

THE LONG BARROWS AND LONG MOUNDS OF WEST MENDIP

by

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the evidence for Early Neolithic long barrow construction on the West Mendip plateau, Somerset. It highlights the difficulties in assigning long mounds a classification on surface evidence alone and discusses a range of earthworks which have been confused with long barrows. Eight possible long barrows are identified and their individual and group characteristics are explored and compared with national trends. Gaps in the local distribution of these monuments are assessed and it is suggested that areas of absence might have been occupied by woodland during the Neolithic. The relationship between long barrows and later round barrows is also considered.

INTRODUCTION

Long barrows are amongst the earliest monuments to have been built in the Neolithic period. In Southern Britain they take two forms: non-megalithic (or “earthen”) long barrows and megalithic barrows, mostly belonging to the Cotswold-Severn tradition. Despite these differences in architectural construction, the long mounds are of the same, early 4th millennium BC, date and had a similar purpose. The chambers of the long mounds were used for the deposition of the human dead and the monuments themselves appear to have acted as a focus for ritual activities and religious observations by the living. Some long barrows show evidence of fire lighting, feasting and deposition in the forecourts and ditches of the monuments, and alignment upon solstice events has also been noted. A local example of this can be observed at Stoney Littleton, near Bath, where the entrance and passage of this chambered long barrow are aligned upon the midwinter sunrise¹. The prominence of the dead during the Early Neolithic has led to the belief that societies at this time participated in ancestor cults, whereby the dead were perceived to oversee and justify the actions of the living, whether in territorial claims (see Renfrew 1976) or the fixing of community identity. To this extent, they were as much “tombs for the living” (Fleming 1973) as repositories for the dead.

The long barrows of the Mendip Hills are not particularly well-known and are often excluded from national syntheses of this monument type in Britain (but see Corcoran 1969, Kinnes 1992 and Darvill 2004 for partial coverage). The reasons for this neglect are numerous: the small number of upstanding monuments, especially when compared to the ubiquitous round barrows of the region; the proximity of Mendip to areas containing more numerous, more impressive and better-studied long barrows (Cotswolds, Wessex) and the lack of excavation at long barrow sites, making it difficult to confirm their status and be absolute in assigning a date. The long barrows of North and East Somerset, including West Mendip, were considered by Grinsell (1971 and 1986) and individual monuments have formed the focus of articles and fieldwork discussions by members of the University of Bristol Spelaeological Society in this journal (e.g. Philips and Taylor 1972; Tratman’s many fieldwork notes between the 1920s and 1940s published in the *Proceedings*). More recently, the author has continued this tradition by reinterpreting the Priddy long barrow (Lewis 2002), and has written

¹ Also, West Kennet faces the equinoctial sunrise; a point obscured by erroneous restoration! (A.M. ApSimon, *pers. comm.*)

extensively about the long barrows of northern Somerset in a book about the Neolithic of this region (Lewis 2005).

The aim of this article is to offer an up-to-date review of the certain and possible long barrows of West Mendip; that is the higher Mendip plateau, broadly corresponding to the current Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). This is not a straightforward task, as there has been little excavation and there is much potential to confuse other earthworks with long barrows, particularly when they have suffered from plough damage. Such earthworks include mining and quarry spoil, pillow mounds (mounds constructed as part of a rabbit warren), field boundaries and misshapen or conjoined round barrows. All will be considered here and their likely status investigated. Earthwork surveys of select, upstanding monuments undertaken by the author have been included.

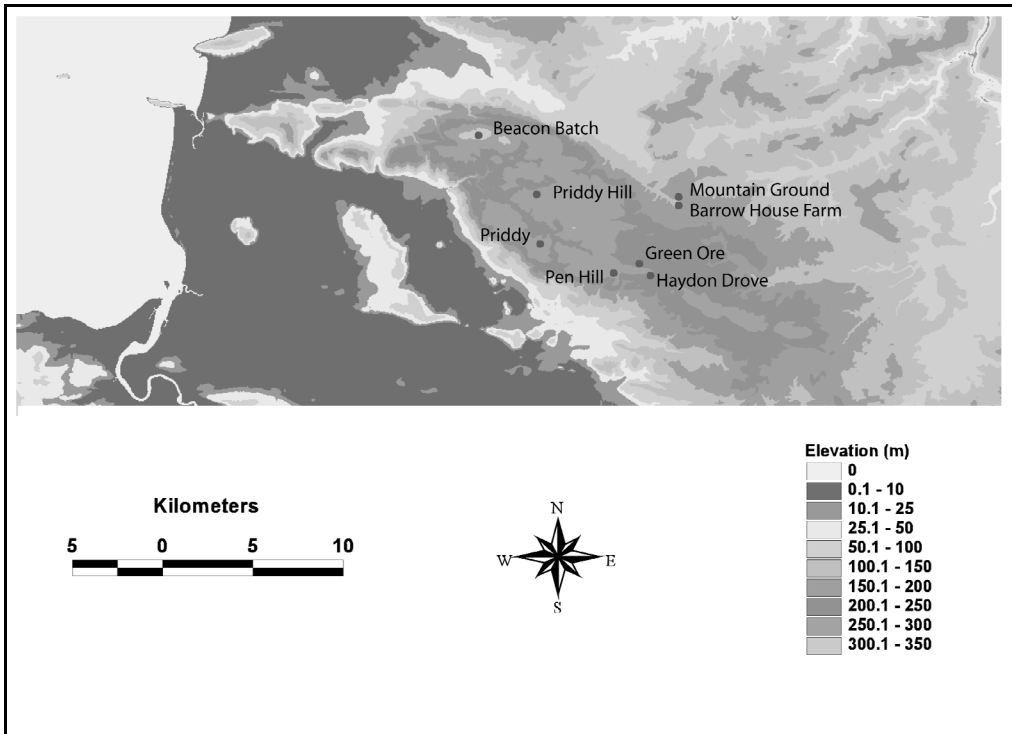


Figure 1. *Location of suggested long barrows on Mendip.*

THE SUGGESTED LONG BARROWS

(See Figure 1 for locations).

Priddy Long Barrow, Priddy. (Figure 2).

The Priddy long barrow was first, unsuccessfully, investigated by the Rev. John Skinner in 1816 and then later partially excavated by members of the UBSS in 1928. A short account of the excavation was published in 1972 (Phillips and Taylor 1972) and more recently, the site was subject to a detailed reinterpretation by this author (Lewis 2002), using original

archival material. Priddy is important, not least because it is the only Mendip long barrow to have been excavated, providing important detail on the choices made in long barrow construction.

