



**Report on the test pit excavations at Beacon Hill, Rottingdean, East  
Sussex.**

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## Excavations at Beacon Hill, Rottingdean 2018

### Introduction

In early October the Brighton and Hove Archaeological Society were contacted by David Larkin a manager at City Parks about conducting a survey at Beacon Hill, Rottingdean (TQ 3645 0265). A large beacon was being constructed to celebrate the end of the First World War (Fig 1.). The County Archaeologist, Mr. Greg Chuter, was concerned about the damage to potential archaeological remains in that location. The County Archaeologist suggested that a trench be cut across the area to be used, to investigate and find evidence for archaeology on this part of Beacon Hill. The BHAS conducted a small scale excavation on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2018.

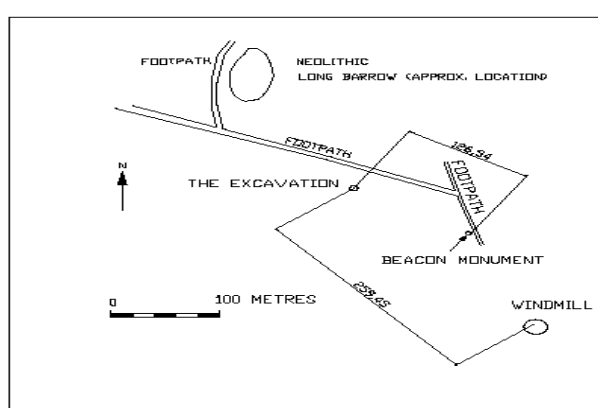


Fig 1. LOCATION OF EXCAVATION ON BEACON HILL

### The History of Beacon Hill

Old maps of Beacon Hill show that the hill has not been ploughed during the past century or longer. A map of 1873/1874 shows a pastoral landscape and subsequent maps throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century show no change to this environment. However, Beacon Hill does contain a number of archaeological features. The old maps show the location of an earthwork scheduled as a Neolithic long barrow. They also show a large dew pond and an enigmatic mound to the north located just east of the top of Beacon Hill. There are no historical records for this mound and it appears never to have been investigated. This feature is also shown on old maps and is shown on the HER as a possible bowl barrow.

In the past few years a second Neolithic long barrow was found from aerial photographs, and located in what was part of the old pitch and putt golf course. This feature has now been scheduled and is located to the south of the BHAS excavation.

When the Rottingdean windmill was constructed in 1802 the skeleton of a 'warrior' was found, bearing a sword. This is almost certainly a Saxon burial. In 1862 during work to the Rottingdean cricket pitch, which was located on Beacon Hill at that time, a further 4 skeletons and an urn were found. The pitch and putt course was opened in 1938 (Carder 1990). There are no archaeological finds noted during the course construction.

During the past two decades sheep grazing has been part of keeping the Beacon Hill grass under control. On a number of occasions after sheep grazing, earthwork anomalies have been revealed. In 2005, 2006 and 2009 the BHAS were on Beacon Hill conducting resistivity surveys around the earthworks. The resulting images have suggested that Beacon Hill has a good amount of archaeology hidden beneath its slopes.

The resistivity survey of 2005 was close to the location of the new beacon site, and this survey revealed a number of features including a large ditch and a circular shape which could possibly be the location of an old windmill (Funnell 2005). (Fig 2.)

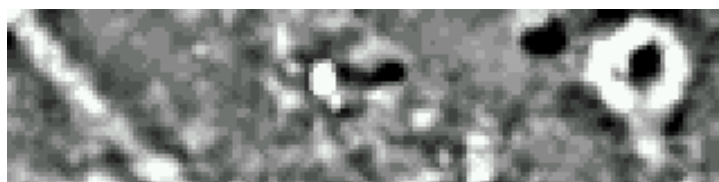


Fig 2. Geophysical images on Beacon Hill 2005

A visit to the Beacon monument on Beacon Hill, located just north/west of the windmill shows that the hill has been used as a beacon location on numerous occasions. The beacons included a warning of the approach of the Spanish Armada in 1588, and several of Queen Victoria's jubilees.

### **The Geology**

Beacon Hill is the southern section of a spur of the South Downs that runs down from Warren Road to the cliffs and the sea between Rottingdean and Ovingdean. The central section has been built upon at Ovingdean, while the most prominent location of the spur is at Mount Pleasant, just north of Ovingdean. The southern section has an undulating topography rising up from the southern end of Ovingdean to a higher location west of the 'Blind Veterans' complex. The hill then drops back down towards the cliffs and sea. On the east side of Beacon hill is located the village of Rottingdean, while the west slopes dramatically down to Greenways Road. This is the road leading to Ovingdean church and the old village.

The British Geological survey of this area (Sheet 318/333) shows the geology to be predominantly upper and middle chalk on the hill, with head deposits in the adjacent valleys.

