

A BEAKER BURIAL AT WEST STOW

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Situated in various places in what was, until the early part of this century, the Breckland area, there occur low mounds of between 100 and 50 feet in diameter and of very low eminence. Where the land has been cultivated a few of these have been recognised as tumuli, but in many instances where the land is still covered by typical heath vegetation they have lain unrecognised, and it may well be that quite a proportion are in fact natural mounds of hard gravel and sand.

Situated at Grid Map reference TL. 808745 in land that appears on the ordnance survey map as Prince of Wales belt, lying some 330 yards east of the Icknield Way in West Stow parish, a mound had been planted about the year 1840 with pines, which were felled during or shortly after the first world war. This belt of trees is now open ground with the former open heath bearing pine plantations of some 25 years growth. The appearance on the forest track which borders the western perimeter of the mound, cutting through its edge, of calcined flints with flakes, prompted an examination.

The soil conditions of the area are extremely sandy, overlying thin glacial gravel deposits over undulating chalk at a depth of 5 feet, and the mound (Fig. 8), now barely perceptible, has an approximate diameter of 90 feet and a height of scarcely 3 feet, which, in conjunction with the coarse grass covering it, render it barely noticeable. A trench (A—A') 8 feet wide was cut from the northern extremity across to the southern slope, and in depth down to the underlying chalk at 5 feet. A second trench (B—B') was cut across this from east to west disclosing that under the eroded mound there lay a circular mound of decomposed turf layers, 50 feet in diameter, and 2 feet 6 inches thick in the centre resting on a thin layer of glacial gravel covering the undisturbed chalk. Covering this inner mound of decomposed turf there was some two feet of sand, and it is reasonable to suppose that originally the mound was of considerably greater height and much less in diameter than at present, the mound having been eroded and spread over the centuries. 43 feet from the beginning of the trench at its northern end, and 10 feet east of the estimated centre of the turf mound a hearth was found sealed under the turf layers and just above the thin base gravel overlying the chalk. Seven feet from it another hearth lay at the same depth.

