Excavation of Pool Farm Barrow, West Harptree, Somerset

BY THE VERY REV. ETHELBERT HORNE, F.S.A.

THIS barrow, although of considerable size, is not marked on the 6-in. O.S. map, XXVII, N.E., on which it should occur. Its position is, Long. 2. 39′ 48″, Lat. 51. 17′. 5″.

The field in which the tumulus is situated, is known as 'Barrow Close', and its S.W. side is bordered by the road to Burrington, half-a-mile after it has passed the 'Castle of Comfort' inn. The barrow was scheduled as an Ancient Monument in 1927, but the farmer-owner obtained permission to dig it down, as he stated it interfered with his farming. The removal was allowed on condition that the tumulus should be excavated by the Somerset Archæological Society, before the farmer took it in hand.

The excavation began on 29 September 1930 and continued for a fortnight. Wm. E. Young, assisted by Wm. Wedlake, was employed to do the digging and the work was directed by the writer. As the barrow had been ploughed over on several occasions it is now much lower and more widely spread than it was when first constructed. No contoured plan is therefore given, as it would only show the result of the last ploughing, and even the boundary line of the mound, as drawn in the ground plan (Plate XIV), must be taken as an approximation. The barrow rises about 3 ft. 9 in. above the normal level of the field, and as it is chiefly composed of soft earth containing little or no stone, the natural silting down, apart from the ploughing, has done much to reduce its original height and increase its

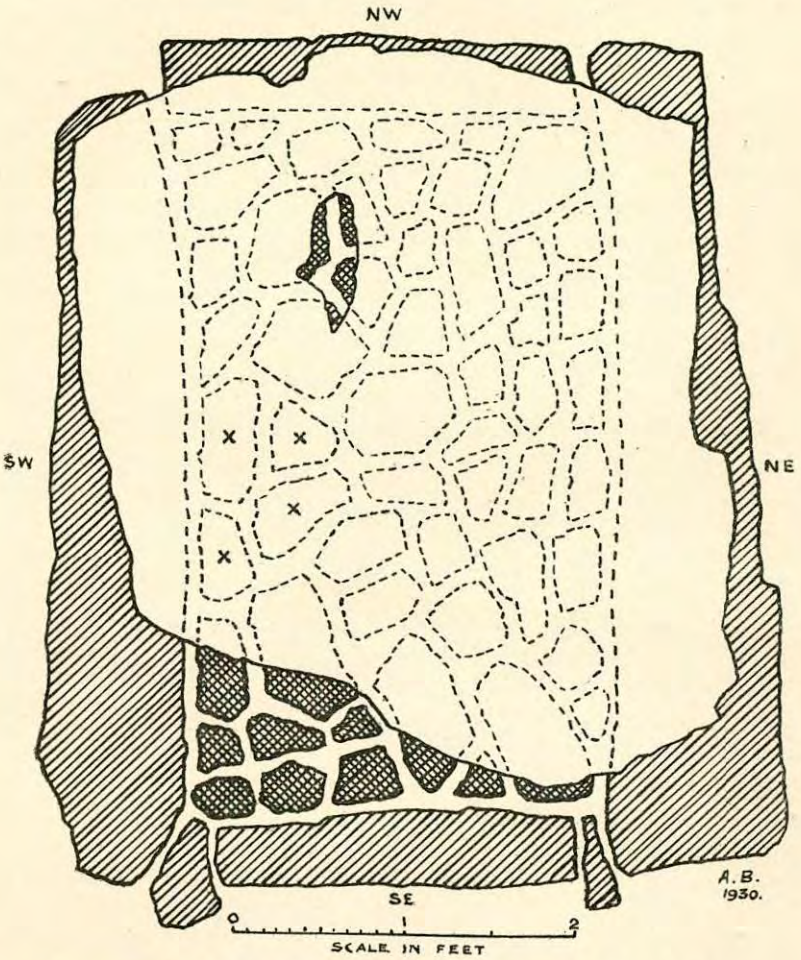
diameter. A fairly deep furrow, running N. and S. still remains, and shows what the plough did before the field became grass land.

The top layer of soil was composed of about 12 in. of humus, below which was a rich, heavy, red earth intermixed with patches of greyish clay. It contained no stones, large or small. What may have been the original turf line was represented by a hard compressed blackish layer, very thin, and probably containing a good deal of iron which accounted for the colour. This blackish material mixed with the clay had every appearance of being the result of fire, but no grains of charcoal could be definitely recognised in it. The depth below this probable turf line to the original undisturbed ground level varied from 3 to 6 in. A few small stones occurred on the natural undisturbed surface.

