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The Saxon Barrows in Greenwich Park.

BY

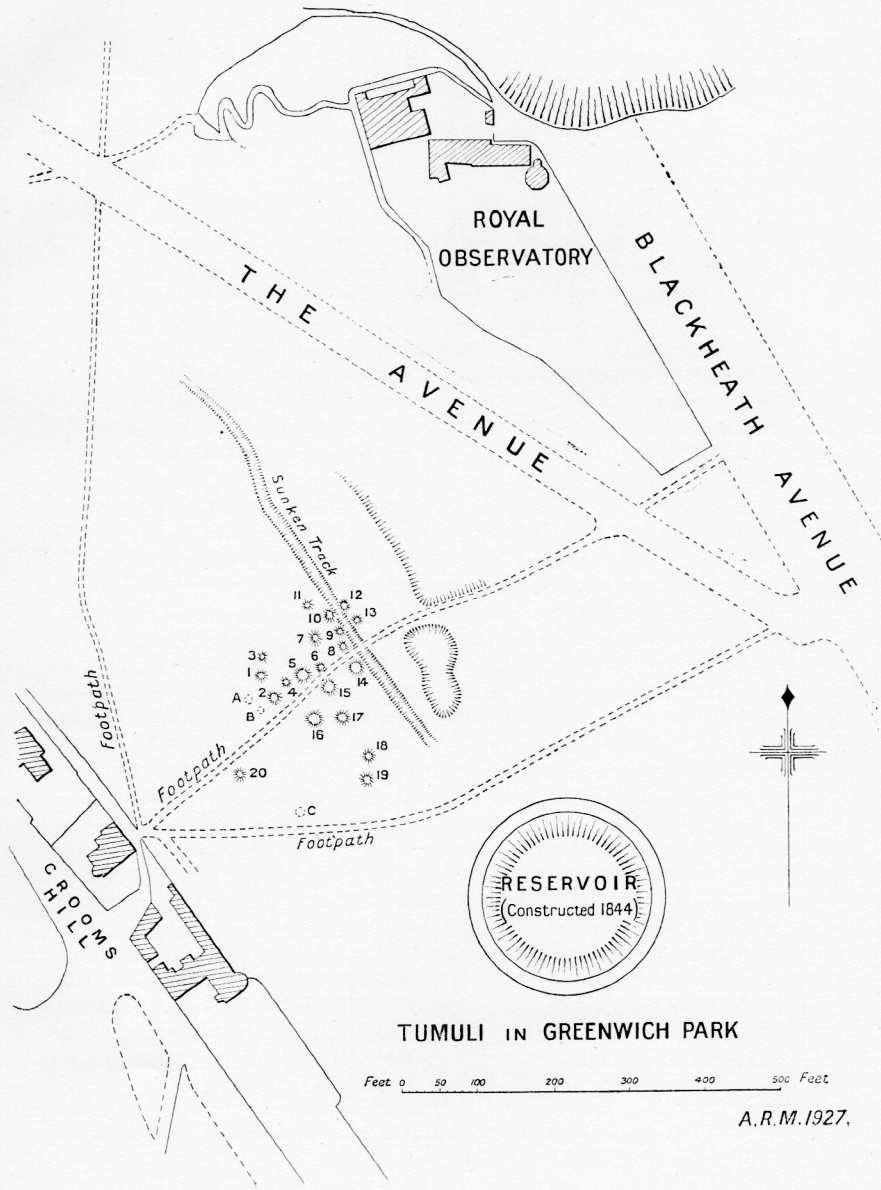
A. R. MARTIN, F.S.A.

THE small group of grave-mounds or tumuli in Greenwich Park has more than once attracted the attention of the excavator, though the results have been very inadequately recorded and no single object from the site, whose provenance can be definitely established, appears to have survived. The mounds themselves are gradually becoming less clearly defined and as no detailed description of them has hitherto been attempted and there appears to be no immediate prospect of any further excavation of the site, the opportunity has been taken of collecting together such facts as are known about them and of adding some notes on the present condition of the surviving mounds.

