

A SURVEY OF PREHISTORIC AND LATER EARTHWORKS ON WHITELEAF HILL, PRINCES RISBOROUGH, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

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A survey of Whiteleaf Hill, Princes Risborough demonstrated the existence of a probable later prehistoric cross-ridge dyke, established the position of an imprecisely located round barrow, and drew attention to a group of First World War practice trenches.

Whiteleaf Hill is a distinct north-south ridge on the edge of the Chilterns scarp. Most of it is wooded but there is a small area of open grassland above Whiteleaf Cross (Plate 1). Extensive gale damage to the tree cover had led to the development of new management proposals by the County Council, who own the land, and a new tree planting programme. As part of this process, the writer was asked by the County Museum Archaeological Section to survey the visible monuments on the hill. This was carried out in July 1991 and details are filed in the County Sites and Monuments Record. Of the monuments which were surveyed (Fig. 1) the location of one of the round barrows had not been precisely recorded, the cross ridge dyke system had only recently been identified and the practice trenches, although known locally, had never been planned. Three of the monuments are legally protected against metal detecting or other disturbance; the remainder are likely to be Scheduled in the near future.

Round Barrow 1 (SP 82120420)

A fairly regular conical mound, 14.5m in diameter and about 1m high. The former presence of an encircling ditch is suggested by a narrow level area 1m wide at the base. Slight traces of a possible external bank 2.75m wide are just discernible at the south and northeast.

The barrow is not easy to spot as the slope of the mound is almost indistinguishable from the natural slope of the ground surface. It seems to have been deliberately positioned to take advantage of a false crest at the northernmost end of the ridge. Possibly a bowl barrow. This barrow appears to have been first identified by Dyer (1959, 16) who suggested it was a 'scraped' barrow with no ditch.

Round Barrow 2 (SP 82190409)

A rather flattened oval mound, 16m by 13m and 0.50m high, with a ditch represented by a narrow levelled or slightly scooped area 1m wide around the base. There are hints of a possible external bank 2m wide, surviving at the north and east. The barrow is made prominent by the presence of a cross-shaped trench cut into the centre of the mound, each arm of the cross measuring 4m by 1m. This can be detected on an aerial photograph taken by Major Allen in August 1934 (copy at BCM SP/82/04). It seems likely that the present appearance of the barrow bears little resemblance to its original form, and that the possible external bank may be due to the dumping of spoil. There is a possibility that the mound may have been used as a post mill mound. Like the other barrow, Round Barrow 2 is also located on a false crest. Possibly a damaged bowl barrow, however Dyer (1959,

24) raises the possibility that it may be a pond barrow.

Whiteleaf Cross (SP 82140400)

A chalk-cut hill figure in the shape of a simple cross, each arm measuring 8m × 5m, the upright 26m × 8m; set on a triangular base 116m across and 36m high. Despite not having been scoured since 1972 the upper parts at least are still well defined. It was not possible to survey the lower parts of the cross which are on the steepest part of the slope and have been deeply eroded by rain water; the position of these, and of the road shown in figure 1, were derived from the 1:2500 Ordnance Survey map.

The date of the cutting of Whiteleaf Cross is unknown. Its existence was first noted in 1738 by the antiquarian Francis Wise (1742) and there has been continuing speculation about its origins ever since. For a summary of references and discussion see Newman (1987), Scott (1937) and Head (1955, 107-9).

Long Barrow (SP 82220398)

An ovoid mound measuring 22m by 18m and 1.82m high, with traces of a ditch surviving to a maximum width of 2m around the base. The ditch is very clear at the north, but less so elsewhere. The mound is very steep in places, but there are two large "bites" into the western side which have mutilated it considerably. The barrow was excavated in 1934-1939 by Scott (1954) and was found to be a Neolithic 'long barrow', although of an unusual form, having some affinities with later round barrows. Within it four post holes indicated the former presence of a burial chamber approximately 8' × 5½', but only part of a foot and one tooth were found. It seems likely that the excavations, along with possible earlier disturbances, have considerably modified the appearance of the barrow and it is presumed that the mound in its current form is largely the product of back-filling; the exterior mounds visible to the south and west are probably dumps of spoil from the excavation.