The assumed centre of the barrow having been marked with a picket, a trench was begun on its southern edge, 10 ft. in width. By a happy mistake this trench was laid out 7 ft. E. of the central picket and 3 ft. W. of it, so that it did not make for the estimated centre, but 2 ft. to the E. of it. When the cist was reached it was found that it was exactly in the centre of the cutting, which it would not have been if the original lay-out had been followed. The cutting was carried out in 10-ft. stages, down to the undisturbed ground, working towards the north. Four flint flakes were found in the barrow mould, but no secondary interments were met with.

In the last 10-ft. stage, the capstone of a cist was uncovered. It was 1 ft. 4 in. below the surface at its N.E. corner, and 1 ft. 10 in. on its S.W. side, as it had a considerable slope. It was formed of a large slab of dolomitic conglomerate rock, measuring 51 in. maximum length, 42 in. maximum width, and $6\frac{1}{2}$ in. maximum thickness. The stone is very irregular in shape and another measurement gives it as approximately 5 ft. 8 in. by 4 ft. 6 in. and 4 in. in thickness. A fairly large long-shaped hole existed in the capstone towards its N.W. end (seen in the accompanying diagrammatic plan), and another and much smaller round one near its S.E. extremity. The latter did not go right through. The cist itself when wholly uncovered measured about 5 ft. 6 in. in length, 4 ft. 6 in. in width,

and 2 ft. 6 in. in height. The sides were composed of two large single stones, that on the N.E. measuring 5 ft. 9 in. maximum



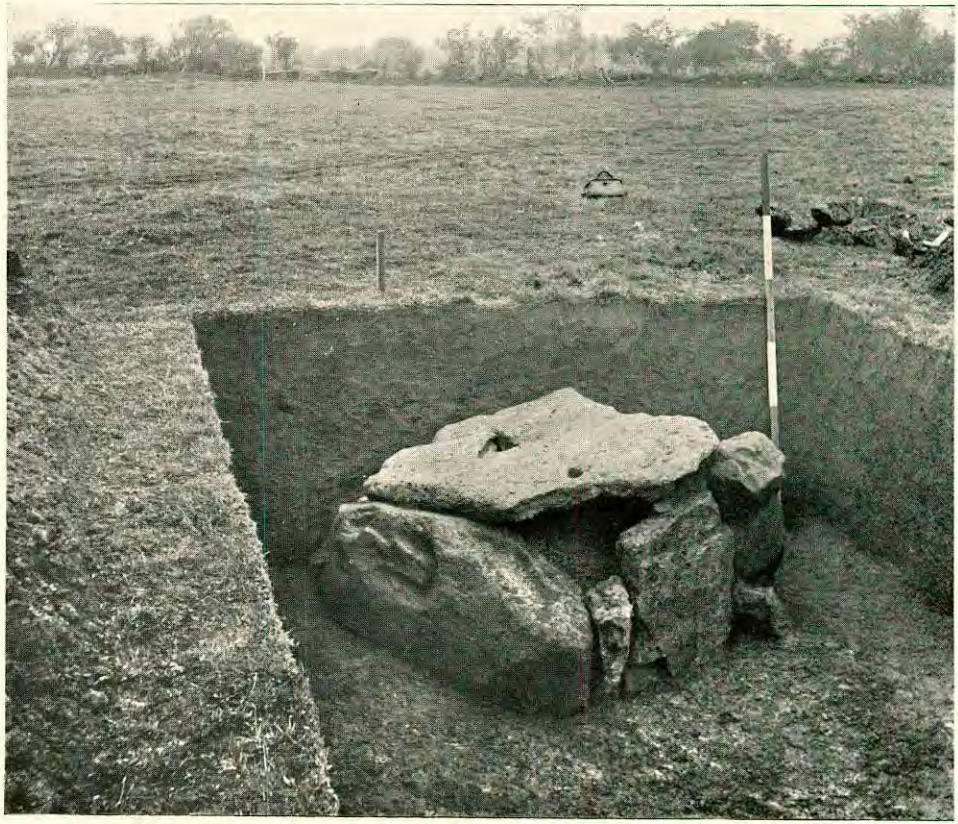
Diagrammatic Plan of Stone Cist, Pool Farm Barrow, West Harptree.

length, 2 ft. maximum depth, and 11 in. maximum thickness. The corresponding stone on the S.W. measured 4 ft. 8 in. maximum length, 2 ft. maximum depth, and 11 in. maximum thickness. The N.W. end, which may be regarded as the back

of the cist was made with one large piece of mountain limestone having a good sized cleft in it. It measured 2 ft. 3 in. in length, 1 ft. 11 in. in depth, and 7 in. maximum thickness. Two small stones were filled in on one side of this slab, and three on the other. Six small stones were piled up against these on the outside.

