THE WARREN FARM CHAMBER: A RECONSIDERATION

PAUL ASHBEE

At least seven ruined but recognisable stone-chambered long barrows, Kit’s Coty House being the best known, still remain in the Medway valley where that river cuts through the chalk of the North Downs. They had exceptionally high rectangular chambers, proportional façades, and stone kerbs. In plan they recall the southern English earthen long barrows, originally of timber, such as Fussell’s Lodge in Wiltshire (Ashbee 1966). They are distinct from other groups and are likely to have been versions of the stone-built long barrows of Holland and Northern Germany (Ashbee 1999).

The Medway’s megalithic long barrows (Fig. 1), like others of their kind, were surrogate long houses (Ashbee 1999, 270) and also repositories for human remains rather than mere tombs. There may have been centuries of recourse to them, before they were finally sealed with occupation debris (Piggott 1962, 26; Woodward 1993). Their construction with sarsen stones, some of almost Stonehenge calibre, required considerable labour, while they cannot but have fulfilled a central role for the Neolithic communities of the terrain that was to become Kent.

Early in 1822 the great stones of a long barrow chamber’s remnant part were encountered, just within the 300ft contour, and close by Warren Farm, on Blue Bell Hill (NGR TQ 753 606). An obstruction to ploughing had led to digging which disclosed large sarsen stones just below the surface. George Fowle, of Cobtree Manor, the landowner, ordered their removal, but when three uprights emerged he determined that they should be uncovered. He invited Thomas Charles, of Chillington Manor, in Faith Street, Maidstone (Roach Smith 1883, 141), and Clement Taylor Smythe, the Maidstone historian (Russell 1881, passim; Roach Smith 1883, 147) to be present. The stones, when for the most part bared, formed an ostensible stone chamber and after their removal human bones and pottery were found. Thomas Charles made a lively isometric sketch
Fig. 1 A plan of a Medway megalithic long barrow, based upon the Warren Farm chamber remnant. It illustrates the considerable number of stones required for the chamber, façade and kerb, in the form common to the series.
Fig. 2 Drawing by Thomas Charles of the chamber as it would have appeared had the stones been completely unearthed.

(Fig. 2) of the stones, and probably a plan, and as a medical practitioner, examined the bones and wrote a short report upon those recovered. About a year later, short accounts of the discovery were written, which included the stones' dimensions (C. T. Smythe Coll. MSS, V. 28-30, Maidstone Museum).

A brief article appeared in the Maidstone Journal on 4 July 1822, and the discovery appears to have been but a short time before. Ploughing is likely to have been much earlier in that year and the stones seem to have been dug out later, during the summer. There was a short report in the Gentleman's Magazine (1822, Pt II, 84) while, a decade later, S. C. L(ampreys) (1834, 59), termed it a 'British Tomb'. These sources said that a skeleton had been found, a statement which barely accords with the bones noted by Charles.

The Maidstone Journal reported that:

On Friday last, as some workmen were ploughing a field belonging to Mr George Fowler [sic], situated about a quarter of a mile from Kit's Coty House, the ploughing was impeded by something, which repeatedly had been the case before. The men in order to ascertain the
cause of the obstruction, commenced digging, and a little below the surface found two stones about 6½ feet long, lying lengthwise upright, but rather slanting, between which was a skeleton, in nearly a perfect state. The skull, the teeth, and two of the vertebrae of the neck, were quite perfect. On being exposed to the air, they soon crumbled into dust. The body lay directly east and west, and at the bottom was a stone, which lay flat. This was supposed to have been occasioned by the pressure of the earth above. The other stones appear to be exactly similar to those of Kit's Coty House, and, it is conjectured, were placed there about the same time.

Apart from a sentence saying that the chalky soil had brought about the excellent preservation of the bones, and references to Kits Conti (sic) House, the report in the Gentleman's Magazine is a reiteration of the Maidstone Journal, although there is speculation upon the structure's occupant, 'some chief slain in the battle fought here between Vortimer, King of Britain, and the Saxons . .' being suggested. A later contribution to the Gentleman's Magazine (1833, Pt I, 12-13) was again the account from the Maidstone Journal, with a paragraph on the other monuments of the locality, invoking Stukeley, Thorpe and Rudge (Ashbee 1993, passim). S. C. L. (1834, 59), however, moved into embryo prehistory. He wrote:

About six years ago a BRITISH TOMB was found in the middle of a large field, at about three hundred yards to the north-east of the crossing of the roads just mentioned [the Pilgrim's Way and the Maidstone-Rochester road]. The sides were formed by two large stones leaning a little inwards, but having a stone bar placed so as to prevent their falling together, under which a rude arch of chalk and flints covered the skeleton. A large stone formed the floor of the tomb, and each end was closed, to nearly the height of the cross bar, with smaller blocks. The body had evidently been buried with the knees bent, according to the custom of the ancient Britons, for the leg bones were lying on those of the thighs; the length of the grave was about six feet. This highly interesting relic met the same fate as the White Horse Stone [Lower White Horse Stone, Ashbee 1993, 86], the field in which it was found being in the occupation of the same person.

