



**NEOLITHIC FACTSHEET 9
MIDDLE NEOLITHIC INDIVIDUAL
BURIALS**

Long barrows and chambered cairns with collective, usually partial, burials had been the standard mortuary monuments from 3800–3600 BC but, with very few exceptions, none were constructed in England and Wales after about 3500 BC. Nor it seems from dating programmes were burials still being made in those where the chamber could still be entered. This abrupt termination, that also affected Neolithic houses, followed a period in which the construction of causewayed enclosures had proliferated. Some at least of these were defensive (e.g. Crickley Hill, Glos., Hambledon Hill, Dorset). Warfare, possibly linked to climatic deterioration and increased difficulty growing crops, might explain these changes.

The period from about 3500 saw the construction of a new type of monument known as a cursus (see Neolithic Factsheet 8), and at about the same time or shortly afterwards (radiocarbon dates are sparse) the earliest burials of intact individuals under round barrows appear. This was a wholly new practice. A few round barrows had been built in earlier centuries, particularly on the Wolds of eastern Yorkshire, but they had covered collective burials just like those under long barrows.

The earliest securely dated example of the new burial pattern was found beneath the great mound of Duggleby Howe on the Yorkshire Wolds excavated by Mortimer in the 19th century. He found an intact body at the base of a grave shaft accompanied by fragments of a decorated bowl and some flint flakes and cores. It has recently been radiocarbon dated to between c. 3500–3400 BC. Other burials, without grave goods, lay further up the fill of the shaft with, at the top, a burial furnished with a long, edge-polished flint axe/adze, a lozenge-shaped arrowhead and the base of a red deer antler, cut and perforated for use as a macehead. This burial has been dated to 3300–3200 BC. Beside it in a separate, shallower grave was a body accompanied by a bone pin, six arrowheads, twelve boars' tusks and two beaver teeth. It has been dated c. 3000–2900 BC, as has

another burial placed between the two that was accompanied by a very thin, superbly polished, flint knife. These burials between them span the Middle Neolithic and reveal an increased use of grave goods.

Other burials of intact individuals under round barrows include similar grave goods: antler maceheads (Liff's Low in the Peak District and Crosby Garret in the Eden valley), a fine fully polished flint knife (Aldro, East Yorkshire), and a waisted flint axe and a slider of jet with a burial under a probable round barrow built over a long barrow at Whitegrounds, near Malton, East Yorkshire. These prestige burials are primarily centred on the chalklands of the Yorkshire Wolds where round barrows had unusually been built over collective burials in earlier centuries. The Wolds were also, at Rudston, the site of the largest complex of cursus monuments in the country and the tallest standing stone. It seems a powerful society developed in the area in the aftermath of the Early Neolithic collapse. It was probably based around pastoralism (isotope analysis shows that none of those buried at Duggleby Howe lived on the chalklands) and control: of the Rudston ritual complex; of fine waisted flint axes manufactured from Flamborough Head flint; of Whitby jet fashioned into sliders; and of the dispersal of stone axes that were brought to the area in very great numbers from the quarry sites of Great Langdale in the Lake District.

Some of these items were adopted, perhaps as insignia of association, at a distance from the Yorkshire Wolds: antler maceheads in the Peak District and Eden valley; jet sliders and far simpler, but nonetheless polished, flint knives in southern England (e.g. Stanton Harcourt and the Radley oval barrow in the Thames valley, and Handley 26 on Cranborne Chase, Dorset). It is probably no coincidence that the Thames valley and Cranborne Chase are both areas where other great cursus complexes are to be found.

The origin of this society remains obscure but the fact that prestige burials with early dates of

3300–31000 BC at Duggleby Howe and Liffs Low were accompanied by antler maceheads may be important. Radiocarbon dating has shown that the macehead accompanying the burial at Duggleby Howe could have been over a century old when placed in the grave. It appears to have been an heirloom or perhaps an inherited symbol of rank. A large number of similarly dated antler maceheads come from the Thames side in London, where a new type of pottery (so called Peterborough Ware often profusely decorated with impressions from bird bones and twisted cord) appears in considerable quantity at about the same time. This major concentration might point to incoming groups of North Sea edge foragers/pastoralist whose life style was better accommodated to the changed climatic conditions than more sedentary, arable-based Early Neolithic groups. Whether natives or incomers the route to individual power, implied by burials with fine grave goods, is unlikely to have been entirely peaceful. Waisted flint axes (conceivably copying copper prototypes) and antler maceheads were clearly weapons not work-a-day tools and an isolated skull included with the burials in the Duggleby Howe shaft shows clear evidence of violent death by clubbing.

Cremations without grave goods were sometimes placed near inhumations (e.g. in the mound raised after c. 2900 BC over the final prestige burial at Duggleby Howe) but after that date are the sole type of burial to be found. They occur in small ring ditches and pit circles (so called hengi-form sites), in the ditch and Aubrey holes at phase I Stonehenge, and even in isolation. Numbers are very small, however, except at the major sites of Duggleby Howe, Dorchester upon Thames and Stonehenge. The dead, whatever their status, effectively disappear until the arrival of Beaker-users c. 2400 BC.

Explaining the emergence of a society that created individual prestige burials in the Middle Neolithic, and its sudden disappearance after c. 2900 BC, perhaps in the face of Grooved Ware related artefacts and ideas spreading from Orkney, are two of the great challenges of Neolithic archaeology. Every new date, environmental sample, skeletal analysis and artefact study adds to our understanding.

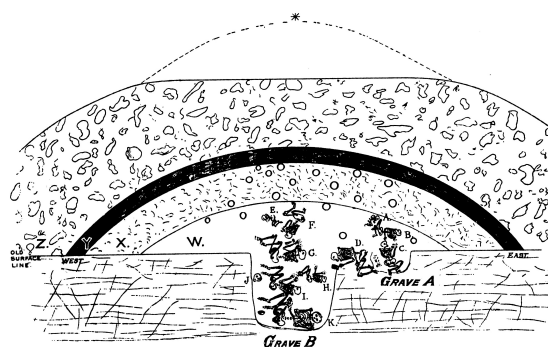
This factsheet was prepared for the Prehistoric Society by Roy Loveday (University of Leicester)

Further Reading

Gibson, A. & Bayliss, A. 2009. Recent Research at Duggleby Howe, North Yorkshire. *Archaeological Journal* 166, 39–78

Loveday, R., Gibson, A., Marshall, P.D., Bayliss, A., Bronk Ramsey, C., and Van der Plight, H., 2007. The Antler Macehead Dating Project. *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 73, 381–92

Leary, J., Darvill, T. & Field, D. (eds), 2010. *Round Mounds and Monumentality in the British Neolithic and Beyond*. Neolithic Studies Group Seminar Papers 10. Oxford: Oxbow Books



Mortimer's section drawing of his excavation at Duggleby Howe, East Yorkshire. 1905.



Bateman's drawing of the burial at Liff's Low, Derbyshire 1848. Antler macehead placed behind the knees; other grave goods (2 boar's tusks, 2 long kite shaped arrowheads, 2 long flint axes, 2 lozenge shaped flint 'spearheads', 2 edge polished flint knives and a small cup) placed behind the head.