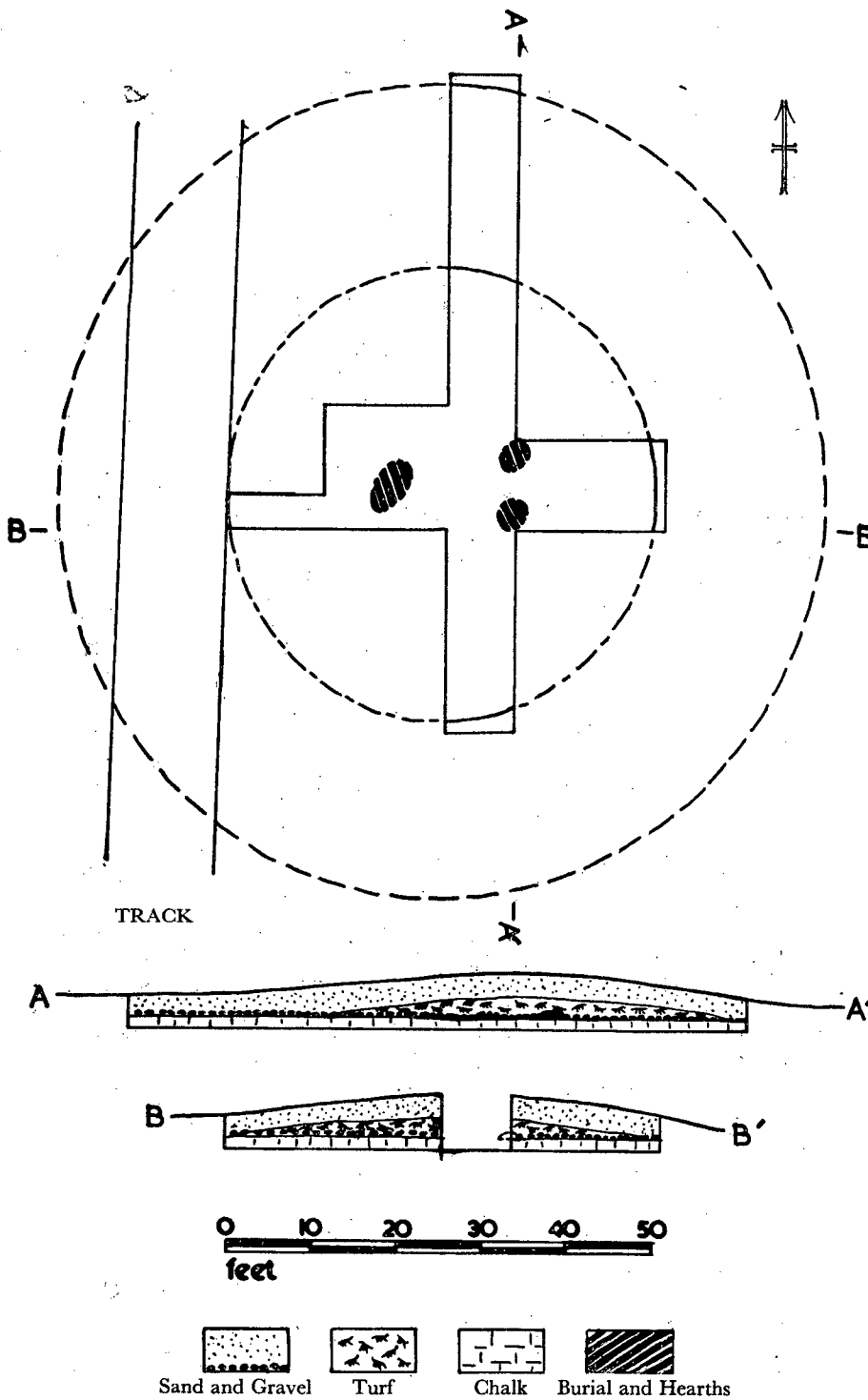


FIG. 8.—West Stow barrow; plan and sections.

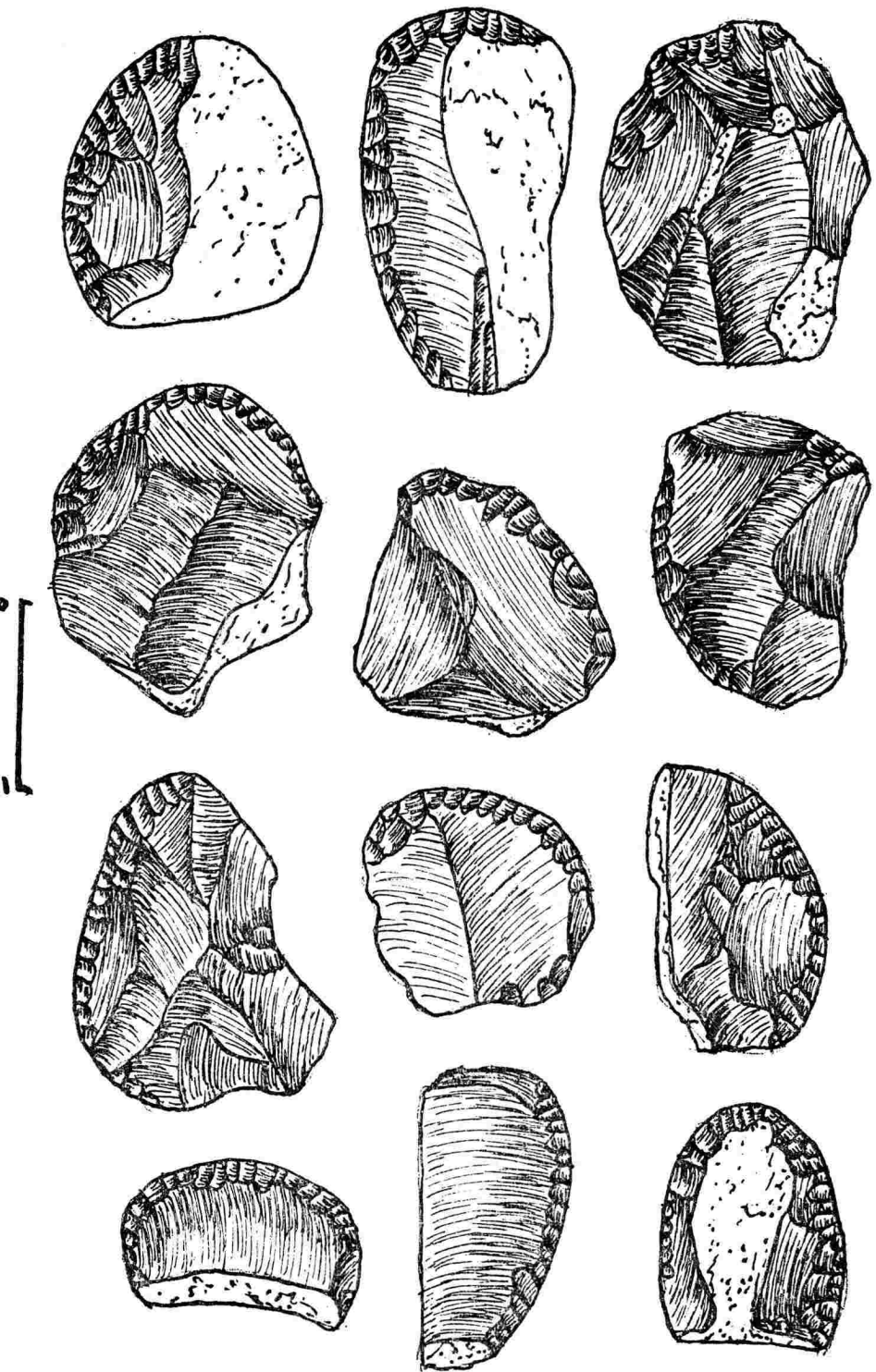


FIG. 9.—West Stow; scrapers.