Cross Ridge Dyke System

(SP 82190381 to SP 82310391 with changes of direction at SP 82230386 and SP 82280387)

A linear earthwork comprising a ditch with large bank to the north and traces of a smaller bank to the south. The main dyke runs uphill in a northeasterly direction, and crosses the ridge of Whiteleaf Hill from east to west at a narrow neck (55m length), before angling off downhill again to the northeast. The dyke is best preserved towards the south-western end at SP 82210383 where the bank survives to a height of 0.8m and is 8m wide; the ditch is 2m wide and 1m deep. Figure 2 shows profiles across the bank and ditch. The dyke is generally less pronounced towards the north-eastern end, where the bank is negligible and the ditch almost completely silted up. It seems to have been obliterated by quarrying at the north-east end and vanishes at the south-western end.

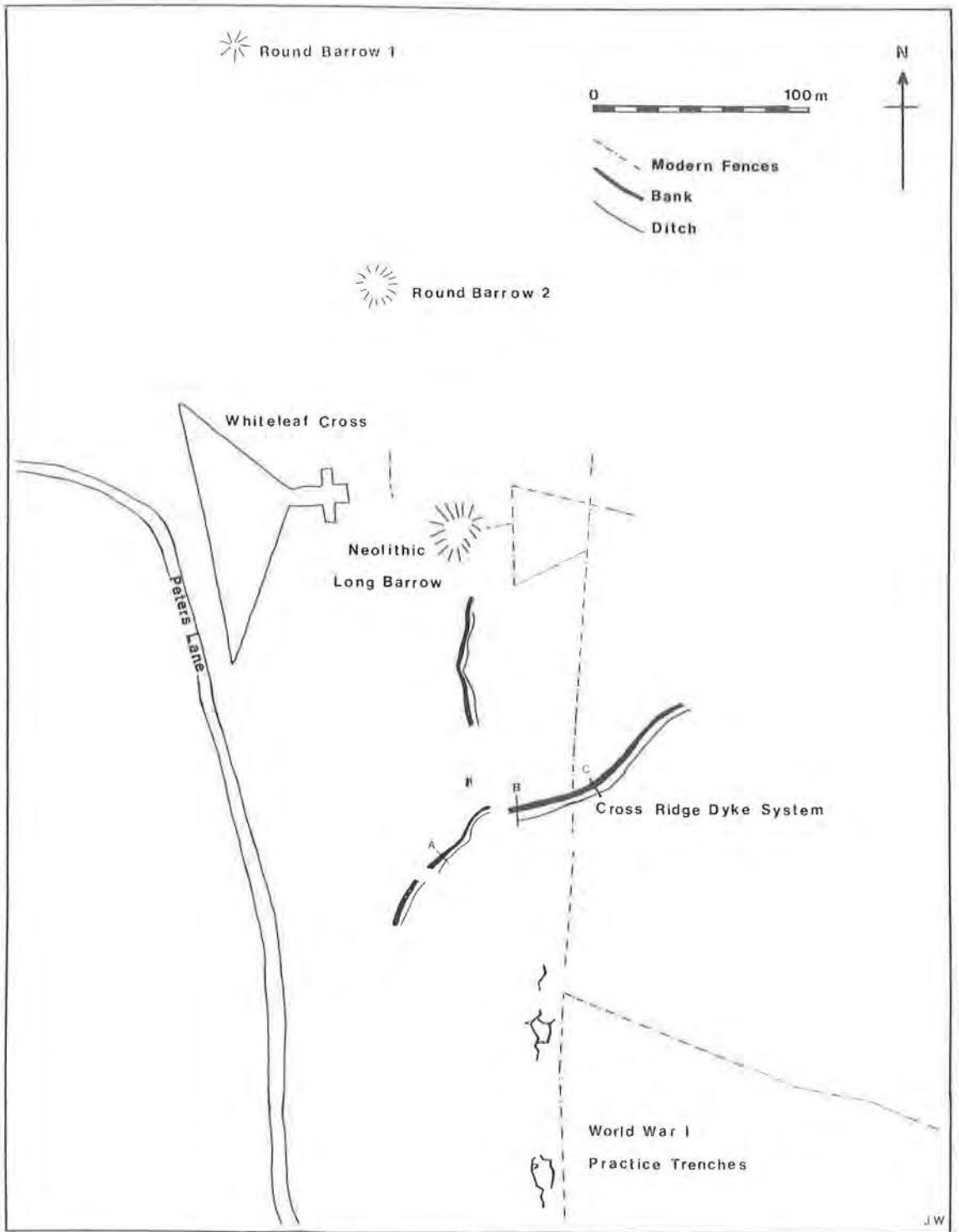
Without any trace of definite terminals it is impossible to make any reliable statement of its original length. At present it survives for a length of 168m. It is cut by a deep hollow way, possibly of medieval date, at SP 82200383 running downhill from the top of the ridge towards the village of Whiteleaf.

