

Olchon Court Bronze-Age Cairn

During June, July and into August Herefordshire Archaeology staff together with volunteers and staff and students from Manchester University undertook the excavation of a round cairn at Olchon Court Farm in the Olchon Valley, south-west Herefordshire. The project was directed by Dr. Keith Ray and Tim Hoverd of Herefordshire Archaeology and Professor Julian Thomas of Manchester University



A low mound had been discovered during the 2009 season of Herefordshire Archaeology's ongoing Olchon Valley Survey. Geophysical survey, together with initial small scale investigations in 2009, suggested a complex structure with a series of elements attached to a central walled cairn. Initially, it was conjectured that the whole might represent a Cotswold-Severn type long cairn, constructed around a primary 'rotunda grave'

Once the site had been stripped it was evident that a series of field walls were attached to the round cairn, but that the latter was also surrounded by a stone kerb, which had retained a turf mound built over the stone cairn in a series of phases. Interspersed within the layers of turf in the secondary mound were a series of cremation burials, one of which was associated with a segmented faience bead.

The primary cairn was retained within a well-built wall, which survived to a height of several courses. When first revealed, this closely resembled a small passage grave. Rather than being truly circular, its plan was flattened on the southern side and pointed to the north.





There was a blocked formal entrance on the southern side, although this proved to be a 'dummy', the passage disappearing a little way into the cairn. This entrance faced toward a distinctive local topographic feature, the Red Darren. The 'chamber' or court area was offset toward the entrance rather than being at the

true centre of the cairn. This was filled with a mass of stone which appeared to have been carefully placed, giving the impression of collapsed corbelling - to the extent that individual stones had been pitched beneath the surrounding ring of massive retaining stones.

However, once this mass of stone had been removed, the pit containing the primary burial was revealed. This was a multiple cremation contained within a Collared Urn, associated with an accessory cup, plano-convex knife, copper awl and thumbnail scraper. It was only at this point that the Bronze Age date of the monument as a whole was finally determined.

It is possible that, while the structure formally represents a ring cairn, the extreme structural similarities with Neolithic passage graves were not accidental. It is conceivable that the cairn was deliberately constructed in such a way as to evoke an already ancient monument, in an advanced state of dilapidation.

Tim Hoverd & Julian Thomas