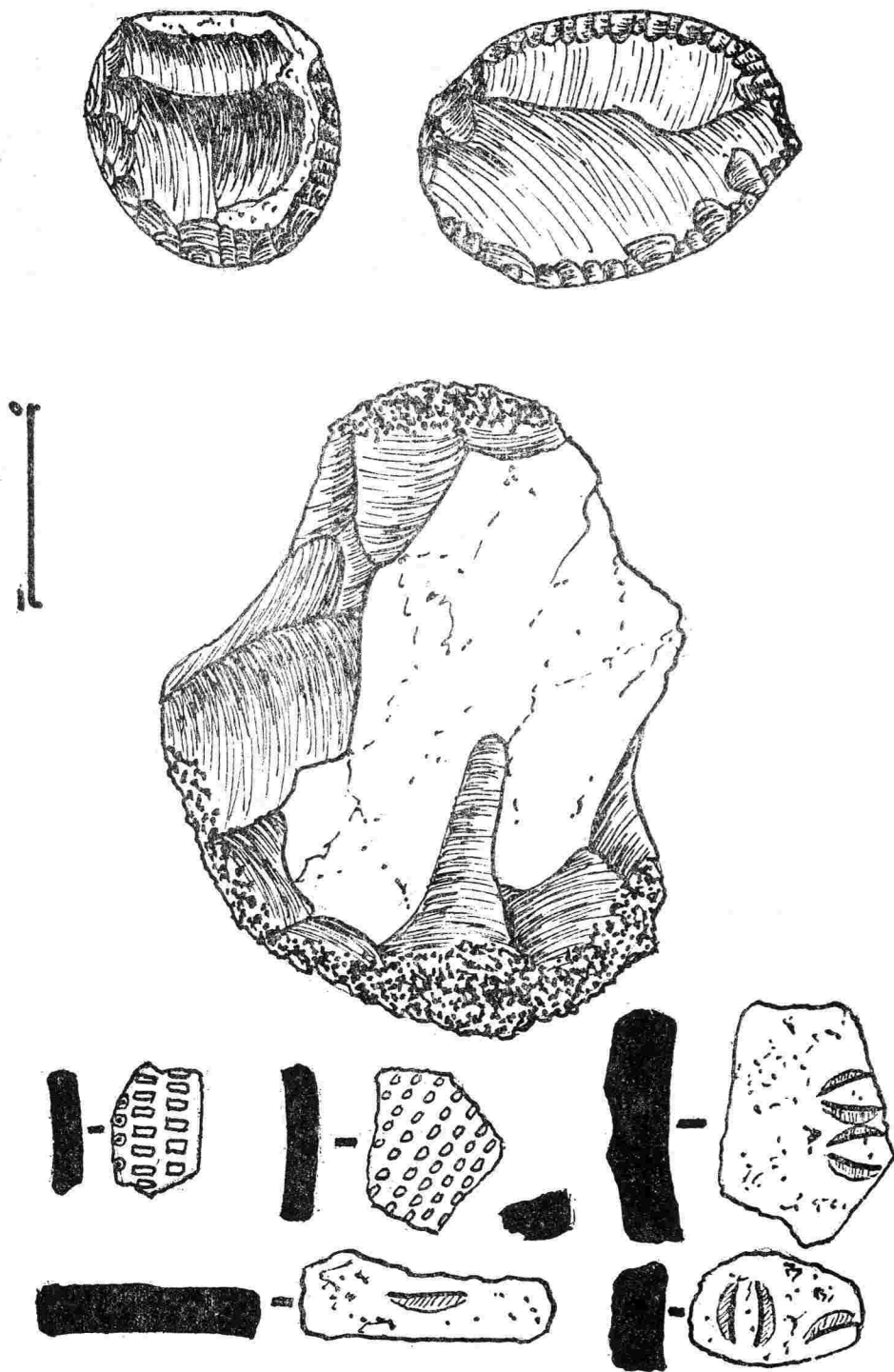


FIG. 10.—West Stow; scrapers, hammer and sherds.

From both these hearths there were recovered more than a thousand calcined flints together with some two hundred flint flakes, some 30 of which were finely worked as scrapers, etc. There were also present two hammer stones of distinctive form. Lying in close proximity to the hearths were two sherds of distinctive Beaker pottery, and three sherds of Rusticated pottery from some larger vessel having finger-nail decoration (Figs. 9 and 10). Since some three miles separate the site from the nearest water supply and since there is a complete absence of any evidence of food bones in the hearths or anywhere on the site, it is reasonable to assume that the hearths in question were not domestic but probably ritual in purpose.

Five feet from the mound centre and 15 feet from the hearths an area 5 feet by 4 feet was distinguished by very dark sand staining at the base of the turf structure just above the base chalk which it is considered marked the situation of an inhumation burial; this is supported to some extent by the presence of the hard capping of a human molar tooth, the roots of which had decayed away completely leaving the capping hollow. Judging by the lack of wear on the tooth capping, the person whilst adult was evidently still quite young. No other fragments of bone or teeth were observed.

The writer would like to express his appreciation to the Forestry Commission Eastern Conservancy for permission to carry out this examination and to Mr. Jones of the Forestry service for his interest and help. Last, but by no means least, to the company of enthusiastic helpers for their hard work and provision of transport.