

Lakehead Hill – Dartmoor's Bronze Age Necropolis

If you were an important person on Dartmoor in the 2nd millennium BC it seems that the place to be buried was Lakehead Hill. Situated in the central bowl of the moor with magnificent views of the surrounding tors (before the 1930s' conifer plantations) and with settlements on the lower slopes you were, at least in death, lord of all you surveyed.

On this and nearby Smith Hill were 20 or more bronze age settlements and funerary monuments, before the indiscriminate conifer planting destroyed many and left us with a dozen or so survivors.

On Saturday, 5 August, 10 members of ACE met at Postbridge to examine some of these monuments, led by John Watson.

Only a few hundred metres south of the main car park we came to a large (120m across) bronze age walled settlement, or pound, now containing 11 houses, although an antiquarian plan of 1891 showed 15. The enclosure walls were probably 2m wide and over a metre high. The round houses are fairly small (3-5.5m across) and several form a line down the hill slope. In common with many Dartmoor prehistoric sites, this pound was excavated in the 1890s by the antiquarian Dartmoor Excavation Committee (DEC), but only hearths and some charcoal were found.

This is an impressive site, kept neatly trimmed by someone, and we paused here for a pleasant cup of coffee in the summer sunshine.

Just above the pound wall is a larger round house (7.8m), which provided speculation as to why it was separated from the others.

Moving towards the crest of the hill we came across a small (6m) circle of 13 standing stones, all that remains of the retaining wall of a burial cairn. The cairn is now flat, apart from a small mound just off centre. There is no sign of any stone coffin, or cist, which might have originally contained the burial.

On the crest of the hill is a row of small (up to ½m high) stones, recorded as 12 in number, although we thought there were a few more showing through the turf, suggesting a parallel row. At the east end is a small mound, possibly a terminal cairn. The row did not appear to align with any other monument although, in common with all the other sites we saw, it had been excavated by the DEC, and partially re-erected, so one must be cautious in drawing too many conclusions from alignments.



About 100m east of this lies a free-standing large cist (1m high) surrounded by a 7m circle of 5 or 6 stones, with a row of 11 small standing stones leading off to the east. Here we stopped for lunch.



After lunch we retraced our steps westward past the small stone row to a free-standing (30cm high) cist on the edge of the conifer plantation. Although this is intact, there is no sign of the surrounding cairn or retaining ring, the site being badly damaged by the tree planting.



Moving down the hill to the south we found two retaining circles very close together, each with 10 stones remaining. At 6.8m and 5.6m they are fairly small, but the southerly one has a fine cist (at least 1m square) set into the ground and covered by a large capstone.



We then walked across the old coffin track known as the Lich Way, and came to a large stone cist set in a clearing in the plantation. Only three sides of the cist remain, and these were being used as a hearth by the group of young lads who were camped in the clearing. John explained to them that they were desecrating a listed ancient monument, but we were not too heavy handed, as they were not to know this (there are no explanatory boards, etc), and good humour was maintained.



A short walk along the forestry track brought us to a number of large round houses set on a partially cleared hillside. One of these has been excavated in the last few years by the National Park, and we lingered here for a while examining the excavation site. Finds had included a large number of



Trevisker ware potsherds, some decorated, and a number of flints. The excavation showed an intricate floor plan, including a wattle lining to the walls, a hearth, a paved stone area and an apparent partition of the floor.

On the way back along the forestry track we visited the much robbed remains of a large (20m) cairn with a large cist dug into the interior. This looked odd, and felt strange to some members of the group, so we did not linger.



Arriving back at our cars, with the sun still shining, we set off to John and Rachel's house in Tavistock for a meal and some alcoholic refreshment. Sitting in the evening sun in their garden, after a good meal, with a glass of something suitable in our hands, it was voted a very good day.