



Long barrows were the first Neolithic monuments to be built in Britain: the earliest date to around 3800 BC, over a century earlier than causewayed enclosures. They are elongated mounds of monumental proportions that range in height from 1–3 m and in length from 19 m to over 500 m; sites over about 150 m are exceptional and distinguished by the label bank barrows. Mound width (usually 12–25 m) is probably the best means of distinguishing long barrows from pillow mounds (2–8 m), which were constructed in the 18th/19th century AD as artificial warrens for rabbits. Pillow mounds are also very much lower.

Two large quarry ditches usually flank the sides of long barrows but in the Midlands and East Anglia, where mounds were usually built of turf, a slighter enclosing ditch was the norm. In areas where mounds were built of gathered stones (strictly long cairns rather than long barrows) ditches were usually omitted.

A few long barrows are rectangular or ovate in shape but most are trapezoidal, with the wider end also somewhat higher. Burial structures and monumental forecourt are usually placed at this end that overwhelmingly faces between NE and SE, the rising arc of the sun and moon. A few in contrast are aligned N–S.

Earthen long barrows usually, but not exclusively, cover wooden burial structures of a set pattern: some 6–7 m long and just over 1 m wide with large, often D-shaped, posts defining each end. In northern England, and sporadically in the south, similar, structures were often burned down as an act of closure. The intense heat achieved has suggested the presence of flues and thus deliberate construction as crematoria. Generally, however, the difference between earthen and stone chambered long barrows appears largely to have been the result of available materials. In the Cotswolds, stone was used; on Salisbury Plain, wood and chalk rubble; and in between, in the Avebury area where stone was available, both types are to be found. Thus the West Kennet chambered long barrow, Wilts., has a concave forecourt of

standing stones comparable to those built of posts elsewhere across Britain, while at Lochill, Dumfriesshire a stone structure directly replaced a wooden one. Yet the fact that burials could be placed in stone chambers under mounds over long periods of time, but in smaller, weaker wooden burial structures perhaps only at the time of construction, seemed until recently to point to very different patterns of use. To explain the fact that, nevertheless, very similar burial deposits have been found in both (muddled, partial, collective burials with, on occasions, one or two more complete – or nearly complete – skeletons) the idea of the long mortuary enclosure was developed in the 1950s.

These are either 1) open, ditched enclosures of the same general dimensions as the areas defined by long barrow ditches, or 2) fenced enclosures found under the edges of long barrows themselves. In these open structures it was believed bodies were exposed to decay and be picked clean by carrion. Later the bones were partially collected and placed in a wooden mortuary house and a long barrow built over the whole enclosure. The same exposure process it was suggested occurred in areas such as forecourts outside stone-built chambered tombs or within the accessible chambers themselves.

Recent work has called all this into question. Radiocarbon dating has shown that many ditched 'long mortuary enclosures' (type 1 above) are later in date than long barrows and that some at least are the remains of ploughed-out turf-built long barrows of East Anglian type. The second type – fenced enclosures – are narrower and coincide in site width with the edging of stone-built barrows. Since in several cases their defining posts were set insufficiently deeply to have stood independently (e.g. Giants Hills 1, Lincs) or were supported by low *external* banks, implying buttressing against internal mound thrust (e.g. Wor Barrow, Dorset; Beckhampton Road, Wilts.), it seems likely that they, like stone edging, were embellishments for the edges of mounds that subsequently collapsed and spread

over them. Additionally, except within the burial structures, skeletal remains are absent from the inside of these 'enclosures' – had they functioned as earlier, open exposure areas scattered bones should have littered the buried land surfaces under the protecting mounds.

Alongside changes in our understanding of the structures once termed long mortuary enclosures, significant advances have been made in our understanding of wooden mortuary structures and the duration of burial activity. In 1985–6 excavation of a long barrow at Haddenham on the Fens in Cambridgeshire revealed for the first time the remains of a wooden mortuary structure preserved by waterlogging. Instead of the anticipated tent-like structure supported by a ridge pole running between very large split-trunk end-posts, a box-like structure (7 m x 1.5 m) was revealed. Its flat wooden roof was supported by low banks on either side. The chamber had continued to be accessible after the mound was built, either as a low tunnel running back from the façade or from the top by removing roofing planks. Here the distinction from stone chambered mounds need not have been great, while elsewhere – as at Kilham in East Yorkshire – it seems the area around the burial structure was initially left open to permit continued access.