The cemetery lies a short distance to the south-west of the Royal Observatory on the edge of the Blackheath plateau overlooking the Thames. The site on the high ground near the river and close to the Roman road from the coast to London was a likely enough position for a small Saxon settlement, but as is usually the case the cemetery is the only evidence which has come to light of a permanent occupation of the district in early Saxon times.¹ It is clear that the surviving barrows which are twenty in number formed only part of a much larger cemetery originally. In the 18th century the Rev. James Douglas noted as many as fifty, and it is probable that others had already been destroyed during the laying out of the park. The large mound on Blackheath known as Whitfield's Mount may possibly be of sepulchral origin though it can scarcely have been associated with the Greenwich barrows in point of date.² Early writers, however, agree that there were formerly other barrows on the heath. William Lambarde writing in 1570 is one of the first to mention grave-mounds on Blackheath, which he believed marked the places of interment of those who had fallen in one of the various insurrections for which the place is

¹ Three small enamelled metal discs ornamented with curved trumpet shaped figures of late celtic origin were discovered in 1862 near the site of the old Tilt Yard at Greenwich. (Proc. Soc. Antiquaries 2nd Ser. ii, 202). They were used as decorative mountings to a metal bowl and are probably of early Saxon date though they can scarcely be adduced as evidence of a Saxon settlement in the district.

² It is possible that it is of much later date as it is shown on a 17th century plan as a mount for trying mortars.



TUMULI IN GREENWICH PARK

Feet 0 50 100 200 300 400 500 Feet

A. R. M. 1927.

famous.³ Dr. Harris in 1719 after referring to the Greenwich barrows mentions "a great number of small tumuli as well as some large and eminent ones" on Blackheath "out of which bones and urns have been dug up" and he attributes them to the Danish period.⁴ Hasted some sixty years later mentions the remains of three barrows on the heath "at a small distance from the corner of the hedge on the right-hand side where the road to Dover and that to Lee parts, one of which is a pretty large one, out of which some bones have been dug. On the left-hand side of the high road are four or five more of these barrows and in Greenwich Park many more small ones to the number of 50."⁵ All traces of the former have long ago disappeared owing to the extensive gravel digging which took place in the 18th century and the more recent levelling of large areas.

In 1880 Sir Flinders Petrie published a paper on Kentish Earthworks⁶ in which there is a small plan showing the approximate position of twenty-three of the Greenwich barrows but no particulars of them are given. The twenty-five inch ordnance survey map (edition 1916) marks twenty-two of these though to-day only twenty can be definitely identified. These are plotted on the accompanying plan where I have attempted to indicate approximately their relative size.

It will be seen that they are mostly grouped together fairly close to one another and without any regular order over an area, about two hundred and fifty feet square. The mounds are mostly small, averaging from twelve to fifteen feet in diameter and of hemispherical shape with circular trenches round the base. The height varies from about two feet six inches in one case to an elevation barely perceptible. According to Douglas they cover shallow graves about one and a half to two feet deep in the natural soil. The orientation of the graves is not recorded though in most of the Kentish cemeteries the east and west position with the head to the west is remarkably regular. The circular trenches from which the mounds were doubtless thrown up are still clearly visible in several instances though the mounds themselves have in nearly all cases been much reduced in height by the holes dug in the centre by excavators who appear to have thrown the earth out into the ditch and thus still further expedited the levelling process which time is gradually completing.

At some little distance from the group near the roadway opposite the new Observatory buildings there is some indication

³ Perambulation of Kent, ed. 1826 p. 392.

⁴ History of Kent, p. 138.

⁵ History of Kent, 1778, Vol. I, p. 27.

⁶ Archæologia Cantiana, Vol. XIII, p. 15.

of what may have been another barrow, but it is too uncertain to insert on the plan. Webster in his *History of Greenwich Park*⁷ states that there are three in this position and also five more on the steep slope of the hill towards Crooms Hill, but I have been unable to find any definite trace of them. The whole ground hereabouts is very uneven and many small mounds probably merely mark the former position of trees. The only certain indication of the tumuli is the presence of the surrounding ditch.

On the east side of the barrows is an irregular shaped depression which is shown on the accompanying plan and is evidently the excavation referred to by Douglas who conjectured that from it earth had been dug for adding height to the mounds. It is probable that it was formerly much deeper as Douglas states that it was annually filled up with dead leaves collected and thrown into it, but there is nothing to associate it definitely with the barrows. Slightly west of this hollow there is clear indication of a sunken track running at right angles to the present pathway right through the barrow group and continuing for some 450 feet in a north westerly direction down the slope of the hill. This does not appear to have been previously noticed unless it is the old road referred to by Webster, and I have therefore shown it on the plan though it is by no means certain that it has any connection with the barrows. At one point where it passes close to two of the mounds (Nos. 10 and 12) it appears to have cut into their encircling ditches which suggests that it is of later date than the burials.