Excavation proved the Priddy long barrow to measure 22 m long by 10 m wide and 2 m high. The mound is rectangular in plan and orientated south-south-west/north-north-east. It lies at a right angle to a gentle slope, close to the southern edge of the Mendip plateau. The excavations revealed that the long mound was formed of a central stone core, delineated by a rough stone revetment wall. There was no obvious buried soil beneath the monument, suggesting that the area may have been stripped in preparation for its construction. Lewis (2002) suggests that the structural elements of the monument relate to the four main phases of its construction, detailed in Table 1, below.

Phase	Structures/Features	Associated Archaeology
1	Central pit and two hearths	Human bone; Lithics
2	Corbelled stone cist, placed over one of the hearths and an Old Red Sandstone pavement	Human bone; Lithics
3	Rectangular stone cairn erected over most of the earlier features. Northern section formed of smaller stones. Stone revetment.	Human bone; Lithics
4	Capping of earth and small stones, enlarging the mound	Lithics

Table 1.

Lewis (2002) has interpreted the Priddy mound as a non-megalithic long barrow, with a possible forecourt structure at its northern end and a space that acted as a “chamber” for the manipulation and deposition of human remains at the central/southern area section. The structural elements of the monument are paralleled at a number of other non-megalithic long barrows, in particular the central pit (presumably for a large timber post), the paved area and the difference in stone size between the north and south parts of the cairn, which is suggestive of the separate “filling” or blocking of the different architectural elements of the monument at the end of the mortuary rituals (Kinnes 1992). The fact that these mortuary rituals involved both burnt and unburnt human remains should not surprise us: recent studies (e.g. Gibson 2007) have highlighted that cremation was much more common in the Early Neolithic than previously assumed.

Priddy is a small long barrow, proved by excavation to be the shortest in the region, though before excavation it appeared larger than the Haydon Drove barrow (below). Its diminutive size should not unduly concern us however, as it falls comfortably within the dimensions of non-megalithic long barrows, with far smaller examples existing.

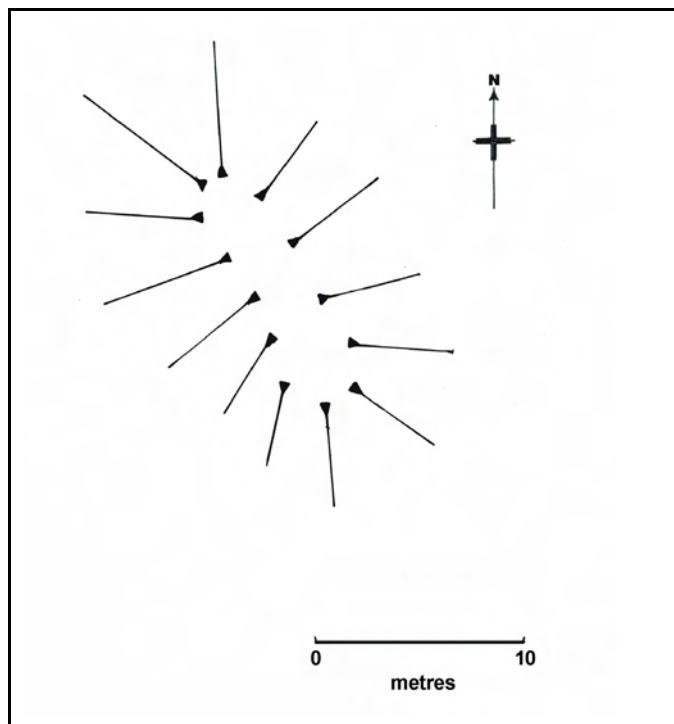


Figure 2. *Priddy long barrow.*

Priddy Hill, Priddy. (Figure 3).

In the 1980s a local amateur archaeologist, Brian Hack, noted a long mound covered by scrub vegetation and hidden within a narrow copse of trees at Priddy Hill (Hack 1982 and 1987). The mound measures 63 m long by up to 30 m wide and is up to 2.5 m high; it is orientated east-north-east/west-south-west, with the east end higher and wider. An earthwork survey by the author revealed that a few metres from the east end there is also a large round mound. Hollows on the north side of the mound may represent the remains of a ditch (but see mention of quarrying, below) A field wall, the line of the old Rodney Stoke-Cheddar parish boundary, follows the length of the long mound and even changes direction to accommodate it.

Whether this is a long barrow has been debated. Grinsell (1987) was convinced that this was recent mining spoil and indeed quarrying is visible on the ground to the north of the mound. However, Vince Russett identified the site as corresponding with the mound name 'Sgaldaberga' mentioned in an 1182 Charter granting land to St Hugh's Monastery at Witham Friary (Russett, 1989).

These indicators; the parish boundary following the length of the long mound and the charter placename; suggest that this is a site of some antiquity. There is a possibility that the 1182 mound name refers to the round rather than long mound but the latter still predates the parish boundary, provides a *terminus ante quem* of the medieval period. In its favour too are its orientation and shape, both fitting well with local and national long barrow characteristics. As a long barrow it would be one of the longer examples in the region, comparable to the Mountain Ground monument at Chewton Mendip and, just outside the study area, the Orchardleigh

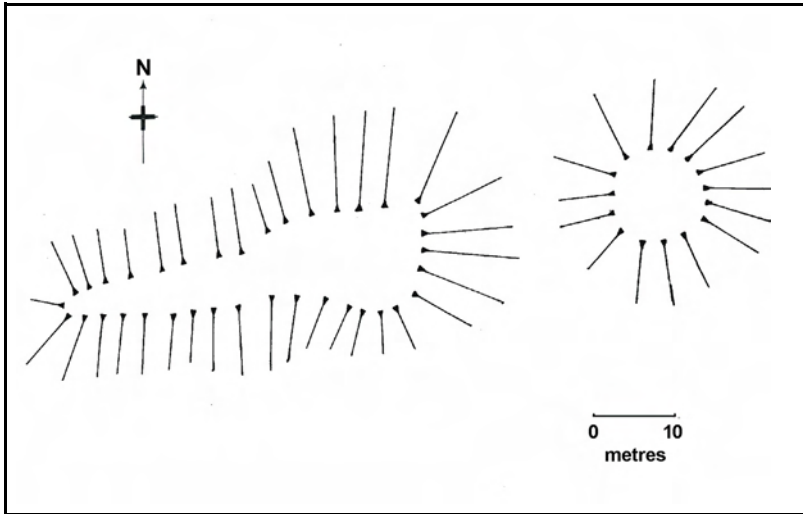


Figure 3. *Priddy Hill long barrow.*

barrow on East Mendip. A parish boundary offers a favourable preservation context for a long barrow, as they are particularly vulnerable to having their length eroded through ploughing. The round mound at the eastern end of the monument appears to be a classic round barrow and this relationship between long and round monument is

also replicated at Pen Hill (see below). Supportive evidence for a long barrow interpretation may also be provided by the large lithic scatter collected by Hack in the 1980s, only 50 m south of the barrow, and suggested by this author to be a Later Neolithic settlement site (Lewis 2005). This settlement could have been deliberately located to be close to an ancestral monument, with the (possible) earlier monument offering spiritual protection.