Radiocarbon dating of burials has also caused serious revision of the old idea that long barrows were long-lived village or lineage (clan) tombs. Recent dating of burials from southern British long barrows with comparably large numbers of interments (41 Hazleton, Gloucs. and 36 West Kennet, Wilts., both stone chambered; 34 Fussell's Lodge, Wilts, wooden chambered) shows that, far from them being used over very long periods of time, or having ancestral bones re-deposited alongside the more recently deceased, burials were in fact being placed in them for no more than three generations – 75 years or less. This, coupled with the fact that a number of sites have produced few or no burials and that, where present, burial structures – wood or stone – occupy only a fraction of the area covered by the mound, argues that burial was not the primary concern. That honour probably belongs to the mounds whose plans and architectural edging seem to echo long houses that had been built by the first farmers in Europe. Yet these houses had gone out of use 1000 years before British long barrows were built.

Understanding the place and purpose(s) of long barrows remain challenges that each new

excavation and radiocarbon date bring us closer to resolving.

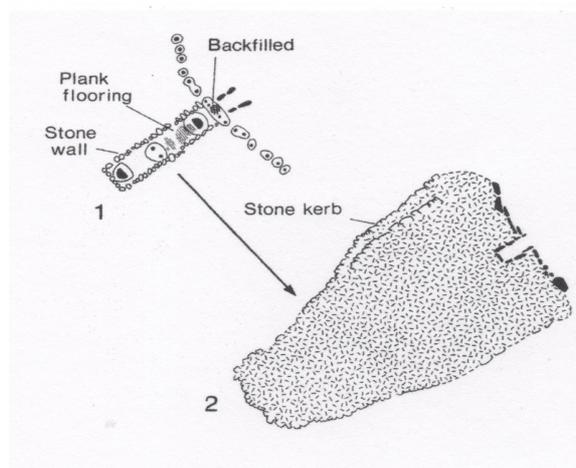
## Further Reading

**Field, D.** 2006. *Earthen Long Barrows. The earliest monuments in the British Isles.* Stroud; Tempus

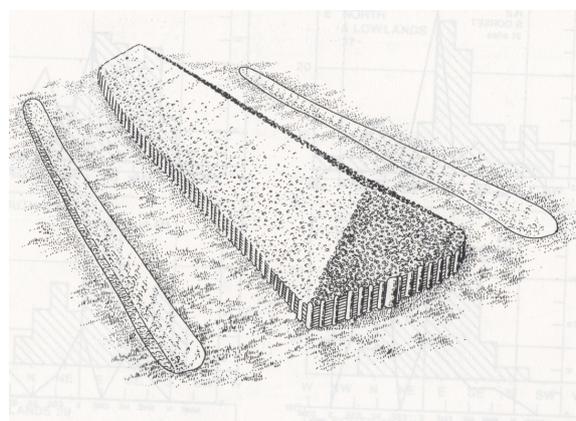
**Darvill, T.** 2004. *Long Barrows of the Cotswolds and Surrounding Areas.* Stroud: Tempus

**Kinnes, I.** 1992. *Non-Megalithic Long Barrows and Allied Structures in the British Neolithic.* British Museum Occasional Paper 52

**Bayliss, A. & Whittle, A.** 2007. Histories of the dead: building chronologies for five southern British long barrows. *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 17(1) (Supplement)



*Lochhill, Dumfriesshire. (Ian Kinnes 1992: courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum)*  
Phase 1 wooden mortuary structure with D shaped split-trunk end posts and concave façade.  
Phase 2 stone chambered long cairn built in front of, and around, the earlier wooden chamber.



*Reconstruction of Fussell's Lodge earthen long barrow, Wilts.*  
(Ian Kinnes 1992: courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum).



*Reconstruction of Belas Knap chambered long cairn  
(copyright: Corinium Museum).*

*This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Roy Loveday (University of Leicester)*

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