

A PREHISTORIC SKULL BURIAL AND POST CIRCLE AT ROCKBOURNE, HAMPSHIRE

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SUMMARY

Following the accidental discovery of a human skull in the side of a pipe trench near Duck's Nest Cottages, Rockbourne, a small excavation showed it to be an isolated skull burial in one of four post-holes, apparently part of an undated circle, diameter 3.3 m.

burial. There were no indications of other features in the sides of the trench. There is a bank running NW-SE across the area which appears to be a field lynchet, and traces of further lynchets may be seen elsewhere in the field.

DISCOVERY

In February 1977, Mr. McLeod, the farmer of Tenantry Farm, Rockbourne, reported to the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, Salisbury, that during the digging of a drainage trench at the upper (north-east) side of the field to the south-west of Duck's Nest Cottages (SU 10082035) a human skull had been found. The site, which is on the Chalk at a height of c. 70 m O.D. and lies on the lower slope of Rockbourne Down above the valley running south-east to Rockbourne, was inspected by Mr. B. Eagles of the Royal Commission and the writer.

The skull was still *in situ* in the north-west side of the trench, although one side had been damaged by the digger. It appeared to be in a narrow feature cut in the natural chalk. Overlying both chalk and feature was a layer, 45 cm thick, of homogeneous brown loam under c. 10 cm of topsoil. The brown loam layer showed no sign of disturbance and sealed the

EXCAVATION

It was anticipated that the remainder of the skeleton might be *in situ* on the north-west side of the trench. Accordingly, with the permission of Mr. McLeod, a small excavation was carried out on 5th March by Salisbury Museum Archaeological Research Group in order to obtain further information on the burial. An area 1.5 m by 4.5 m was cleared on the north-west side of the trench (Fig. 1). The topsoil, 5-17 cm thick, and brown loam layer, 42-7 cm thick, were removed down to the chalk. There were no finds except one struck flint flake in the topsoil. There were no features in the brown layer apart from another modern pipe trench running diagonally across the excavated area. There was no grave, but four circular features (Fig. 2, P1-P4) were found cut in the chalk, apparently forming part of a circular arrangement. P1, in which the skull lay, had been cut on one side by the 1977 drainage trench (filled in prior to the excavation); P2 had been cut by the earlier modern pipe trench. P1-P4 were

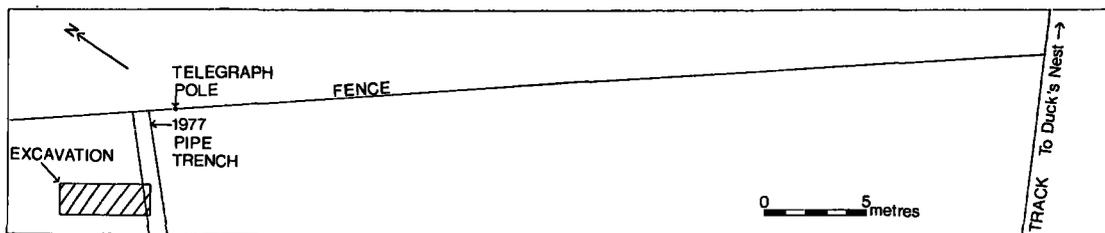


Fig. 1. Location of excavation in field south-west of Duck's Nest Cottages, Rockbourne.

excavated, and the finds were placed in Salisbury Museum (Acc. No. 50/1977).

THE POST-HOLES

P1 Diameter 31–3 cm.
 Depth 43–4 cm.
 Fill Brown soil with occasional chalk flecks, flint nodules at sides and above and below skull.
 Finds Human skull at a depth of 12–15 cm. One crumb of pottery.

P2 Diameter 34 cm.

Depth 40 cm.

Fill Brown soil with occasional chalk flecks, flint nodules.

Finds One sherd of pottery at a depth of 7 cm. A fossil echinoid (*Echinocorys*), perhaps a deliberate deposit.

P3 (Fig. 3)

Diameter 33–6 cm.

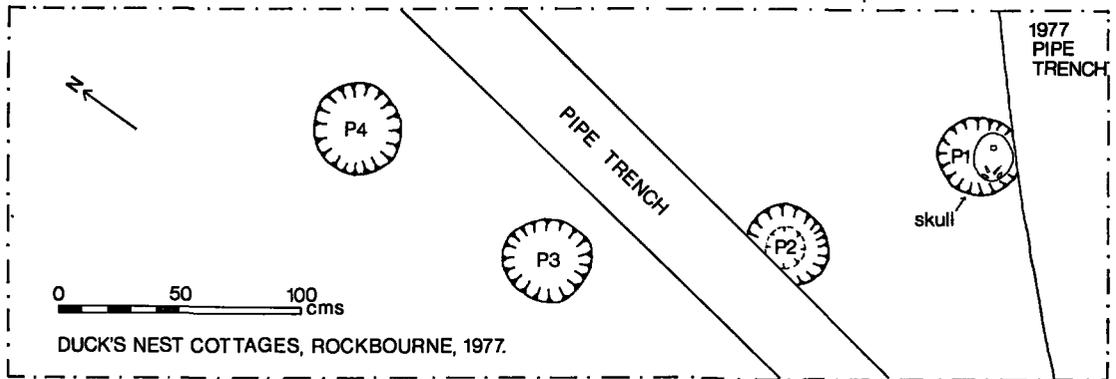


Fig. 2. Plan of excavation.