Beacon Batch, Burrington.

The possibility that a long barrow exists below the summit of Beacon Batch, Black Down, the highest point on Mendip, is often overlooked. It was first noted by the Rev. John Skinner in 1819, when he mentioned that an oval barrow named Beacon Barrow was being quarried to make walls (BM Add Mss 33653 f43). Later, Tratman (1926) recorded the monument as 32 m long and 16 m wide and described an east-west orientated long shaped, square-ended mound, with no trace of a ditch. He described the mound as composed of old red sandstone blocks, with a regular outer margin and three large stones visible in the south-west corner (*ibid.*). The current author has not traced the monument on the ground but a 1947 aerial photograph of Black Down shows the monument orientated south-east/north-west, rather than east-west, with the mound wider at the south-east end (photograph too poor to reproduce).

Is this a long barrow? In its favour, the monument shares a similar topographical location to the Pen Hill long barrow (see below) and is similar in size and ovate shape to the monument at Green Ore (see below) and, just outside the study area, the famous Stoney Littleton long barrow. Moreover, a south-east/north-west orientation is very common for long barrows, on Mendip and elsewhere in Britain. The proximity of the monument to the Beacon Batch round barrow cemetery may also be significant, as these later monuments were often attracted to earlier sacred sites. If not a long barrow, the monument could be conjoined round barrows, although this seems rather doubtful when one considers Tratman's description. It is difficult to see that ploughing could have created this distinctive form, as the acidic heath landscape of Black Down has not been subject to agricultural improvement. The remaining

possibilities are limited. Although Black Down was used extensively during World War II (Schofield *et al* 1998, Brown 2001), the earliest descriptions of the mound predate the war and it cannot therefore be assigned a military function. Another possibility is that it is a pillow mound, an artificial rabbit warren created in the medieval or post-medieval period. However, the known pillow mounds of Mendip are not composed of large blocks and it would be difficult to see the point of the three large stones, noted by Tratman. These would seem to fit more comfortably with a structural interpretation and, if a long barrow, they could have formed part of a chamber. On balance, it is tentatively suggested that Beacon Batch is a chambered long barrow, though the usual provisos apply.

Pen Hill, St Cuthbert Out. (Figure 4).

Just west of the large mast on Pen Hill, the second highest point on Mendip at 305 m AOD, is the Pen Hill long barrow. Like the location of the Beacon Batch earthwork, the monument is slightly downslope, set into the hill, giving a false cresting effect from below. It is 43 m long and 20 m wide and orientated east-west, higher and wider at the east end. Severe damage caused by sheltering sheep along its steep southern side has exposed the barrow core and shown it to be made of earth and small stones. Skinner visited in 1832 and noted side

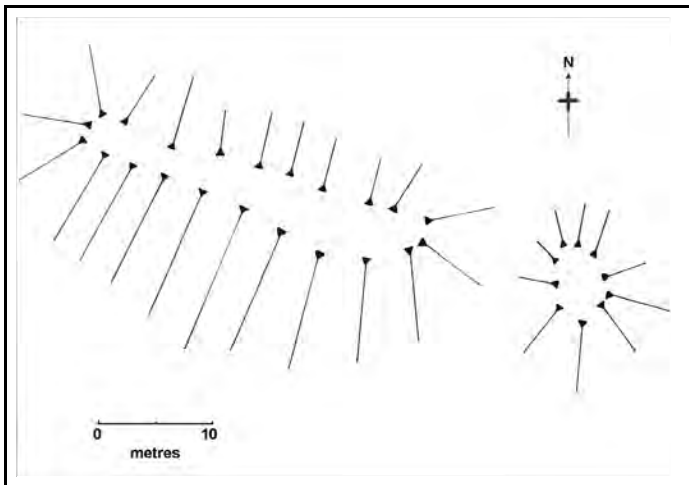


Figure 4. *Pen Hill long barrow.*

monument is a round mound: this is either a divorced section of the monument or a separate, later round barrow. The round barrow interpretation is preferred here and indeed, it is shown as a separate structure on the first edition Ordnance Survey map (1881). Such a phenomenon is known elsewhere in Britain and locally, echoes the round mound at the end of the Priddy Hill earthwork.

The size, orientation and location, together with the parallel side ditches, indicate that it is likely that Pen Hill is a classic long barrow. The presence of these side ditches might suggest that it is a non-megalithic structure (see discussion, below) though in the Avebury district megalithic long barrows also have side ditches.

ditches and thought that the earthwork and ditches formed part of an unfinished hillfort. Although the ditches are not as defined today, in 1928 Wicks described them as deep depressions (cited in Grinsell 1971). One of the substantial concrete and cable supports of the mast is placed immediately south of the monument. This is roughly where the southern ditch would be and explains its disappearance; the northern ditch is still just visible. The monument was also used for tank training in World War II and suffered as a result. At the east end of the

Haydon Drove, St Cuthbert Out.

Grinsell appears to have been the first to note a "...much ploughed down long barrow just north-east of a sharp angle in Haydon Drove", in the parish of St Cuthbert Out. (1971, 87). He gave the measurements as 25m long, 15 wide and 0.5m high and the orientation as east-west. The mound no longer exists, as a small factory has been constructed on the site in the last twenty years. The monument is not visible on any aerial photographs consulted as part of this research. Grinsell was, of course, an expert and experienced cataloguer of barrows and if he thought this the remains of a long barrow, then this must remain a possible interpretation and the measurements and orientation certainly fit this classification. However, other possibilities, such as relict field boundary, a mining spoil heap or a pillow mound, cannot be discounted. Indeed, possible infilled mining rakes have been observed running from the north-west (Somerset HER).

Green Ore, St Cuthbert Out.

Another inveterate barrow cataloguer, A.T. Wicks, described a long mound south-east of Green Ore (Wicks, 1926). He noted a hollow to the south-east of the mound, which may have formed part of a flanking side ditch. Tratman also later described the monument, noting that it was 32m long, 14m wide and orientated east-south-east/west-north-west. The site was destroyed between 1946 and 1954, but was visible as a slight earthwork on the 1946 aerial photographs and as a cropmark on aerial photographs from 1964 (Grinsell 1971; Somerset HER). Measurements given by Somerset HER, taken from the 1964 photograph, are slightly different from Tratman's: up to 37 m long by up to 9 m in width. The 'on the ground measurements' by Tratman are preferred here. The Somerset HER entry also gives the measurements for the flanking side ditches as 24 m in length by up to 11 m in width, suggesting that the hollow that Wicks observed was one of these ditches.

