



# WEST KENNET LONG BARROW

## Information for teachers



### What are long barrows?

Long barrows are ancient, communal tombs. They are elongated mounds, built of earth, or chalk and earth, covering a wood or stone 'house' for the dead.

It used to be thought that long barrows were in use for hundreds of years, but recent research on four long barrows in the south west shows that burials took place over no more than three or four generations and perhaps as little as a decade.

Long barrows were built during the Neolithic (c.4000 – 2200 BC). They used to be dated to between 4000 BC and 3000 BC, but evidence from the four in the south west suggests that the last burials had been made by around 3600 BC.

Over 300 long barrows have been found in Britain, with concentrations on the Wessex downs and the Cotswolds. They were often built on a prominent hill, some distance from where people were living. Perhaps they served as a territorial marker as well as a burial chamber.

### How were long barrows constructed?

Long barrows vary considerably in size and method of construction. In some areas a wooden building – a 'mortuary house' – was erected and then covered with a mound of earth taken from either side of the structure. Where it was available, stone was used instead of wood.

West Kennet Long Barrow is 100 metres long and 20 metres wide. It must have taken an enormous amount of co-ordinated labour to shift the tonnes of earth and stone from which it is made. The huge sarsen stones at the entrance were brought from the nearby downs. The smaller stones of the monument are limestone and seem to have been selected from a location over 32 kilometres (20 miles) away.

One estimate is that it took 15,700 man hours to build.



*An artist's illustration of how the stones were moved*

## West Kennet Long Barrow

The West Kennet Long Barrow was built some time around 3650BC. Over a period of between 10 - 30 years, the bones of at least 36 individuals were carefully placed in the five stone chambers before they were closed. It probably continued to be an important place for many generations after that.

### Who was buried at West Kennet Long Barrow?

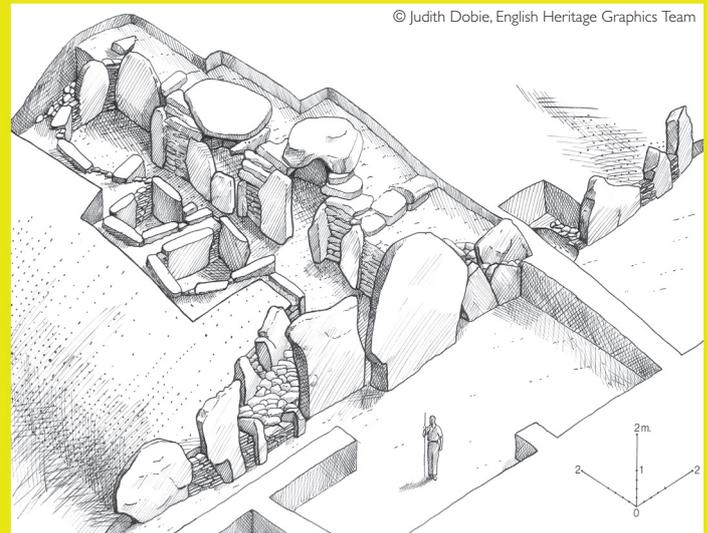
We don't know the relationship between the people whose bones were laid at West Kennet. It's possible that the bones were placed in the five chambers in a way that reflected their different status and position in society.

The great majority of Neolithic human remains found by archaeologists are disarticulated. It used to be thought that the dead at West Kennet had been excarnated (exposed for animals to scavenge and the flesh to rot, before the bones were retrieved and taken away for burial). However, recent research suggests that the bones became separated by being moved and rearranged when new bodies were placed in the Long Barrow.