Depth 40 cm.

Fill Brown soil with grey flecks and occasional chalk flecks. Large numbers of flint nodules.

No finds.

P4 Diameter 35–7 cm.

Depth 53 cm.

Fill Similar to P1–P3.

No finds.

P1–P4 were well-shaped, well-cut and straight-sided. Although there were no traces of actual post-pipes, the characteristic and plentiful flint-nodule packing indicated that they were post-holes. A slight depression in the bottom of P2 (dotted on Fig. 2) may have been caused by a post. It seems probable that any posts were pulled out, thus dislodging the flint packing.

THE SKULL

The skull was lying in the south-eastern half of P1, 12–15 cm from the top of the hole. It was upside down, with the foramen magnum facing upwards and the eye sockets on the south-west side. It gave every appearance of having been deliberately and carefully placed in the hole; with some flint nodules above and below, it is difficult to believe that it would have fallen accidentally into the position in which it was found. One (perfectly natural) flint nodule found immediately beneath the skull was shaped somewhat like a figurine and it is just possible that it was deliberately selected to be placed in this position. It is possible that a stake could have been set beside the skull, but it seems more likely that the skull was placed in the hole after the post had been removed. Except for the root of the

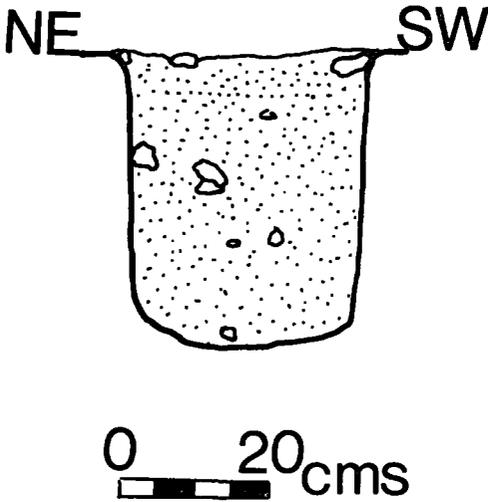


Fig. 3. Section of posthole P3.

left upper second pre-molar, all the teeth of the upper jaw were missing and no lower jaw was present, showing that the flesh had decomposed before the skull was buried in the hole. The skull is that of an adult, probably a female (Eric Wain, pers. comm.).

THE POTTERY

From P1: Small fragment, orange-brown throughout, with some flint grit.

From P2: Plain body sherd from a hand-made pot, 9 mm thick, orange-brown externally, dark grey internally. Fabric moderately hard with some grog and fine grit.

It appears to be prehistoric but is unfortunately too indistinctive to provide any closer dating evidence.

COMMENTS

The site would repay further investigation to obtain, if possible, further dating evidence and to confirm the existence of a complete circle of post-holes, the apparent diameter of which is c. 3.3 m.

Stake- and post-circles of similar size have been found associated with some Bronze Age round barrows (Ashbee 1960, 62). Although no barrow ditches were observed in the 1977

pipe trench, a barrow ditch could lie beyond the length of trench inspected (approximately 7 m south from the fence) and subsequent agriculture may have destroyed any barrow mound. The evidence indicates that most internal timber circles under round barrows were of a temporary nature, the posts being withdrawn before the barrow was raised, and it has been suggested that they may have been mortuary huts (Ashbee 1960, 62-5). On this site it also appears that the posts were pulled out, rather than decaying *in situ*. Since the flesh on the skull had decomposed before it was buried in the hole, one might hypothesise that the post circle was a mortuary enclosure or hut in which the corpse had previously been laid; after a period of time during which the flesh had decayed, the structure was demolished and the skull placed in one of the post-holes. If this was the case, further excavation might reveal what happened to the rest of the bones. The skull burial under a small barrow at Easton Down, Wilts, was of an essentially different character since the presence of cervical vertebrae and lower jaw indicated that 'the head itself had never been moved since the rotting of the flesh' (Stone 1934, 564). One should stress, however, that at the Duck's Nest Cottages site there is no direct evidence of a barrow or any clear dating. Sites in the vicinity include the Neolithic Duck's Nest earthen long barrow, a large Bronze Age barrow cemetery, and Iron Age/Romano-British settlements and field systems. This site, whatever its precise date and character, is an interesting addition to the rich archaeological landscape of Rockbourne Down.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- Stone, J F S 1934 A Case of Bronze Age Cephalotaphy on Easton Down, Winterslow, *Wiltshire Archaeol. and Nat. Hist. Mag.* 46, 563-7.

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