This is another site that cannot be verified on the ground, though again, the measurements and orientation fit a long barrow classification. However, it is the flanking side ditches that provide the strongest support. A *terminus ante quem* is also provided by buildings of a medieval/post-medieval farmhouse, which encroach upon the mound (Somerset HER) and it is postulated that the activities of this farm and its modern, adjacent replacement resulted in its destruction.

Mountain Ground, Chewton Mendip. (Figure 5).

Lying at the boundary of West Mendip in the parish of Chewton Mendip is an imposing, though disturbed, long mound, known as Mountain Ground. The monument was extensively sketched by the Rev. John Skinner, who described it as an outstanding mound. It measures 60 m long by 20 m wide and survives to a height of over 3 m, one of the largest monuments discussed here. It is orientated east-west, with the east end being higher and wider. The mound is situated on the small yet prominent Chew Down ridge and when viewed from the north appears to be set on the edge of a precipice.

There has been some confusion about this monument, due to disturbance on the northern and southern sides of the mound. Previously, this has led to suggestions that it is a round barrow or a long barrow with the central area removed (Somerset HER). A new earthwork survey carried out by the author shows that it is sinuous in plan but it is suggested here that this

is the result of old excavations, though none are officially recorded. However, through local investigation A.T. Wicks was able to shed some light on this:

“...some of the oldest inhabitants can “mind when they were buoys” (c.1850-1860) that strangers came and found a quantity of bones in the barrow”. (Wicks 1914, 46).

It should also be noted that the east end of the mound is symmetrical and neatly shaped and there are references to the upper parts of two orthostats being visible here (Wicks 1914; Grinsell 1971). Taking together, the cumulative evidence would suggest that this is a disturbed chambered long barrow, of a comparable size to Priddy Hill.

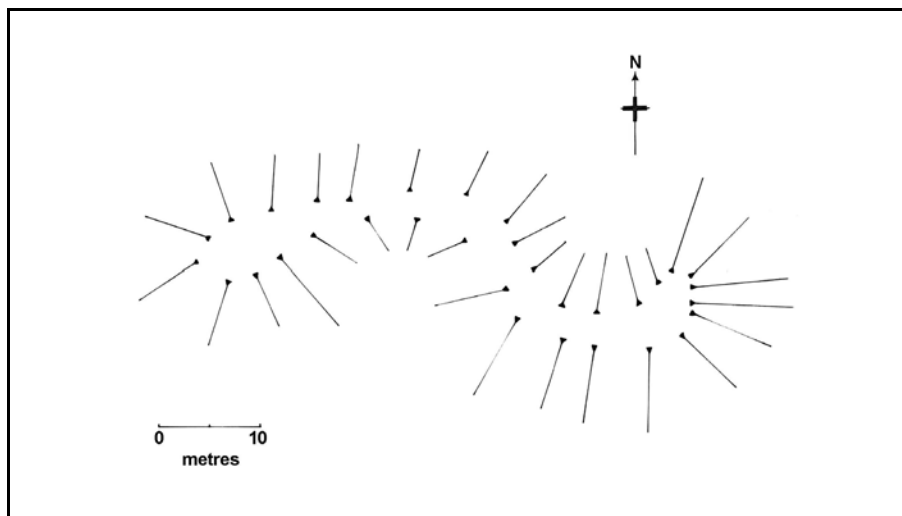


Figure 5. *Mountain Ground long barrow.*

There are three round barrows at the eastern end of the long mound, and these and the long mound are scheduled together. This placement of round barrows at the east end of a long barrow is of interest and repeats the pattern noted at Pen Hill and Priddy Hill.

Barrow House Farm, Chewton Mendip.

Only 500m west of Mountain Ground is another long mound. This, much-disturbed, earthwork measures 53 m long and 28 m wide and up to 2.7 m high and is orientated south-east/north-west. Wicks appears to have been the first to record the site and he noted traces of an outer revetment wall and a large hollow at the northern end (1914), which may represent a collapsed chamber, stone robbing or an illicit excavation. He also noted that the monument was once much longer but some of the northern end had been ploughed away (*ibid.*): this was later confirmed ‘on the ground’ by the different colour of the ploughsoil beyond the northern end of the mound (Somerset HER).

Although now scheduled as a long barrow, previously some doubt has been cast on this interpretation because it is located in an area with known mining and it has been suggested to be poorly orientated and low-lying (Ordnance Survey Archaeology Division 1966). Unfortunately, the first statement is true of much of West Mendip and the second may be explained by

Tratman's observation that the orientation of the monument, 30 degrees north of west to 30 degrees south of east, may have been determined by the positioning of the mound on a spur between dry valleys (Tratman 1948). The size, trapezoidal shape and orientation of this mound are all acceptable for a long barrow classification and the evidence for an outer revetment wall makes it possible that this is a chambered long barrow.

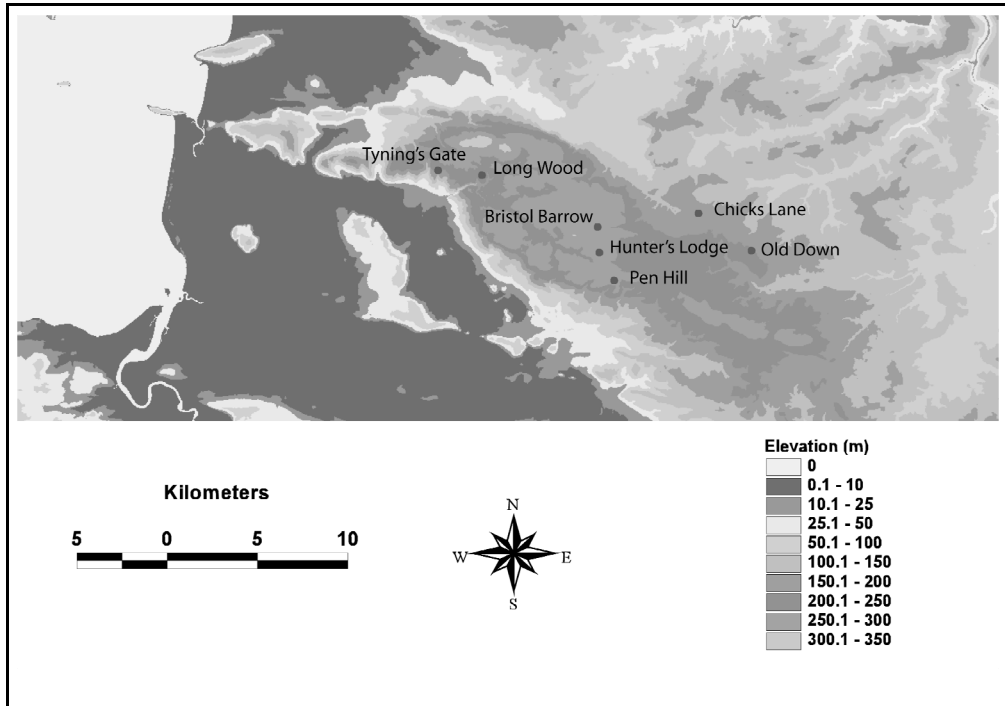


Figure 6. *Conjoined round barrows and other mounds mentioned in the text.*

CONJOINED ROUND BARROWS

(See Figure 6 for locations)

