

Watching Brief at Beacon Hill, Rottingdean, December 2018

Introduction

In the middle of 2018 the Brighton and Hove Archaeological Society were contacted by Emma Keane, a Brighton and Hove countryside ranger, and Jason Fisher, a member of the Friends of Beacon Hill. BHAS were asked to conduct a watching brief while post holes for 3 benches were being dug at location (TQ 3665 0240). The event took place on Monday 10th December 2018. The benches are located just east of the Rottingdean Hub café and south of the Rottingdean windmill. (Fig 1.)



Fig 1. Beacon Hill watching brief location (Google earth)

The History of Beacon Hill

Beacon Hill contains a number of prehistoric features and a number of ‘warrior’ burials. A sheep skeleton was found close to this location a few years ago. BHAS have conducted a number of geophysical surveys over the past decade or so, and the images provided indicate a good number of potential features (Funnell 2005 and 2009). In September of 2018 a small excavation west of the Rottingdean windmills produced finds of pottery and flintwork (Funnell & Tolhurst 2018 forthcoming)

In the past few years a second Neolithic long barrow was found on the old pitch and putt site. It was observed from aerial photographs. This feature has now been scheduled and is located to the west of this excavation. This feature is quite close to the location of the new benches, but is not in the scheduled area.

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, another 4 skeletons and an urn were found. The pitch and putt course was opened in 1938 (Carder 1990). There were no archaeological finds noted during the course construction.

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 Watching Brief

The location of the 3 tables had been set out using spray paint. Each table required 2 post holes each measuring approximately 60 cm square. The top soil was removed and then a layer of chalky loam measuring between 25 and 35 cm in depth. There were no features observed, although one post hole at the east end did have a shallow layer of additional loose chalk. This additional layer was only a few centimetres deep and also came down onto virgin chalk. The excavation of the post holes was carried by a number of volunteers from the Friends of Beacon Hill group.

The small collection of small post holes did produce some artefacts.

The Finds

The Flintwork

A total of 6 pieces of flintwork were collected weighing a total of 49 gm. All of the flakes were hard hammered, with 3 flakes (50%) having a grey patination. Other patinations were blue and black, with only 1 flake being black. Most of the flakes retained some vestige of cortex. The flakes were simple struck flakes and none had any retouch.

The Fire-Cracked Flint

A single piece of fire-cracked flint was found weighing 25 gm.

The Pottery

The pottery consisted of 3 sherds of Victorian or early 20th century ceramics. One item was a beige coloured stoneware vessel, which consisted of a complete base section and part of the wall. The other fragments were a small section of cream coloured glazed, and a single piece of glazed brown 'Keymer' type ware.

Contemporary Materials

The excavation produced a single piece of modern roofing tile weighing 32 gm and a small piece of brick which weighed only 2 gm.

Animal Bone

A small long bone was recovered measuring 40 millimetres in length, and weighing 3 gms. The bone is most likely from a sheep.

Discussion

The small excavation of post holes for benches at Beacon Hill once again produced enough archaeology to confirm that this location has been the subject of activity from the prehistoric period to modern times. The Brighton and Hove Archaeological Society are hoping to work with the Friends of Beacon Hill to conduct further geophysics on the hill in the not too distant future. The aim is to return to the hill on a number of occasions, particularly in areas after there has been sheep grazing. This may also allow for some contour surveying to be undertaken. The Friends of Beacon Hill are also keen to conduct a small excavation in the area, possibly with the Friends group and a local school. This would require some planning, and involvement with the County Archaeologist.

Acknowledgements

The author 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 to the Friends of Beacon Hill for digging the post holes.

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.

Author John Funnell (15th December 2018)

References:-

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Brighton & Hove Field Unit Notebook 2018 (forthcoming)