## The excavations

The area was cleared of shrub and brambles by Jason Fisher and the Friends of Beacon Hill. The area was approximately 6/7 metres in diameter (Fig 3.)

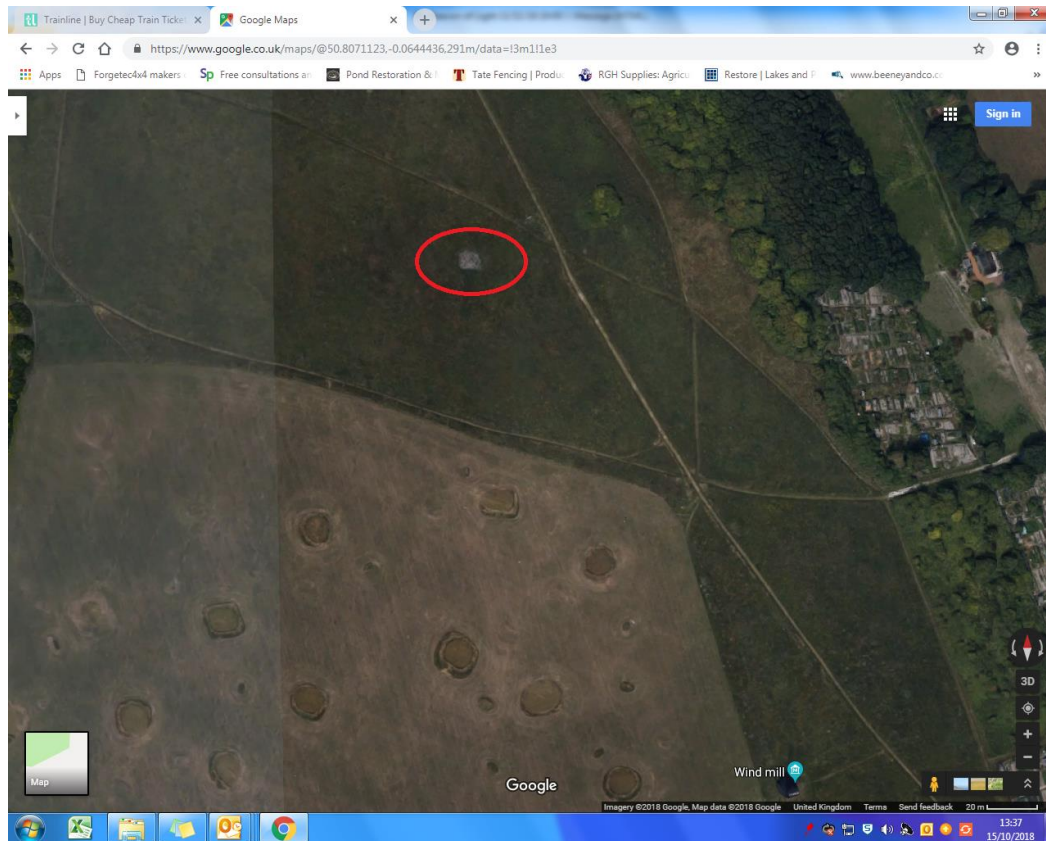


Fig 3. The area cleared by the Friends of Beacon Hill (Google Earth)

It was decided to sink 5 test pits. One was to be cut at the centre of the circle cleared with the other 4 trenches at the cardinal points of the compass (Fig 4.). The area was measured out for accuracy and strings set up to set the dimensions of each trench. The excavation was conducted by members of the BHAS Field Unit led by Archaeological Secretary Pete Tolhurst.

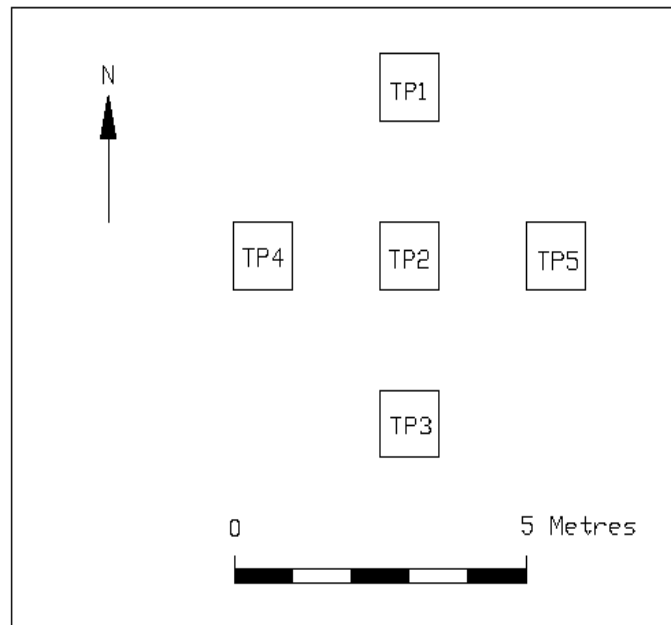


Fig 4. The Location of the test pits

The top layer was a very soft and light dark loam, with plenty of bramble roots. These were removed using shovel and spades. At a depth of about 15 cm the excavation continued using trowels.