Round barrows, funerary monuments dating to the Early Bronze Age, occur on Mendip in their hundreds. They occur individually and in groups: where four or more barrows are found in proximity the group is classified as a cemetery (Ashbee 1960; Fleming 1971). There is potential for confusing closely spaced or overlapping round barrows with long barrows, particularly when ploughing of their margins has resulted in a “squared off” profile. This can be seen on West Mendip, where a number of short, low oval shaped mounds that have been variously argued to be small long barrows, natural outcrops or round barrows. Research by the author at five of these sites has revealed some interesting results.

Long Wood, Cheddar and Hunter's Lodge, Priddy. (Figures 7 and 8).

The suggested long barrows at Long Wood, Cheddar and Hunter's Lodge, Priddy have previously been discussed in the pages of this journal by the author (Lewis 2003). The Long Wood mound measures 28 m long by 13 m wide and 1.1 m in height and is orientated south-east/north-west. It was

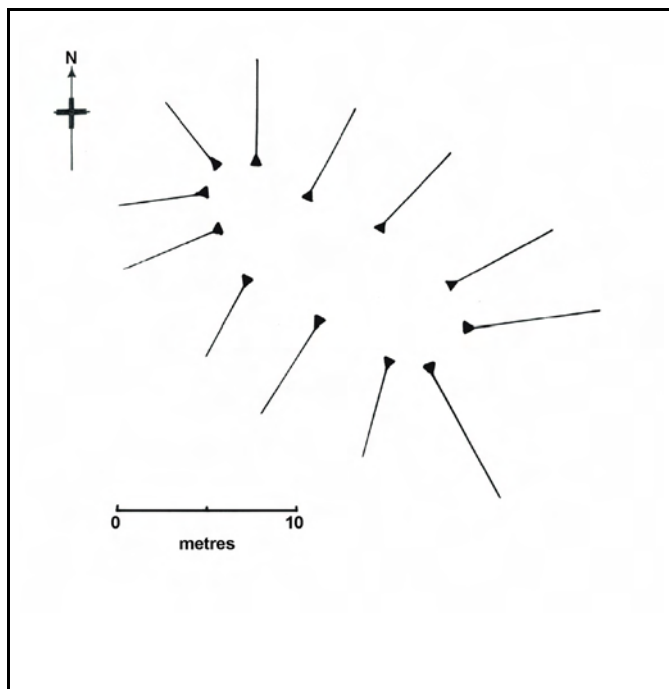


Figure 7. *Long Wood conjoined round barrows.*

suggested to be a long barrow by Wicks (1924) and confirmed by Crawford but then argued by others to be a natural outcrop (Tratman 1938) and a misshapen round barrow (Grinsell 1971). A geophysical survey by the author revealed the mound to cover two circular ring ditches, c.2 m apart, both with a diameter of c.8.5 m and each with a causeway facing the other. The results indicate that the mound at Long Wood is actually two adjacent Bronze Age round barrows (Lewis 2003). A similar result was revealed by geophysical survey at Hunter's Lodge. The mound here measures 23 m long by 16 m wide and c. 0.1 m high, orientated east-west. Wicks thought it two round barrows (1914), Crook and Tratman argued it to be a long barrow (1948) whereas Grinsell

thought it a single round barrow (1971). The geophysical survey revealed two circular ring ditches, 5 m apart, the northern being c. 20 m in diameter and the southern c. 25 m. Again, the indications are that the Hunter's Lodge long mound is in fact two conjoined Bronze Age round barrows.

Bristol Barrow, Chewton Mendip.

Near the Miner's Arms crossroads is another mound suggested to be a long barrow and scheduled as such. This monument, known as the Bristol Barrow or Bristol Cross in 18th century perambulations, lies in a narrow copse of fifty pine trees, planted in 1903 (Wicks 1928), and the parish boundary between East Harptree and Chewton Mendip passes through it. The mound is much disturbed but measures approximately 23 m long by 13 m wide and is orientated west-east, with the higher and wider end at the west. An irregular sunken hollow at the east end has led to the suggestion that this is a collapsed megalithic chamber within a long barrow (Tratman 1949), though Grinsell (1971) thought it two round barrows.

Clues are provided by previous accounts and on the ground observations. Wicks (1928) described the western end of the mound as composed of earth, and honeycombed with rabbit holes, whereas the eastern end is described as formed of blocks of Old Red Sandstone, up to 2 ft long. Today, it is possible to make out what appears to be a restriction in the length of the mound, which could well be the conjoin of two round barrows. The two sections are also of differing heights; the west being 1.5 m high and the east 1 m. Indeed, the highest point of the western section is not at the end of the mound, as would be expected if this were the façade of a long barrow but c. 10 m east of this point, as if it were the summit of a round mound. Moreover, several sketches of the mound by Skinner in 1824 show a large round – not long – mound. If a long barrow the west-east orientation would also be somewhat anomalous. The available evidence supports Grinsell's interpretation of the site as two Bronze Age round barrows. The western mound appears to be an earthen bowl barrow and the eastern a stone cairn. The sunken hollow at the east end may represent stone robbing or an old excavation rather than a collapsed chamber.

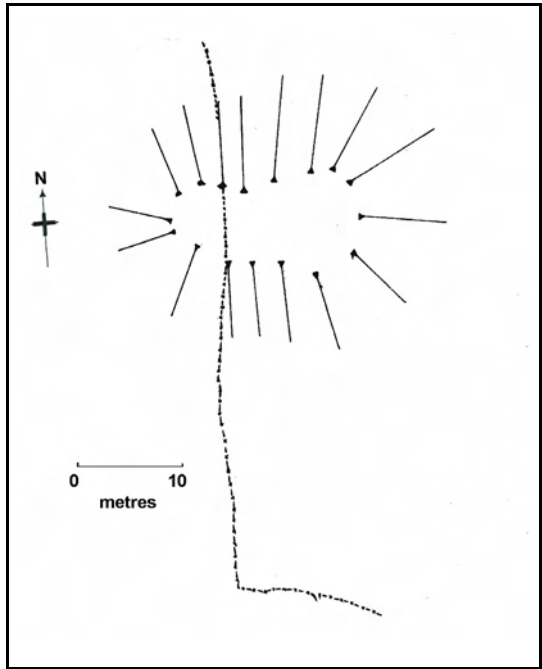


Figure 8. *Hunter's Lodge conjoined round barrows.*

Tynings Gate, Cheddar. (Figure 9).