The first to attempt any excavation of the site was a park-keeper named Hearne, who about 1714 is recorded to have dug into some of the mounds and obtained several valuable objects.⁸ Unfortunately no account of his discoveries has survived and it was not until Douglas undertook a more systematic investigation of the site in 1784 that the true character of the mounds became apparent. A description of this work is contained in his book "*Nenia Britannica*" published in 1793. Operations were begun on 22nd January, 1784, and some twenty graves appear to have been opened.⁹ The interments were found to be of a similar type to many of those in the barrows opened some years earlier by Bryan Faussett on Kingston and Barham Downs near Canterbury, though the objects found at Greenwich were poorer and less well preserved. The graves were very

⁷ A. D. Webster, *Greenwich Park*, 1902, p. 15.

⁸ J. Douglas, *Nenia Britannica*, 1793, p. 89; Hasted's *History of Kent* (ed. Drake), p. 83.

⁹ Later writers mention fifty as being opened at this time, but Douglas implies that only twenty were examined out of the total of fifty.

shallow being in some cases only eighteen inches below the surface of the natural gravel of the Blackheath beds. In several instances the decayed remains of coffins were found, though it is not recorded that these showed traces of burning as was noted by Faussett in the East Kent burials, where the coffins had probably passed the fire as a symbolic rite.

The contents of eight of the graves are described by Douglas as follows¹⁰ :—

1. A large central barrow. The trench in which the body was laid appeared to be just deep enough to admit of it, not more than a foot and a half deep to the native gravel, beneath the surface of the circumjacent plain. Several accreted lumps of iron were found in it, and some uncommon thick and broad-headed nails, two or more inches in length, with decayed wood adhering to them. By the quantity of fine mould apparently produced by the decayed wood, I conjectured this body had been interred in a very thick coffin.

2. A similar barrow of middling size, the cyst at its base sheeted with fine mould ; small fragments of iron, with decayed wood, and an iron spear-head, ten inches long.

3. An iron knife, converted to entire calx, seven inches long, near the centre of the grave, and towards one end a quantity of human hair.

4. Human hair, near the head.

5. Hair, near the head.

6. Almost in the centre of the cluster, seemed to have been the largest ; in this grave, not more than one and half foot deep, in the native unremoved gravel, was found one of the largest iron spear-heads ever discovered, fifteen inches long, two broad at the socket, which was not more than two and a half from the blade. The spear near the head ; towards the centre a knife of iron, and fragments of an umbo of a shield of the same metal. No remains of bones, but on a line where the body seemed to have been laid, a considerable quantity of fine black vegetable mould, probably the decomposed particles of some wooden case, in which the corpse had been deposited.

7. As usual, the cyst not deep in the native soil, which proves that the barrow had been raised from a circular excavation near the cluster. In this grave was a considerable quantity of woollen cloth, sheeting the whole extent of it ; black, and chiefly decomposed, but very observable from the distinct appearance of the warp and woof.

8. A large barrow ; hair and woollen cloth, as 7.

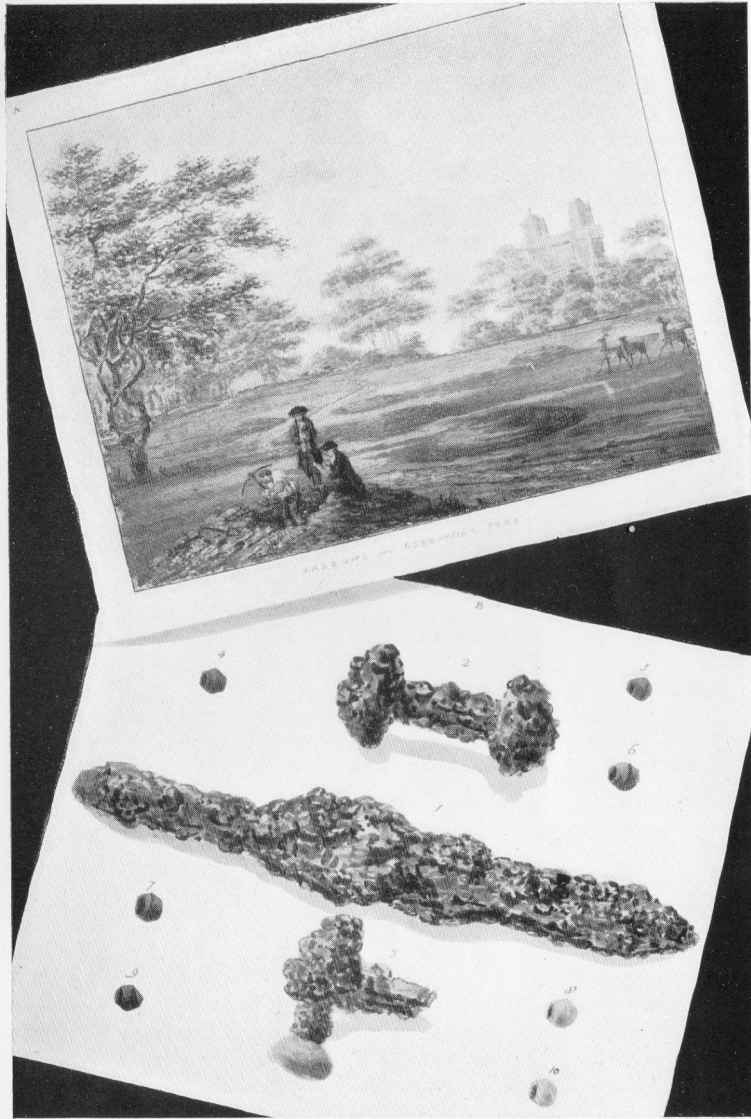
¹⁰ *Nenia Britannica* (at supra), pp. 89-91, and p. 56 (note).