### The Stone Chambers

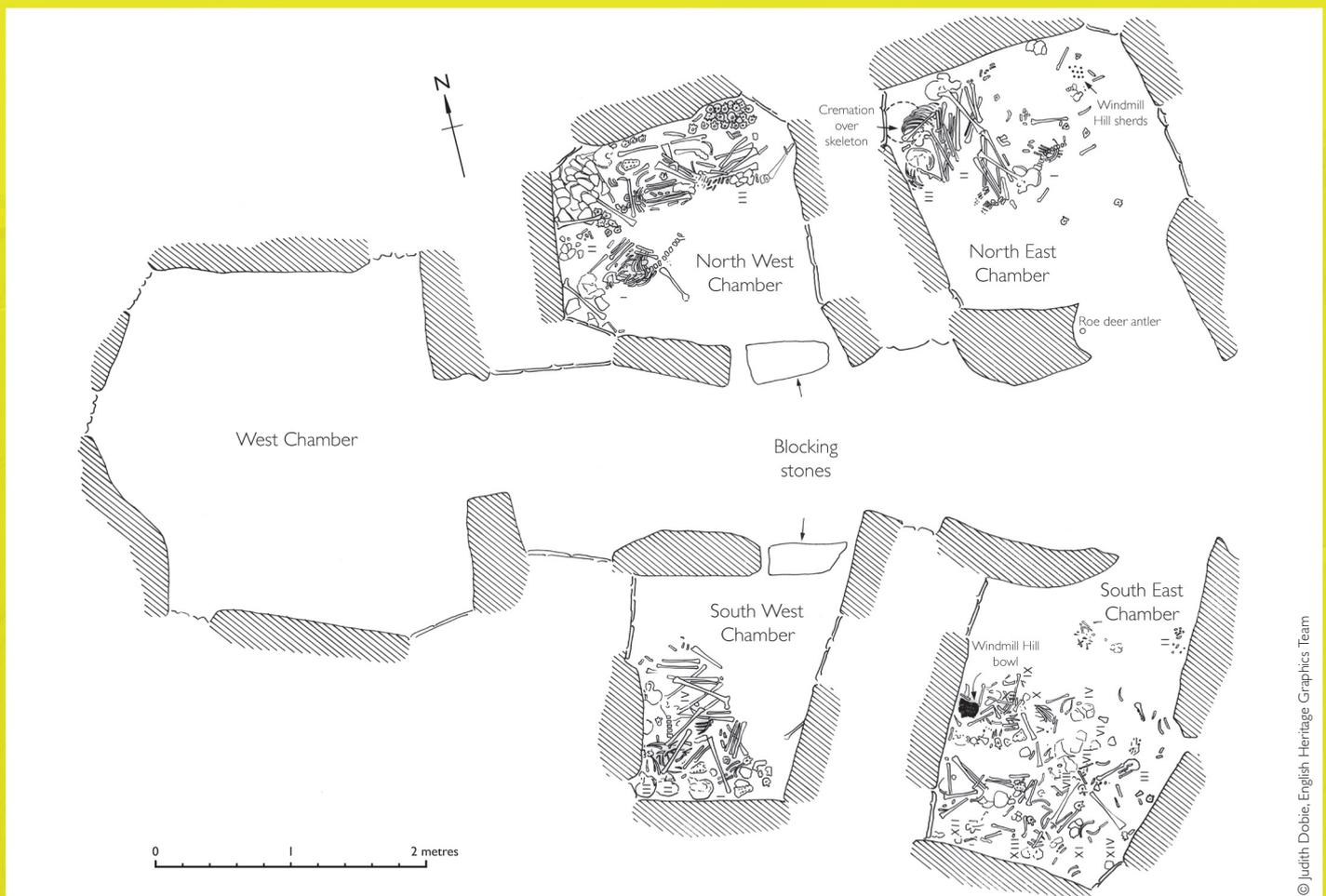
The chambers take up only one – eighth of the barrow's length. Outside the barrow is a concave forecourt, with a façade of huge sarsen stones. It's wide enough for people to congregate, unlike the narrow passage inside. Perhaps this is where ceremonies were held to celebrate and respect the dead.

In the south west burial chamber (on your left as you go in) is a large sarsen stone with a smooth groove down it. Archaeologists believe it was worn away by the sharpening or polishing of stone axes.



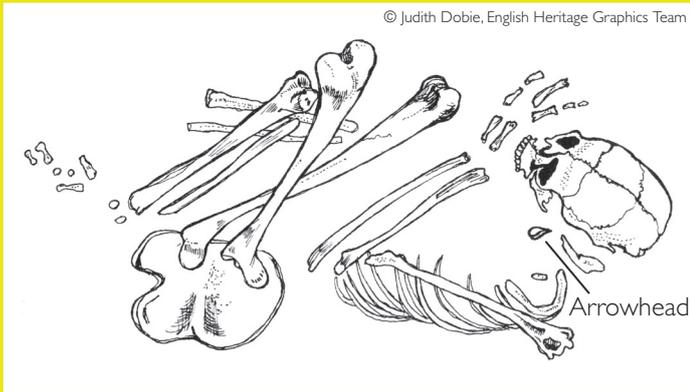
### What happened later at West Kennet?