Close to the southern edge of Mendip is a long mound that has been suggested by Grinsell to be either a non-megalithic long barrow (repeated in Kinnes 1992) or two round barrows (1971), whilst the Somerset HER suggests it is a natural mound on which two round barrows have been placed. On the ground, the mound is oval, measuring 36 m long by 18 m wide and 1 m high, and is orientated broadly east-west. There is a higher irregular mound towards the centre of the earthwork and adjacent to this, on the north side, is an area of disturbed ground, covered by nettles and brambles. The west end is higher and wider than the east.

The site does have the appearance of a long mound but in 1928 Wicks noted that there was a neck in the middle of the mound and argued it was in fact two round barrows ploughed into one. Indeed, he stated that if there were no constriction between the mounds and if the east was the higher end it could easily be mistaken to be a long barrow (Wicks 1928). He also notes the disturbance in the north-west area, and this suggests an unrecorded, pre-20th century excavation. The smaller, irregular mound is adjacent to this area of disturbance and is undoubtedly the spoil from the excavation.

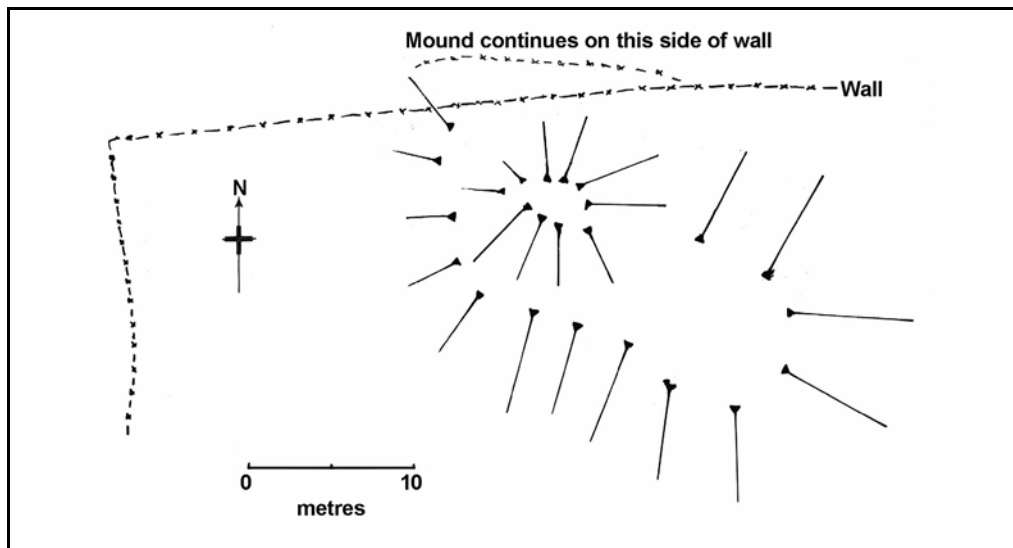


Figure 9. *Tynings Gate probable conjoined round barrows*

It appears fairly certain that this long mound is two round barrows, confusion having arisen because the barrows are low and conjoined, with the heap of spoil from an old excavation atop the western end making it appear that a small round barrow was placed on a long mound. The situation of the mound would seem to fit better with a round barrow(s) interpretation as it is on a slight prominence, common to so many of the Mendip round barrows and in contrast to the placement of long barrows in the region.

Old Down, Chilcompton. (Figure 10).

An oval mound near the Old Down crossroads, at the junction of West and East Mendip, was first noted by Crawford (1925) and suggested to be a (non-megalithic) long barrow. Tratman (1938) also supported this interpretation, as did the Ordnance Survey Archaeology Division. By contrast, Grinsell (1971) thought it to be two round barrows. The mound measures 32 m long by 16 m wide by 1 m high and is orientated east-west: the east is the higher and wider end.

Superficially, this monument appears to be a convincing, though much reduced, Neolithic long barrow with the measurements and orientation fitting local (Beacon Batch, Stoney Littleton) and national patterns. On the ground a slight constriction is visible on the south side of the mound, around 20 m from its eastern end. The Ordnance Survey Archaeology Division believed this to be the result of an earlier episode of excavation or quarrying. During 2007-8, a programme of research excavations was carried out at the site by the author and David Mullin, to test the long barrow/round barrow hypothesis (Lewis and Mullin, *in prep.*). The analysis is ongoing but it can be revealed here that the Old Down mound is in fact two, conjoined, round barrows. The monuments were exceptionally well-preserved and contained a rich assemblage of grave items and human remains. Of significance here, however, are two key



Figure 10. *Old Down conjoined round barrows.*

points. Firstly, it is often assumed that low mounds are the result of intensive ploughing in the historic and modern periods, the supposition being that all prehistoric barrows would have been of considerably stature. Yet, the excavations at Old Down revealed intact Bronze Age archaeology only c. 0.1 m below the surface of the mound with no evidence for plough damage. This has important repercussions and must make us question our ideas about the appearance of monuments and also consider the vulnerability of archaeological deposits so close to the surface. Secondly, the phasing of the two round barrows at Old Down was clear and revealed that they were deliberately constructed to be overlapping. Again, there is a tendency to see closely spaced or “touching” round barrows as resulting from the spread of the mounds by erosion and ploughing yet at Old Down this was the intention of the Bronze Age builders. It may be that the form of conjoined round barrows was meant to inspire uncertainty, perhaps blurring the boundaries between ancient long barrows and contemporary round barrows

OTHER LONG MOUNDS

(See Figure 6 for locations)

Chicks Lane/Chewton Plot, Chewton Mendip. (Figure 11).