All of the remaining barrows, apparently twelve in number, opened by Douglas contained hair and cloth which was either woollen with herring-bone wool or a finer texture of linen. In one grave was found a very fine braid of auburn hair, two beads of transparent dark blue-green glass, one of white opaque glass and one of brown-red opaque glass, while in another were three beads of transparent blue-green glass and one of yellow opaque glass. Several of these objects including the braid of hair just mentioned are illustrated in the "Nenia Britannica" while others figure in a water-colour drawing bound in a copy of that work in the British Museum¹¹ which belonged originally to the author and which contains many of the original drawings from which the published plates were made. The drawing was evidently intended as an additional plate, but was for some reason omitted from the published work. It is interesting as showing the excavators actually at work on one of the barrows with the Observatory in the background, while below are several objects from the site (see illustration) including the corroded iron spear head from grave No. 6 in Douglas' list which he states was fifteen inches long and the largest he had seen. The objects shown are described in a MS. note at the end of the volume in Douglas' handwriting as follows :—

1. Spear head of iron. Nenia, p. 90, No. 6.
2. Iron relic see ditto.
3. Iron relic with accreted pebble from same barrows.
- 4—10. Beads of vitrified coloured earth and transparent glass from same barrows.

Unfortunately not a single object from these excavations with the possible exception of the braid of hair already mentioned appears to have survived. They doubtless formed part of Douglas' extensive collection of Anglo-Saxon antiquities which he bequeathed on his death in 1819 to Sir Richard Colt Hoare, the famous Wiltshire antiquary, who gave them in 1829 to the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, where many of the objects described in the "Nenia Britannica" from other sites are still preserved. Through the kindness of the present Keeper, Mr. E. T. Leeds, F.S.A., I was allowed to make a careful search for any of the objects described by Douglas as coming from Greenwich. In a small box not ordinarily on view is a well-preserved lock of thick reddish hair which resembles in many ways the braid of hair described and illustrated by Douglas and with it is a small piece of woollen cloth. A label on the box, however, associates it with a collection of Anglo-Saxon antiquities from Brighthampton which were acquired by the Museum in 1858, but as no such object is mentioned in the account of those

¹¹ The press mark is G 6863.



A. BARROWS IN GREENWICH PARK, 1784.
B. OBJECTS FOUND DURING THE EXCAVATIONS
From a water-colour drawing in the British Museum.

discoveries there is nothing improbable in assuming that this example really came from the Douglas collection. With this possible exception, however, there is nothing from Greenwich. It is probable that the iron objects, which were apparently in a very corroded state when found, perished when the Archaeological specimens which formed the nucleus of the present collection remained in a state of great neglect in the cellars of the old Ashmolean building prior to their removal to the new building in 1894.