A smaller subsidiary dyke runs north-south along the top of the hillslope just north of the main dyke, from SP 82220395 to SP 82220390. This has an external bank measuring 4m wide and 0.5m high, a ditch 1m wide and 0.85m deep and some slight traces of a smaller internal bank. The northern terminal is obscured by the spoil dumps from the excavation of the long barrow; the southern terminal and any relationship with the main dyke have also been destroyed, possibly by the removal of fallen trees. The dyke appears to have spanned the top of the slope between the long barrow and the northwestern angle of the main dyke, surviving for a length of 56m. For a discussion on the function and dating of cross ridge dykes see Fowler (1964) and Williams-Freeman (1932).

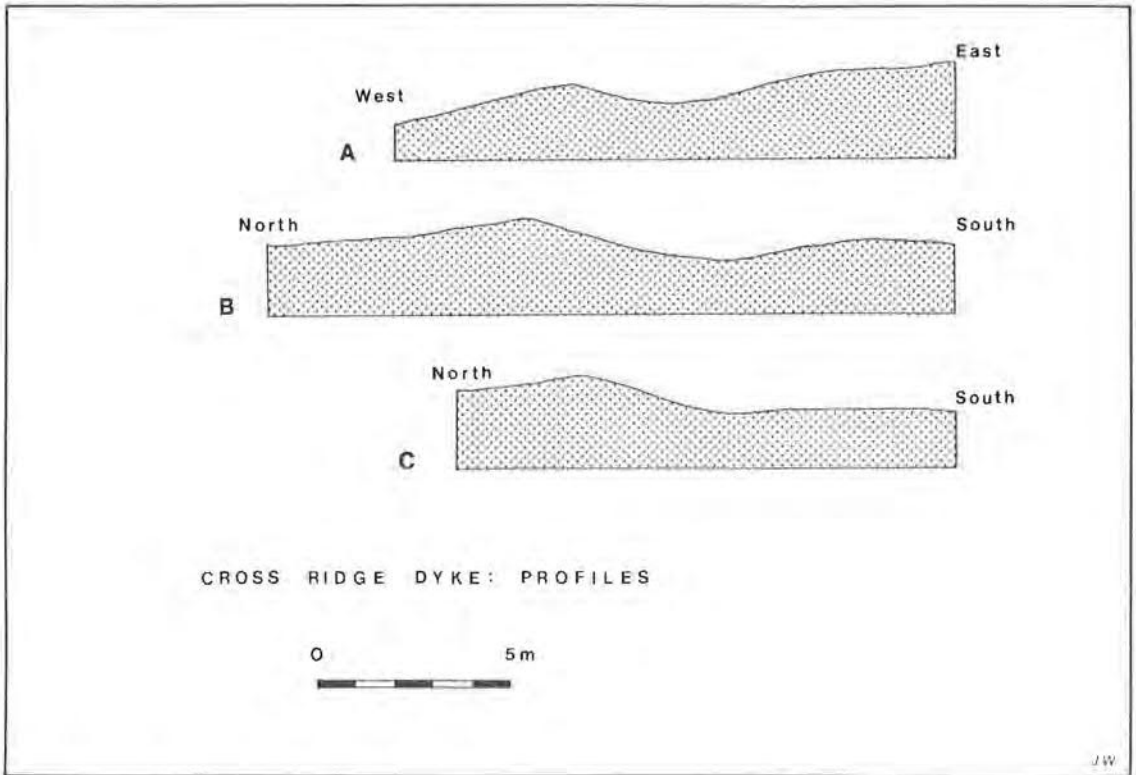


1. Aerial view of Whiteleaf Hill in March 1992 from the west

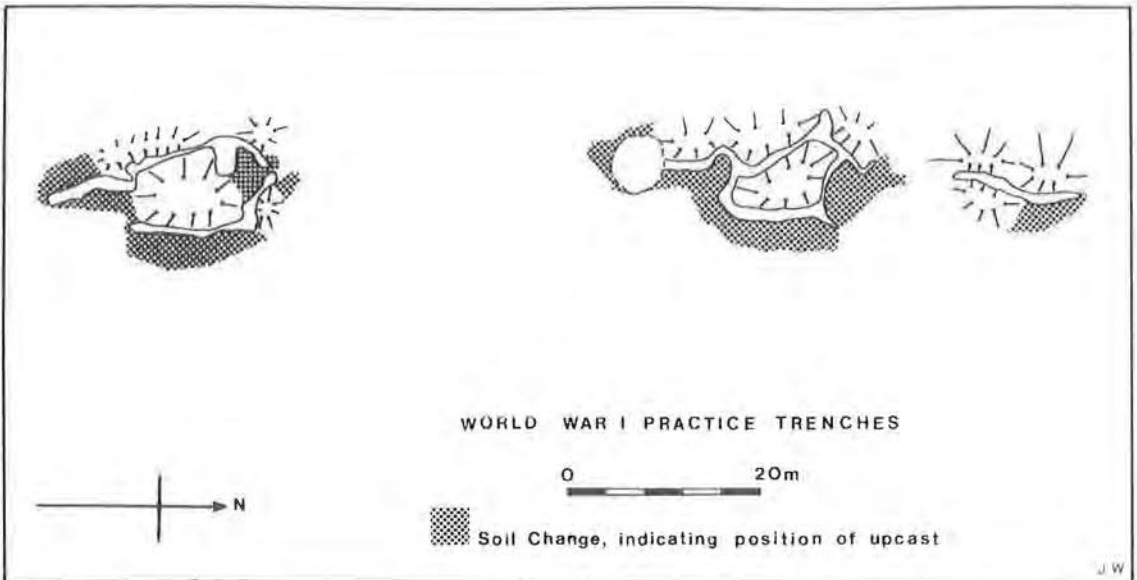
(Buckinghamshire County Museum).



1. Whiteleaf Hill. Princes Risborough. Location of earthworks.



2. Whiteleaf Hill, Profiles across dyke.



3. Whiteleaf Hill. Practice Trenches.

First World War Practice Trenches
(SP 82250370; SP 82250376; and SP 82250379)

Three groups of zig-zagging trenches and linear mounds of upcast, with a general trend north-south, survive as shallow ditches and low banks. These are best preserved at SP 82250376 where the trenches are now 0.8m deep and 1.2m wide (Fig. 3). The middle group of trenches is the most complete, those to the north and south are rather more silted-up and in places the southern group can only be traced as a soil change caused by the upcast material. The line of the trenches has been considerably obscured by the root-holes of trees felled by the gales of 1990 and by subsequent machine damage.