West Kennet Long Barrow has had a chequered history. The earliest records show it was dug into in the 17th century by a Dr Toope, who removed some bones to grind into a 'cure-all' medicine. In the nineteenth century turf and chalk were taken from the mound, and a farm track crossed over it. One of the chambers was excavated by Dr John Thurnam in 1859. He removed human skulls in order to measure them, but he left no detailed records of the objects he found.



### What can we learn from archaeological evidence?

The remains of many different people were found in the chambers of West Kennet Long Barrow, but only one skeleton was complete - that of an elderly man whose broken arm and embedded flint arrowhead suggest he had met a violent death.



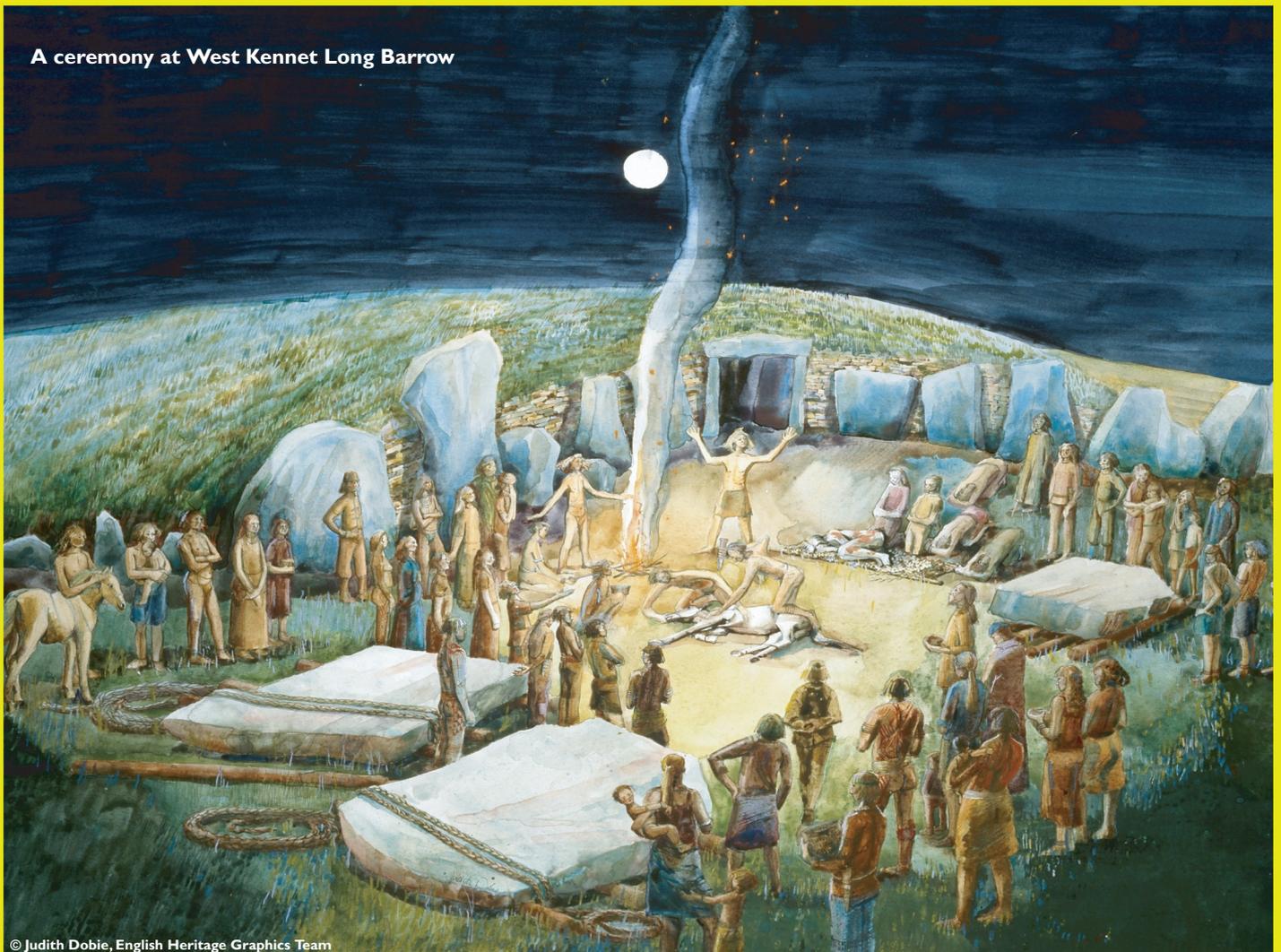
The burial rites at the Long Barrow were complicated. The bones from partly decomposed corpses seem to have been moved about within the different chambers of the long barrow.