These brief accounts emphasise the good state of preservation of the human bones from within the confines of the stones, contentions which scarcely accord with the observations of Dr Charles; indeed, S. C. L. describes what might be considered as a contracted burial. Nonetheless, his comments lead one to believe that he witnessed the disinterment of the stones and bones. The coalesced chalk and flints, which covered the skeleton, were possibly remains from the chamber infill, inserted when it was sealed. Smaller blocks (of sarsen stone),
seen by S. C. L., at each end of the area between the massive stone slabs, could have been either discarded packing stones, heaped after the monument’s slighting (Ashbee 1993, 63-7), the remains of smashed blocks or even walling which had given height to the chamber. Further substantial stones were found in 1955 (McCrerie 1956, 254), while fragments can still be seen scattered upon the fields.

Although preserved in Maidstone Museum (Hewett (ed.) 1949, 102; Clarke and Murfin 1995, 170), the basic accounts of the Warren Farm megalithic structure, likely to be those of Dr Charles (Daniel 1950, 234), besides his report on the bones, were lost sight of for a century. O. G. S. Crawford (1955), the first Archaeological Officer of the Ordnance Survey was, with the cordial assistance of Hubert Elgar, then Curator of Maidstone Museum, able to incorporate the location of the Warren Farm site, together with details of the manuscript sources in the museum, plus references to such particulars as had been published (1924, 7). Presumably from the manuscript accounts, J. H. Evans (1928, 90, fig. opp. 77, viii) presents a plan of the stones, terming them a *dolmen*, while at a later juncture (1948), after negotiations with A. J. Golden (Curator until 1948) he was able to publish the basic observations. With these he included redrawings of the original plan and isometric presentation, while comparison was made with other alleged *chambers*, as, at the time, appreciation of the methodical slighting of the series (Ashbee 1993, 63-7) lay in the future.

The basic notes (C. T. Smythe, MS Collections, folio 30; Nat. Mon. Record) are as follows:

In the summer of 1823 [this date indicates that the note was written some time after the discovery, as the *Maidstone Journal* notice was on 4 July 1822] a British Tomb or Druidical Monument was discovered in the parish of Aylesford on the Warren Farm belonging to Geo. Fowle, Esq., of Cobtree, in the same parish. The workmen having repeatedly met with obstruction in ploughing from large stones about 4 inches below the surface, Mr. Fowle directed them to remove the obstructions. Upon digging for that purpose they found that there were three stones of large size, and as this excited some curiosity, Mr. Fowle determined to uncover the whole prior to destruction.

I received an invitation from Mr. Fowle to be present at the investigation and was there during the progress of work. Upon removing the earth we found that there were three large stones and one smaller stone, all of them of irregular shape, of the same formation and appearance as the monument close by called Kits Coty House:

- That on the N. side: 7ft 6in. x 4ft 9in. x 1ft 2in.
- That on the S. side: 7ft 0in. x 5ft 9in. x 2ft 3in.
- That on the W. side: 3ft 0in. x 4ft 0in. x 1ft 6in.
Small stone 3ft 0in. x 2ft 0in. x 1ft 0in. this having been placed to prevent the N. stone from falling against the S. stone. The whole structure had been depressed towards the south.

The stones were removed and next day workmen continued to dig beneath to ascertain if anything had been deposited, and at about 4 feet below the monument, they discovered a flat stone 4 feet long, 3 feet broad, upon which several human bones were found lying E.-W., but they were thrown out carelessly by the workmen, and no one being on the spot to take notes, particulars could not be ascertained. Some of the bones were collected and shown to Mr. Charles of Maidstone, who gave the following description of them. With the bones were found a small fragment of an unglazed urn.

Dr Charles commented upon such bones as were collected thus:

The bones had been broken by the workmen who opened the tomb into very small fragments; some of the metatarsal bones and two of the Cervical Vertebrae were the only ones entire. Many small pieces of the skull, ribs, thigh, leg and arm bones were found. They were of ordinary size. From the state of the teeth we may conclude they belonged to persons of, or past, middle age, as they were in some places carious, and the points of the molars were worn down and flattened. It is evident that two bodies must have been buried in the tomb as among the fragments of bones collected there were two right sides of the under-jaws, and two portions of the ulna, with the Olcranon, one of which was much larger make than the other.

