts slightly. Some cremations and the partial remains of at least 46 individuals – both male and female of all ages – have been found inside, together with funeral goods, eg pottery, beads and a stone dagger. These items have been dated to between 3000-2600 BCE.

The tomb was closed around 2000 BCE and the main passage filled with earth, stones, rubble and debris. The forecourt was then blocked with sarsen boulders and a false entrance of twin sarsen uprights constructed. Finally, three massive sarsen blocking-stones were erected across the front (eastern end) of the tomb.

## Horsell Common Barrows

So, having looked at two of the more notable mounds in the UK, here's an example of some comparatively local barrows, dating from the Later Bronze Age. In the Later Bronze Age, cremation became the main type of burial rite and many barrows contain secondary cremations, deposited in barrow mounds, in either cloth or burial urns.

The deliberate construction of a mound over a burial is often interpreted as a mark of status or rank. Not that that stopped amateur historians or treasure hunters digging into barrows during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Several different barrow types have been identified and characterise the Early Bronze Age of southern England and there are some good examples on Horsell Common, near Woking, as below.

1. A *bell barrow* is a small mound surrounded by a flat area (berm) and ditch.
2. A *disc barrow* is a wide flat area that exists between the round barrow and its ditch.
3. A *saucer barrow* has a broad low mound.
4. A *pond barrow* has no mound at all, but a circular concave depression in the ground ringed by a bank

Horsell Common has two good bell barrows and a disc barrow that date from the Bronze Age. These barrows are located near the canal (Basingstoke Canal) at Monument Bridge, where there are three tumuli – all built during the Bronze Age (around 1500 BCE). In general, bell barrows are burial monuments and thought to be for people who were important members of the community, possibly chiefs or elders.

The best-preserved barrow is on the path which runs from opposite the car park at Britannia Wharf to a point on the Chertsey Road, near to Woodham Rise. The barrow is circular in shape and has a central mound that is about 1.1m high and about 25m in diameter.

The disc barrow next to it has almost vanished. Around the mound is a flat platform, or berm, up to 4.5m wide, which is contained by a circular ditch 3m wide and 0.3m deep. Beyond this is an outer bank which survives to the north and east of the mound between 3.5-4m wide and 0.3m high.

Multiple bell barrows are usually found further west in Wessex, so the existence of the barrows on Horsell Common indicate that this was a key Bronze Age area. According to both English Heritage and the Horsell Common Preservation Society, it is important that large trees and scrub are removed to prevent root damage to the site.

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