Test Pit 1- This was the most northerly trench. After the removal of the top soil and bramble roots a second layer consisting of chalk rubble was revealed. This was quite a soft fill and was easy to remove and measured about 10 cm in depth. Below this was a lighter loam. The chalk bedrock was revealed at 32 cm depth. The surface had no visible plough marks and was virgin chalk. (Fig 5.)

Test Pit 2 – This trench was at the centre of the area cleared. This proved to have deeper soil going down to a depth of 40 cm at the north end, and dropping down to 50cm at the south end. A slight curving edge was noted going from west to south/east. The chalk bedrock was again free of any plough marks. ((Fig 6.)

Test Pit 3 – This trench was at the south end of the excavation and proved to be the deepest reaching a depth of just over 50 cm (Fig 7.) This trench revealed a stratigraphy of 4 distinct layers, with the chalk rubble second layer very visible in the sections all round (Fig 8.)

Test Pit 4 – This pit was on the west side of the area, and went down to a good depth almost 50 cm. The stratigraphy was similar to the other pits with at least 4 clear levels. (Fig 9.)

Test Pit 5 – This test pit was on the east side of the area. The top soil was removed and during the subsequent trowelling a large protruding flint was visible with a sharp

edge facing upwards. As the excavation progressed it became clear that there was either a pit or post hole in this location, on the north/east side of the test pit. The fill was carefully removed and from the bottom level of this possible post hole a piece of fire-cracked flint and a sherd of pottery were recovered (Fig 10.)

After photographs were taken, including a number for creating 3D imaging, all of the test pits were back filled. Measurements to the excavation were taken from both the Rottingdean windmill location and the Beacon Hill monument.

## The Finds

### The Flintwork (Table 1.)

A total of 78 pieces of flintwork were collected weighing a total of 1477 gm. All but two of the pieces were struck flakes, with 2 cores also being recovered. All of the flakes were hard hammered, with the majority (69%) having a white patination. Other patinations were blue and blue/grey, with only 3 flakes being black. Most of the flakes retained some vestige of cortex. The flakes were simple struck flakes and none had been retouched.

Context	No	Wt gm	White	Grey	Blue	Black	Core
TP1/1	4	186	1	3			
TP1/2	7	48	5		2		
TP2/1	2	19		1		1	
TP2/2	1	7	1				
TP2/3	5	150		4	1		
TP2/4	6	128	3	1	1	1	1
TP3/1	2	41	1			1	
TP3/2	2	35	2				
TP3/3	5	73	2	2	1		
TP3/4	5	186	5				1
TP4/2	3	59	3				
TP4/3	3	22	2		1		
TP4/4	17	305	16		1		
TP5/2	4	39	3		1		
TP5/3	3	27	2	1			
TP5/4	7	152	6	1			
Total	76	1477	52	12	9	3	2

Table 1. The Flintwork

The most well defined stratigraphy of the area was revealed in Test pit 3. The greater depth also produced a detailed visual display of the various layers. The very dark top soil had a depth of 15 cm. Below this was a layer of loose chalk rubble measuring 15 cm in depth while below this a light loam deposit measured 15 cm in depth with a shallow 5 cm of depth of a layer just above the natural chalk. It was in this lower layer that most of the flintwork was found.

### **The Fire-Cracked Flint (Table 2.)**

A similar situation to the flintwork also applied to the collection of fire-cracked flint, with most of the pieces again coming from the bottom layers, in all of the test pits.

Context	Number	Wt gm
TP1/1	2	184
TP1/2	4	62
TP2/1	4	18
TP2/3	12	248
TP2/4	13	211
TP3/3	3	110
TP3/4	31	997
TP4/2	1	13
TP4/3	1	12
TP4/4	25	505
TP5/2	2	34
TP5/3	13	197
TP5/4	2	79
Total	113	2670

Table 2. The Fire-Cracked Flint

### **The Pottery (Table 3.)**

It was interesting that such a small area produced 16 sherds of pottery with mostly prehistoric fabrics, although some sherds could be Saxo-Norman. Two sherds had a similar fabric to pottery found from the Ovingdean medieval excavations, which were conducted from 2015 to 2018. A more detailed and accurate assessment will be published once the pottery has been examined by a specialist. As with the flintwork and fire-cracked flint the location of the majority of the pottery came from the bottom layers.