With the two basic narratives, there is a further note which, besides repeating the basic dimensions, gives some more details:

Middle Stone, wide 1 foot, depth 2 feet. The stones on the N. and S. sides incline to S. From the appearance of the stones it is to be supposed that the N. when put in leaned to the S. and the middle stone was put in to support it, but its weight pressing against the N. stone forced that into a similar position. The space between the two stones is about 3 feet at the E. end. About 4ft below the surface of the N. stone was a flat stone about 4ft long 3ft wide, on which lay the skull of a mole, the rest of the bones lay in a direct line with the E. end. A Jaw bone with several perfect teeth was found; some of the teeth were slightly decayed, apparently previous to death. The tomb is of the same stones as those of Kits Coty House, about ¼ mile away from it.

It was discovered by the plough hitting against the highest stone which was about 4in. below the surface. Nothing but bones was discovered except a small piece of pottery.

These brief but valuable records, in many ways in advance of their
age, are augmented by the isometric drawing, by Thomas Charles, of the apparent chamber, as it may have appeared when the stones had been unearthed (Fig. 2), and a plan. This drawing, photographed early in the twentieth century by Hubert Elgar, when he recorded the remains of the Medway Valley's megalithic long barrows (Ashbee 1993, 85 Pl. IV), is proportional, drawn from a SE stance, and gives a not unsatisfactory impression of the bared sarsen stone blocks. The second, the plan (Fig. 3), does not, however, reflect the recorded dimensions of the stones, for that on the S side is almost twice as thick as its counterpart on the N side, and one has the general impression that it may have been an attempt to depict the character of the apparent chamber, or perhaps, cist.

The isometric drawing by Thomas Charles is a valuable record of the

---

**Fig. 3** A copy of a sketch plan made at the time of the unearthing of the chamber remnant. It does not reflect the recorded dimensions of the stones.
general appearance of chamber remnant, but, as has been observed, it
does not accord with the dimensions recorded. The stones were
removed, presumably dragged out by horses, and the bones on the
floor-stone were found only when the soil infilling the space between
them was subsequently dug away. Thus the drawing is a portrayal of
how the chamber remnant might have appeared had it been completely
unearthed and emptied, with the stones remaining in situ. Nonetheless,
to remove the massive stones effectively their outer faces and ends
would need to have been bared. In the circumstances there is a good
measure of reality in the record.

O. G. S. Crawford (1924, 6) noted the location of the apparent
‘chamber’ in terms of degrees, minutes and seconds of latitude and
longitude, the usage of those distant days. In determining this he
employed W. H. Bensted’s map (Maidstone Museum) which he had
used to indicate destroyed monuments upon the occasion of the Arch-
exeological Institute’s (Royal in 1866) 1863 visit to the area (Arch.
Journ., XX (1863), 384). As was his inveterate methodology, the site
was checked on the ground and it is more than probable that scattered
sarsen stone chippings determined its siting. Nonetheless, the correct
location did not appear upon appropriate Ordnance Survey maps until
the post-war period. Robin Holgate, in his assessment of the
Medway’s stone-built long barrow remnants for the then Dept. of the
Environment, illustrated this siting with a localised map, which
included the White Horse Stone and a view of the field, from the
south-east (1981, fig. 15, Pl. 15), which show that the erstwhile long
barrow had been upon near-level ground.

The location (Fig. 4) of the erstwhile Warren Farm long barrow,
just within the 300ft contour, and thus in a position commensurate
with Kit’s Coty House, and about a quarter-mile eastwards therefrom,
may well be of significance. This long barrow, with the Lower Kit’s
Coty House and the Coffin Stone, both of which are close to the 125ft
contour, and thus some 170ft lower, are a trio sited upon and at the
foot of a south-western facing bastion of Blue Bell Hill. The Warren
Farm long barrow was, however, within a south-facing combe. Were
the White Horse Stones (Ashbee 1993, 86) also the remains of long
barrows, each more or less on the 250ft contour, there would have
been two adjacent, and near identically disposed, trios of megalithic
long barrows on Blue Bell Hill. As far as can be seen, the south-
western facing group, with Kit’s Coty House in the prime position, is
likely to have been the principal because of their position and
considerable size.

Direct evidence of the mode of slighting of the Medway Valley’s
megalithic long barrows in the Middle Ages emerged from the careful
excavation of the Chestnuts, at Addington, in 1957. There had been a planned mode of demolition and also positive indications of the way in which this had been carried out (Alexander 1961, 24-7). The barrow had been dug away, the chamber emptied and thereafter such stones as still stood systematically felled by pits excavated at their bases. Pottery indicated the second half of the thirteenth century as the time of their overthrow. A particular aspect of the wrecking process was evidence of stone burial, attested in various ways from almost all of them. At about this time there was a general consolidation of Church authority, though there had been concern about those who frequented and worshipped stones, from the seventh century onwards (Ashbee 1993, 63-6). The wreckers could have been itinerants probably with substantial support and some power.