Animal bones, pottery and the remains of fires have been found outside the entrance to long barrows. These may be all that remains of elaborate rituals and ceremonies which took place when the bones were moved.

After the last burial, the chambers were filled with chalk rubble and the entrance to the barrow sealed.



### A ceremony at West Kennet Long Barrow



## Investigate West Kennet Long Barrow

### Supporting notes

Most of the questions on the sheet are designed to be open ended, to encourage discussion during and after your visit.

Answers to some of the questions in sections 1-7

1. West Kennet Long Barrow was built about 5,600 years ago.
2. Archaeological evidence suggests that people held celebrations and feasts outside the entrance to the tomb.
3. We don't know for certain how the sarsens were transported. The most likely suggestion is that they were dragged on wooden rollers. The smaller stones would have been carried or dragged since wheels were not in use in Neolithic Britain.
5. The Long Barrow is 100 metres long and 20m wide at the entrance.
6. You would not have been able to see Silbury Hill: it was not built until some 1,200 years later.
8. The flint arrowhead and broken arm suggest the man met with a violent death.
9. The greatest threat to the Long Barrow, is erosion of the mound, and damage to the stones. Both of these are caused by visitors, so we need to encourage people to treat the monument with care and respect.

### Suggestions for follow-up activities

#### English

- Describe a ceremony to honour the ancestors at West Kennet Long Barrow.
- There is a local legend that the Long Barrow is visited on Midsummer Day by a ghostly priest and a large white hound. Tell the legend as a poem or a story.

#### Maths

- Make a scale model of the Long Barrow using the measurements made on the site visit. (The barrow is 100 metres long, 20 metres wide and 9 metres high.)

#### Science

- The 'ceilings' of the burial chambers at West Kennet are made of enormously heavy stones, covered with tonnes of earth and chalk. But they have stayed up for 5,500 years! The stones are corbelled: stones are laid, each overlapping the previous one until they near the centre where the vault is covered by a capstone.
- See how this works by using wooden or plastic building bricks to build an arch. This would be useful as part of a study of forces.

#### History

- It's difficult to know how people in Britain looked in the Neolithic period. Very little clothing has survived, and we have no evidence of things like hairstyles and body decorations. But elsewhere in Europe, tattooed skin and jewellery have survived.
- The best evidence we have of Neolithic clothing comes from the Alps. Around 3000BC, a man was buried in the ice while crossing the mountains. The mummified body of Otzi, as archaeologists called him, gives us clues about the clothing worn by men in Europe 5,000 years ago. He was wearing a cap of brown bear fur, a fur tunic and leggings with a belt, a soft leather loincloth, grass-lined deerskin shoes with bearskin soles and a cloak of plaited grass. He carried arrows in a quiver made from leather and wood, a leather tassel with a stone bead, a flint dagger and a flint axe with wooden handles. Can you use this information to draw someone who might have visited the West Kennet Long Barrow? Remember Britain would have been considerably warmer than the Alps. Compare your drawing to others in your class. Why are they all so different? Look at [http://www.archaeologiemuseum.it/f01\\_ice\\_uk.html](http://www.archaeologiemuseum.it/f01_ice_uk.html) to find out more about Otzi.

#### Geography

- The smaller stones were brought to West Kennet from the area around Frome, 32 kilometres (20 miles) away. Use the Ordnance Survey Landranger Maps 173 and 183 to plot the best route from Frome to West Kennet. Would the best route follow the higher ground or avoid the hills? What about the river? Do the modern roads use all or part of the route you have chosen? What other factors might have had an effect on the route of a modern road?

#### Art/ Design Technology

- Design a poster to encourage visitors to take care of the monument.