The S.E. stone which closed the cist in front, was 2 ft. 2 in. in length, 2 ft. 7 in. in depth and 7 in. in thickness, all maximum measurements. This closing-stone was inserted into the ground 6 in. to bring its top edge level with the side stones. As it was not wide enough to fill the space between the sides of the cist, a thin slab of stone was fitted in at either end, both slabs being on edge. Fairly large stones to the number of eighteen had been placed against the closing-stone to keep it in place. It was evident that some of these must have been put in position as the earth was being heaped up round the cist, for on removing the soil round them down to the ground level, one or two fell off as they had lost their support. The capstone did not cover the top of the cist exactly, owing to its defective shape. This was made good by packing ten small stones into the opening. Plate XV shows this opening after the packing stones were removed.

When the cist had been uncovered it was seen to be nearly full of fine earth that had silted in. To remove this, the capstone was first lifted off, and then the closing stone at the S.E. end was taken away as well. On clearing out all the fine silt a small pile of burnt human bones was found close to the S.W. side, and about 2 ft. from the S.E. end (see the crosses in the diagrammatic plan). The heap was compact and it might originally have been contained in something, such as a bag, which rested on the cobble-stone floor of the cist. This floor was formed of fifty-three rough and irregularly-shaped stones, set in the earth. All of these stones were taken up and the ground below them thoroughly examined, but nothing further was found. No flints and no pottery were met with in the cist, nor was there any charcoal mixed with the cremation. One small stone that had been well burnt and had evidently been taken for a piece of bone, was found among the cremated remains.



STONE CIST, POOL FARM BARROW, WEST HARPTREE

From a Photograph by Very Rev. E. Horne, F.S.A.

The cutting A.B. was then extended 7 ft. beyond the central picket, towards the N. but nothing further was found. So that the centre of the barrow might be thoroughly explored, cutting 'D', was then made, running E. A corresponding one, 'C', was dug towards the W., and in this a large flat stone, roughly 3 ft. by 3 ft. and about 11 in. in thickness, was uncovered. This stone was lifted and the ground below it carefully examined but without any result. It was probably a stone brought to the site to be used in building the cist, but it was not required and so left a short distance away. It was 3 ft. 6 in. from its centre to the nearest corner, the N.W., of the cist.

With a view to seeing if any ditch existed round this barrow, the original cutting was extended 18 ft. by 5 ft. towards the S. which would be some distance beyond the estimated edge of the barrow, but no trace of a ditch could be discovered. Again, at a distance of 40 ft. from the central picket, running N., another cutting, 'E', was made, 20 ft. by 5 ft., but here again no sign of there ever having been a ditch, could be found. Two flint flakes, a small double-ended flint scraper, and a few fragments of late glazed ware, came out of the surface mould of this cutting.

At what period in the Bronze Age this barrow was constructed it is difficult to estimate owing to the entire absence of worked flints, pottery, etc. Although no systematic work appears to have been done hitherto with regard to the dating of barrows, it seems probable that those containing cinerary urns and food-vessels are older than barrows where these are absent. Inasmuch as this barrow contained nothing but the cremation resting on the floor of the cist, it is perhaps one of late construction.

The cremation itself was composed of pieces of burnt bone that were broken small after they had been burnt. One piece, the longest, measured $2\frac{1}{2}$ in., several were 2 in., or $1\frac{3}{4}$ in., $1\frac{1}{2}$ in., and $1\frac{1}{4}$ in. The rest were small fragments of from half to three-quarters of an inch, and a quantity of coarse dust. The total amount of the cremation after it was dry, would probably about fill a quart measure. Most of the larger pieces of bone were contracted and twisted from the effects of the fire, and some were entirely black, but the majority of the harder frag-

ments retained their ordinary bone colour. Professor E. Fawcett, F.R.S., who kindly looked at the cremation, thought it was possible that it contained the bones of two persons, one young and one old, but no opinion could really be formed on such very fragmentary remains.

I have to thank Dr. Arthur Bulleid, F.S.A., for much useful help during the excavation, and for the care with which he made all the measurements and drew the plans that accompany this account.

NOTE. Since the above account was written, the whole of the barrow has been removed by the Clutton District Council in order to use the material for road widening purposes. Nothing whatever was discovered during the removal, and the barrow was found to be composed entirely of fine earth without the admixture of any stones. The cist has been left standing and will be railed round. The soil was taken away during the week, March 9–14, 1931.