Local tradition dates the digging of the trenches to the winter of 1914, when they are believed to have been constructed by troops of the 21st Division, part of Kitchener's New Army, then training at Halton camp and billeted in and around Princes Risborough, before being posted to the Somme in September 1915 (Adam 1983).

There was no single standard plan for military trench systems – they were dug in a wide variety of forms to suit different conditions and requirements. In general however they were 6 feet (1.8m) deep and 3 – 6 feet (0.9–1.8m) wide, with earth parapets 2 – 3 feet (0.6–0.9m) high along both sides. A trench system would comprise a “fire trench” at the

front with firing positions for rifles and machine gun emplacements and “shelter” or “reserve trenches” behind, in which troops would have mustered for attacks, and lived in their dugouts. Connecting these together were “communication trenches” with passing places and bays for stretchers. For details on these matters reference can be made to: Addiston (1926), Greenwood (undated), School of Military Engineering (1915), War Office (1925) The practice trenches on Whiteleaf Hill show a number of these typical features: the northern-most is a single simple zig-zag trench with parapets on both sides; the middle group appears to comprise a zig-zagging fire trench with firing bays, two communication trenches and a reserve or shelter trench, all with protective parapets; the southern-most group appears to be another zig-zag fire trench with a “forward traverse” firing position, a zig-zag reserve or shelter trench and a possible zig-zag communication trench, again all with parapets. Although the depth of the trenches have been greatly reduced by silting up in places, the middle group probably retains much of the original form.

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