Since Douglas' time the barrows have undergone further loss. In 1844 the present reservoir in Greenwich Park was constructed and apparently involved the destruction of about twelfth of them. It was originally proposed to build this further north on the site of the main group and the levelling of the ground was actually begun, but in face of considerable opposition to the scheme and at the instance of the Royal Archaeological Institute the present site was substituted at a sacrifice of £850.¹² A writer in the "Illustrated London News" of that date describes how "a set of world's-end wretches were let loose on the barrows and in a few short hours three-fourths of them were actually—and in spite—cleanly and smoothly shaven from the face of the ancient sward." This outburst doubtless allows of some softening although it is clear that several of the mounds disappeared at this time when according to Webster a number of stone implements were unearthed.¹³

Since that date a few more of the barrows have disappeared. One (C on plan) is shown in Sir Flinders Petrie's plan close to the new path to the Crooms Hill gate which passes close to the reservoir. It is now barely distinguishable though there are slight traces of possibly two mounds in this position. Two more which formed part of the main cluster (A and B on plan) are shown both in Petrie's plan and on the ordnance survey map, though they appear to have been entirely effaced in recent times by the levelling of part of the land on the north side of the footpath which passes through the group close to the park gate. A description of the twenty barrows which remain will be found in the appendix to this paper.

It only remains to consider the date of the burials. The evidence of wooden coffins in some of the graves may be paralleled by many of the barrows opened by Bryan Faussett on Kingston and Barham Downs the majority of which appear to have dated from the second half of the sixth century. The Greenwich examples differed, however, in the poorer character of their contents and notably in the entire absence of jewellery

¹² Arch Journal I, pp. 166, 168 and 249.

¹³ Some of these are stated by Webster to have been preserved in the Lecture Hall Museum at Greenwich.

which forms such a striking feature of the East Kent Jutish cemeteries. Evidence of Jutish settlements west of the Medway Valley is very slight, and it is probable that the Greenwich Cemetery like those at Cliffe, Higham and Northfleet represents rather a Saxon people advancing along the Thames Valley. The absence of any recorded evidence of cinerary urns at Greenwich may perhaps indicate a comparatively late date in the pagan Saxon period for the interments though this in itself is of little significance as cremation was almost unknown in typical Kentish cemeteries at this date.¹⁴ The general evidence, however, makes it probable that the Greenwich burials may be attributed to the sixth century though the comparative poorness of the objects makes precision in dating impossible.

APPENDIX.

LIST OF THE TUMULI.

(The numbers refer to the plan. The measurements are in all cases only approximate).

1. About 60 feet in circumference. Irregular and not well defined.
2. Ill defined and somewhat elongated and irregular in shape.
3. Small and well defined. About 45 feet in circumference.
4. Very small and insignificant. No sign of excavation.
5. Large and flat. About 70 feet in circumference. Excavation pit in centre.
6. Fairly well defined with circular ditch partly destroyed by modern path. Excavation pit in centre.
7. Large with distinct traces of ditch. Excavation pit in centre.
8. Well defined with definite traces of ditch. Excavation pit in centre.
9. A very small insignificant mound.
10. A large and well-defined mound about 65 feet in circumference with a well-preserved ditch partly merging into the hollow track on which it abutts. Excavation pit in centre. This and No. 14 are probably the best preserved examples.

¹⁴ The presence of cinerary urns at Northfleet is exceptional in Kent and suggests an affinity with the more western cemeteries at Mitcham and Croydon rather than with the typical cemeteries of East Kent.

11. Small, but well marked and traces of ditch. No indication of excavation pit.
12. This mound abutts immediately on the hollow track. Excavation pit in top.
13. Smaller than No. 12 and fairly well preserved with ditch which is partly filled with the earth from the excavation pit in centre.
14. About 70 feet in circumference with very well-defined ditch. The height from the bottom of the ditch to the top of the mound is about two feet six inches. Round excavation pit in centre.
15. About 90 feet in circumference and well defined. The mound has been partially destroyed by an excavation trench cut through the centre and the shape altered by the earth thrown out.
16. One of the largest of the group and very flat though clearly defined. About 100 feet in circumference. It was probably from this mound (No. 6 in Douglas' list) that the large iron spear-head came.
17. About 70 feet in circumference. Well defined with definite traces of surrounding ditch. There does not appear to be any sign of an excavation pit in the top.
18. The shape of this mound has been altered by two dumps of earth thrown in the ditch from the excavation pit in the centre.
19. Small and low, but well defined. About 60 feet in circumference.
20. This mound stands somewhat apart from the main group and is not marked on the earlier ordnance survey map. It is about 50 feet in circumference with traces of ditch into which earth from the excavation in the centre has been thrown.

DESTROYED TUMILI.

- A & B. Both the Ordnance Survey Map and Petrie's plan shew two mounds in these positions, but all trace of them have now gone.
- C. Petrie shows a tumulus approximately in this position. There are very faint traces of one or possibly two mounds here, but they are too slight to be certain as to their significance.