



VENTNOR & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY

Bronze Age barrows on Luccombe Down



Early this century the National Trust, Isle of Wight, commissioned archaeologist Christopher Currie to survey its properties. He undertook desk research at the IOW Record Office and the Hampshire Record Office, studied various aerial photos and drew on the IOW archaeology archives. He also carried out field work inspections on the various National Trust sites. In this article I have concentrated on the parts of his report that are about the Bronze Age bowl barrows on Luccombe Down. These barrows are listed as Scheduled Ancient Monuments and there could be 13 of them.



Bronze Age bowl barrows on Luccombe Down

The Bronze Age in Britain dates from around 2200 BC, lasting nearly 1500 years, and barrows are found all over southern England - mounds of earth which were burial places as well as being used for other community rituals. They are often round in shape and known as 'bowl barrows' like the ones on Luccombe Down.

Bronze Age people believed that ancestors bestowed new life on their settlements and therefore built their barrows - their burial places - within sight. The barrows on Luccombe Down (two of them are shown in the photo here) were probably constructed by people living in a settlement in Wroxall. Five of the barrows were excavated in 1855 and they contained pottery vessels the contents of which disintegrated on exposure.

What Currie discovered in his field research was that there were a number of banks that must pre-date the barrows because they were built beneath some of them, and are likely to date from the early Bronze Age. These banks formed a rectangular enclosure that ran for 80 metres (West-East) and some 130 metres (North-South). Another similar, but smaller, bank was found to the north of the barrows and could be another enclosure. The survival of earthworks pre-dating Bronze Age barrows is extremely rare anywhere in the UK. Currie does not speculate on what the enclosures were for, although the land was probably cleared of forests by 2000BC at the latest, and used for grazing, so they could have been for livestock - Bronze Age farmers kept cattle, sheep, pigs and goats - but they are very large for that. Or they could have been to keep animals out, for example to stop sheep from eating a grain crop, but that seems unlikely: who would grow grain on top of the Downs? There are more suitable places.

Another cluster of barrows was situated on Wroxall Down, two of which were excavated in 1825, but the extensive extraction of flint, when Lowtherville houses were built, has removed all trace of them. An urn found in one of the barrows on Wroxall Down is now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

Richard Downing, [Ventnor and District Local History Society](http://www.ventnorhistory.org.uk). Sources: Christopher Currie report to National Trust 2002; Whitehead, John L The Undercliff of the Isle of Wight 1911; photo: Alan Phillips. For more information on Ventnor Downs visit <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/ventnor-downs>