The Chicks Lane, or Chewton Plot, earthwork was first noted by Wicks in 1928. He described a mound, almost round at the east, and continuing westwards into a long mound. Crawford, the next to visit, thought it to be the remains of a Celtic field system (quoted in Grinsell 1971). Others have argued the mound variously to be a long barrow (Tratman 1948) or a round barrow (Grinsell 1971) and it was scheduled as a long barrow in 1962 (and remains scheduled as such today). An earthwork survey undertaken by the author suggests it is neither a long nor round barrow but a well-preserved lynchet corner, seemingly forming part of an extensive field system in the area. The presence of a Romano-British settlement attached to this field system may provide a date for the whole complex (see Somerset HER entries 23279 and 23251)

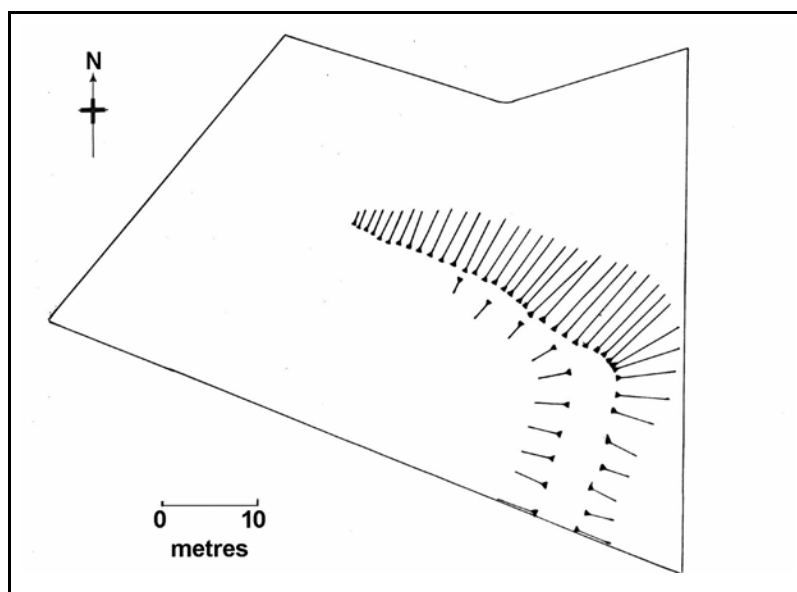


Figure 11. *Chicks Lane earthwork.*

Pen Hill long mound, St Cuthbert Out. (Figure 12).

There is another long mound on Pen Hill, close to the long barrow and running near the summit of the high ground. This mound measures 235 m long and is up to 10 m wide and survives to c. 0.6 m high. It is aligned north-east/south-west. It was first noted by Grinsell (1971) who thought it a bank barrow, a rare type of Neolithic monument consisting of an elongated mound, flanked by two parallel side-ditches, often situated on hilltops or ridges, related to the long barrow and cursus monument traditions of the Early Neolithic. However, Williamson and Loveday (1988) questioned the Pen Hill 'bank barrow' interpretation and

argued that it might be a pillow mound, a type of earthwork associated with rabbit warrens. Pillow mounds, constructed in the late medieval and post-medieval periods, provided a suitable habitat for rabbits and facilitated the trapping of the animals. They are usually rectangular with a sharply profiled ditch running around the mound and are a common feature of upland landscapes.

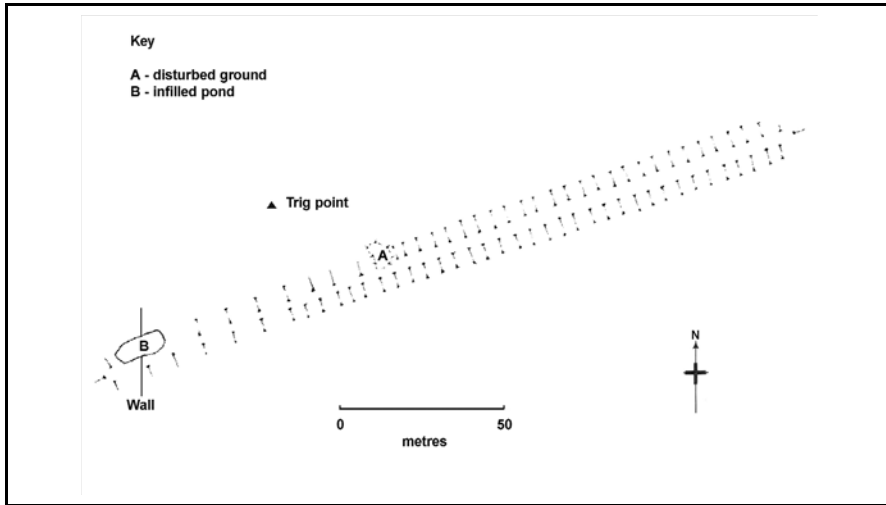


Figure 12. *Pen Hill long mound.*

The author has carried out detailed studies of the Pen Hill long mound (Lewis 1996, 2005 and in prep.), including earthwork and geophysical survey, aerial photographic analysis and documentary research. Cartographic sources give a *terminus ante quem* of 1837 for the mound's construction, evidenced by a stock pond cutting its western terminal. The aerial photographs were of great interest, revealing soil marks of what appear to be eight smaller, cigar-shaped mounds lying perpendicular to the main earthwork, four each side. These do not survive on the ground but their morphology suggests that they may be ploughed out pillow mounds. This may lend support to the central, long mound to also be a pillow mound. Indeed, Dolebury Warren hillfort to the north contains comparable archaeology in the form of one of the best preserved rabbit warrens in the country. Features include a warrener's house and garden, twenty-one vermin traps and eight definite and one possible pillow mounds. Two of the smaller mounds lie perpendicular to an elongated central mound, c.150 m long, reminiscent of the Pen Hill arrangement.

Yet, it would be unwise to discount Pen Hill as an earlier monument as there exist factors in its favour. Firstly, the geophysical surveys carried out by the author reveal that the mound is two-phase, with an eastern section approximately 120 m long and a western section approximately 115 m long. The break between the two is also marked by a slight change of orientation and a narrowing of the mound westwards. This may be suggestive of a Neolithic date, as bank barrows/cursus monuments are known to exhibit these characteristics; the Dorset Cursus, for example, appears to have been built in stages, albeit on a much larger scale. Secondly, the alignment of the Pen Hill mound on the nearby long barrow, only 50 m west, might also support a Neolithic date as there is often a close spatial relationship between long barrows and bank barrows and cursus monuments. Thirdly, the narrowness and restricted

height of the Pen Hill mound has been suggested to be wrong for a bank barrow yet its dimensions are closely matched by the bank barrow at North Stoke, Oxfordshire. This monument measured 225 m long by c. 11 m wide and has been dated to 3630-3340 cal BC (4672 \pm 49BP: BM1405). The Pen Hill mound also shares the same orientation and is comparable in height to the West Cotton long mound, Nottinghamshire. West Cotton was also found to vary in width, as with Pen Hill where the east end is twice as wide as the west, and showed evidence for a staged construction, with the original mound extended some time after the initial erection. This site has been dated to the later fourth/early third millennium BC.

It is likely that an unenclosed rabbit warren existed on Pen Hill in the medieval or early post-medieval period. The long mound could have been constructed as part of the warren but it remains a possibility that the mound already existed and was reused in this endeavour. Indeed, it may have been the presence of this earthwork, and the nearby long barrow, that encouraged the establishment of a warren at this site. It seems peculiar that the smaller pillow mounds on Pen Hill have not survived whilst the other earthworks, and indeed many round barrows, have and might suggest that we should not be too confident in assigning these soil marks a definite function without further research (Lewis *in prep.*).