Context	No	Description	Wt gm	Diag.
TP1/1	1	Medium sand temper (Saxo-Norman)	3	
TP1/2	2	Flint temper 0.1 to 0.3 mm (Saxo)	12	1 Rim
TP2/4	1	Flint temper 0.3 to 0.6 (I.A.)	2	
TP3/1	1	Fine sand temper (Medieval)	5	
TP3/2	1	Black flint/sand temper (I.A.)	2	
TP3/4	6	Flint temper 0.3 to 0.6 (I.A.)	31	
TP3/4	1	Daub	7	
TP4/4	1	Flint temper 0.3 to 0.6 (I.A.)	3	
TP5/4	1	Black flint/sand temper (I.A.)	7	
TP5/5	1	Red/brown flint temper (I.A.)	5	
Total	16		68	

Table 3. The Pottery

The excavation also produced a number of post medieval ceramics which totaled 11 in number. The majority of these sherds came from the top soil and upper chalk layers. One single piece of grey stoneware, which was a very fine vessel spout fragment, did come from the lower layer of test pit 5. It is highly likely that this may have dropped in from the upper layer during the excavation, as it quite out of context with the other finds in that layer.

### **Marine Mollusc**

The excavation produced 5 pieces of marine mollusc. There were 2 small fragments of oyster shell, an almost complete limpet shell, a complete whelk shell and a small fragment of scallop. Most of the shell came from the upper layers, with only a single piece of oyster being found in the lower layer of test pit 4.

### **Contemporary Materials**

The excavation produced 6 fragments of modern roofing tile (71gm), 6 fragments of modern brick (79gm), 5 pieces of modern glass, 1 clear piece 23 green in colour and 2 sherds being black. There was also a single piece of blue roofing slate (15gm).

### **Clay Pipe**

A total of 8 fragments of clay pipe stems were recovered ranging from 5.5 mm in diameter to 8 mm diameter. The majority of the stems were between 20 and 30 cm in length with a single piece slightly longer measuring 39 mm in length. No bowls were found and all the pipe stems were plain and without decoration.

### **Metalwork**

The excavation produced 2 large and older nails, with a squared body section and large heads, and a single small copper alloy plate measuring 17x16x0.5mm thick.

### **Animal Bone**

Only two pieces of animal bone were found, in the same test pit. One larger long bone with a knuckle end is sheep, but the smaller long bone measuring only 10cm in diameter came from the bottom layer of Test pit 5.

### **Stone**

A small number of stone finds are included in the collection of finds. One item is a small light brown beach pebble, recovered from the loam fill of test pit 4, while the other pair of stone finds were a possible complete rubbing stone (TP1/3) measuring 85 x 60 x 23 mm thick. The other rubbing stone was of a reddish fabric but was only a small fragment. One face was highly burnished.

### **Discussion**

Beacon Hill has long been regarded as having great archaeological potential. A combination of Neolithic long barrows and Saxon burials make any ground intervention requiring investigation and recording. The various geophysical surveys conducted by BHAS over the past decade, revealing additional images of possible ancient features, has only enhanced the importance of Beacon Hill as a site of immense importance.



The whole area of Ovingdean and Rottingdean is rich in archaeology. Field walking in the valley to the west of Beacon Hill produced numerous finds from the Neolithic to the medieval periods (Funnell 2000), and it is well known that metal detectorists have frequently been observed digging on Beacon Hill in the past.

The small test pits cut by the BHAS in November have only embellished the known records. The excavation has revealed edges that could indicate the location of ancient features or terraces. The finds from the excavation have provided additional evidence for activity on the hill ranging from the Neolithic through to the medieval period, with clay pipe stems and Victorian ceramics showing even later activity.

Beacon Hill remains a site of great interest and any ground intervention will require monitoring and recording. It is the ambition of BHAS to eventually conduct a major geophysical survey of Beacon Hill, and hopefully discover even more features. It is anticipated that further information may give a greater insight into the history of this very intriguing location.

A meeting was held with Jason Fisher in November and he has suggested working with the Friends of Beacon Hill. He also said that BHAS could effectively follow the sheep onto Beacon Hill after they have cropped the grass. This would make geophysics a great deal easier than with the present long grass, and may highlight even more subtle earthworks.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank Greg Chuter, the County Archaeologist and David Larkin of City Parks for allowing access to Beacon Hill, to Jason Fisher and the friends of Beacon Hill for clearing the excavation area, and to the members of the Brighton and Hove Archaeological Society that conducted the excavation. A copy of this report will be passed to County Hall and Brighton and Hove City Planning. A copy of the report will be published in the BHAS Field Notebook for 2018.

Authors John Funnell and Pete Tolhurst (13<sup>th</sup> November 2018)

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Fig 5. Test Pit 1.



Fig 6. Test Pit 2





Fig 7. Test Pit 3



Fig 8. Test Pit 3, the stratigraphy





Fig 9. Test Pit 4



Fig 10. Test Pit 5