

Long Barrows: Background information for teachers

Long barrows are great mounds of earth or stone. Most are between 25 and 75 m long but only 15–20 m wide. They were the earliest monuments built in Britain by the first farming communities. They date from about 3800 BC. Some, like that at [Uley](#) in the Cotswolds, which is the subject of the PowerPoint presentation, have stone-built chambers within them. These are usually low and difficult to get into – the much-visited example at [West Kennet](#) near Avebury in Wiltshire is very unusual in having a high entrance and chambers. Where there was no available stone, wooden chambers were built instead. These have rotted away so only the marks left by posts remain.

Whatever the chambers were made from, they were all very small compared to the length of the mounds. This tells us that the mound wasn't just a covering for burial chambers. It was important in its own right. The fact that the first farmers in continental Europe lived in very long houses probably means these long barrows were built to copy them. Excavation has shown that care was taken edging the mounds in stone or wood, probably to make them look like houses – in this case for the ancestors.

Burials within the barrows comprised multiple skeletons, mixed up and usually with bones missing. It seems likely that people came into the barrows at important times and took away some of the bones of their ancestors probably for special ceremonies. The picture in the PowerPoint of jumbled bones in a chamber comes from the tomb of [Isbister](#), South Ronaldsay, Orkney. It has been used because it most graphically shows the confused mess of bones found in these mounds, and because the Uley barrow was excavated prior to the advent of photography. Twenty-four skeletons, or parts of skeletons, were identified at Uley (based mainly on a simple skull count) but, using modern scientific methods, more than 187 were counted on the floors of the chambers at Isbister.

Further reading

- Lynch, F. 1997. *Megalithic Tombs and Long Barrows*. Princes Risborough: Shire Archaeology
- Wickham Jones, C. 2015. *Between the Wind and the Water: World Heritage Orkney*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Windgather
- Scarre, C. 2007. *The Megalithic Monuments of Britain and Ireland*. London: Thames & Hudson



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