DISCUSSION

It is impossible to be certain from surface observation just how many of the long mounds of West Mendip are Neolithic long barrows, for the potential exists to confuse them with other earthworks. However, this article has highlighted eight mounds that are certain or possible long barrows: Priddy; Priddy Hill; Beacon Batch; Pen Hill; Haydon Drove; Green Ore; Mountain Ground and Barrow House Farm.

These suggested long barrows fall within the typical sizes and orientations for long barrows generally. The average West Mendip length is 41.25 m, compared to 47 m for non-megalithic barrows and between 30 and 50 m for Cotswold-Severn tombs. 50% of the West Mendip barrows are orientated east-west and of the remainder all but Priddy fall between north-east and south-east. An east-west orientation is common for most of the Early Neolithic long mounds within Britain, both megalithic and non-megalithic. Kinnes (1992, 68) cites that 77% of non-megalithic sites lie between north-east and south-east, with east emphasised (34%). The figures for megalithic long mounds compares well: of the 126 Cotswold-Severn long mounds with known orientations detailed in Powell et al (1969), 79% lie between north-east and south-east, with east emphasised (37%).

It is possible to identify three landscape positions that the West Mendip long mounds occupy:

1. monuments placed so their long axis runs parallel to a slope
2. monuments placed so their long axis is at right angles to a slope (thus with entrances pointing uphill/downhill)
3. monuments placed on level ground

50% of the long mounds fall into category 1, whilst 25% fall into categories 2 and 3 respectively. Again, these figures tally well with the national picture, where there is a general preference for long barrows to run along the contours of the hill. When viewing these monuments from below they form a 'false crest' effect against the skyline, which may have been of significance.

Worthy of mention is the relationship between long mounds and round barrows in the study area. Priddy Hill, Pen Hill and Mountain Ground all have one or more round barrows placed close to their eastern ends, whereas Beacon Batch was incorporated into a round barrow cemetery. There are round barrows within 100 m of Green Ore, 200 m of Barrow House Farm and 400 m of the Priddy and Haydon Drove long mounds. Whilst an intentional relationship is suggested by the first four examples, it is difficult to be certain of the significance of the latter four, due to the high number of round barrows on the Mendip plateau. The siting of round barrows adjacent to long barrows is seen elsewhere in Britain, perhaps most spectacularly at Winterbourne Stoke, Wiltshire where two lines of round barrows run in a north-easterly direction from a long barrow and others cluster nearby (around 27 in total). This suggests that long barrows retained a form of sanctity in the Early Bronze Age and that their links with the dead were reinforced through this new relationship. That some round barrows may have been constructed to appear similar to long barrows, as at Old Down, is also a possibility.

When looking at the distribution of the Mendip long mounds several facts are striking. Firstly, there is a general avoidance of much of the central and northern parts of the plateau. Beacon Batch is the most northerly monument but it is a single example and its focus is south, onto and beyond the plateau. Secondly, there is a cluster of long mounds at the eastern limit of the high plateau, from Mountain Ground in the north, through Barrow House Farm, Green Ore, Haydon Drove and Pen Hill in the south. As one moves east from this point, the Mendip plateau loses its uniformity, becoming lower, more geologically varied and more difficult to define. These observances may be related to our modern, privileged “plan view” of the landscape, aided by Ordnance Survey and geological mapping. However, it is possible that the gaps on the plateau represent an avoidance of certain areas during the Early Neolithic, perhaps because they were occupied by more dense woodland and utilised as valuable hunting and gathering grounds. If such land was communally exploited it may not have been appropriate for groups to build long barrows there. The cluster of long mounds at the eastern margin of the plateau may represent a formalisation of this boundary between the inhabited world and the wilder lands to the west, where many groups may have held an interest in the rich resources that could have included auroch, wild boar and deer as well as edible vegetation and timber.

West Mendip has been singled out for the purposes of this article but it is important to see the region as part of a wider long barrow landscape. A further ten monuments exist in the East Mendip Bath/Frome environs, the most famous example being Stoney Littleton. To the north of West Mendip, another group of six monuments can be found in the Broadfield Down/Dundry area, which includes the now destroyed but once impressive Fairy’s Toot chambered long barrow. What may be significant is that the long barrows in these regions appear to fall into the Cotswold-Severn chambered long barrow tradition, whereas the evidence from West Mendip might indicate the juxtaposition of this style with the non-megalithic long barrow, of which Priddy is an example. The ‘spheres of influence’ of megalithic and non-megalithic barrows in southern England are largely exclusive, with megalithic monuments in the west ‘upland’ zone and non-megalithic monuments in the central, south and east areas ‘lowland’ zone (for a fuller discussion of this phenomenon see Lewis 2005). The availability, or not, of stone has long been seen as the reason for the selection of a particular style and whilst this may be true in some cases, the occurrence of both megalithic and non-megalithic architecture in the same geographic region suggests the choice may not have been about availability alone. Regions other than West Mendip where this can be seen include the ‘Medway Group’ of megalithic barrows in Kent, a few megalithic barrows in Dorset and the monuments of the Avebury region. The Medway and Dorset groups are viewed as small local aberrations in a non-megalithic landscape but Avebury has long been assigned more importance in contributing

to an understanding of megalithic/non-megalithic relations. It is seen as a true ‘frontier’ zone, lying between the two traditions, building both traditions but also combining architectural elements from both into one monument. Recent work on dating long barrows in southern Britain has not revealed any definite chronological differences between the megalithic and non-megalithic styles, suggesting a complex decision-making process, perhaps intertwining themes of raw material availability with local preferences, aesthetic perceptions, ancestral proclamations and the deliberate group manipulation of monumental traditions.

Long barrows are discreet historical phenomena, with building seemingly beginning in the 38th century cal BC (Whittle, Bayliss and Healy 2008) and continuing for another few hundred years. They were probably constructed by local communities as communal burial monuments that acted as the physical focus for a range of ritual practices and religious observations. The primary use of some long barrows seems to have lasted as little as a single generation (*ibid.* 67) and the numbers in use at any one time may have been low (Whittle *et al* 2007). It cannot, therefore, be assumed that the long barrows of Mendip were all directly contemporary and it may be that where long barrows are closely grouped (e.g. Mountain Ground and Barrow House Farm) one monument is the successor of the other.

The suggested long barrows of West Mendip are an important regional group and they deserve to be the focus of further research. This should include non-intrusive geophysical survey, as this could detect flanking side ditches, quarry pits or stone chambers. Ultimately, however, if our understanding of Mendip is to develop and match that of neighbouring regions, properly focused and funded modern excavation is essential. This way, we can begin to talk of “...the different choices of particular communities in particular places...” (Whittle, Bayliss and Healy 2008, 68) and bring the prehistory of Mendip into the twenty-first century.

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