By the Medway, destruction was carried out in different ways. Some chambers were topped and others left, at least partially, standing, perhaps reflecting their substance and structure. At Kit's Coty House, the kerb stones, and possibly the façade, were thrown
into the ditches and largely buried (McCrerie 1956) during the process of effacing the barrow. It seems likely that the Warren Farm megalithic long barrow suffered in much the same manner.

It is manifest that this apparent chamber is a surviving part of a larger partitioned chamber at the eastern end of a megalithic long barrow (Ashbee 2000, 336, fig.7). From the size of the stones it can be seen that the erstwhile chamber may have been of lesser height and breadth than some, although the barrow, which was presumably kerbed, could have been commensurate with that of the Chestnuts (Alexander 1961). Flanking ditches, into which stones were perhaps thrown, may lie at an appropriate distance from the barrow’s sides, below the hillwash. S. C. L.’s observation regarding rubble at each end of the remnant suggest the remaining central section of what might have been a long chamber. On the other hand, the modest apparent end-stone, the dimensions of which are recorded, but challenged by Evans (1948, 138), could have been, as at Coldrum (Ashbee 1998, 14), set to divide the chamber, the stones unearthed in 1822 remaining from its fore-part.

Another feature of the Warren Farm chamber is that it is recorded as having been paved by a ‘flat stone 4 feet long, 3 feet broad’, upon which the bones lay. It is not impossible that this slab was a cover-stone that was thrown into the chamber-remnant when the monument was slighted. The bones unearthed by the workmen could have been the residue of a larger deposit which had been scattered. It must be observed that such paving is unusual. Indeed, Glyn Daniel (1950; 1960) records neither paving nor stone flooring from either the English or the French stone chambered cairns or their like. Apart from the paved entrances of the Wéris (Luxemburg) chambers (De Laet 1958, 110), few if any examples of the use of paving stones in chambers can be found in Northern Europe (Nordman 1938; Sprockhoff 1938; Midgley 1992).

The original Warren Farm chamber may have been as much as 20ft in length, and, to judge from the calibre of the surviving stones, as many as ten of which could have gone into its construction. As at the Chestnuts (Alexander 1961, 7, plan II) a further six, or even eight, selected stones could have formed the façade. Following the evidence from Kit’s Coty House, Addington and Coldrum (Ashbee 2000), the long barrow could well have been contained by a sarsen stone kerb. Although the larger, and thus more impressive, stones would have been used at the proximal, and smaller blocks at the distal, end, such a kerb, were the contained barrow about 180ft in length, would have involved the use of some 110, or even 120, selected sarsen stone blocks. The flanking ditches would have provided chalk rubble for
the barrow, and when complete it would have had the lineaments of a trapezoidal long house (Ashbee 1970, 79, fig. 42).

As can be seen from Coldrum's chamber (Ashbee 1998, 25-8, 34), the Medway's chambers are likely to have housed considerable deposits of human bones before they fell out of use and were sealed, as at West Kennet (Piggott 1962, 26). While bones may have been disinterred from single graves, as were those of Fussell's Lodge long barrow (Ashbee 1966, 37-42), there is now evidence from Coldrum, and Eyford (Glocs), that corpses were dismembered with lithic instruments (Wysocki & Whittle 2000, 595). Thus the few bones found in the Warren Farm chamber remnant may be those remaining after the stone-built long barrow was slighted and its contents scattered.

With regard to the bones, dug out after the chamber remnant's side-stones had been dragged out, there are divergent accounts which may reflect subjectivity of view, contingent upon understanding. The Maidstone Journal (4 July 1822) reports '...a skeleton in nearly a perfect state. The skull, the teeth, and two of the vertebrae of the neck were quite perfect'. S. C. L. (1834, 59) described what could be taken for a contracted burial for he relates that 'the body had evidently been buried with the knees bent...for the long bones were lying on those of the thighs', which could mean that the lower leg bones, tibiae and fibulae, were across and upon the femurs. S. C. L., who noted the rubble at each end, was presumably present and thus may have seen bones unearthed that were perhaps reinterred in the pit left by the removal of the stones and the baring of the floor-stones. A mass of bones, such as has been encountered in certain long barrows, would have impinged itself upon the minds and memories of the workmen, and, moreover, would have been, perhaps, difficult to dispose of. Thus the bones examined by Thomas Charles might have survived from a modest accumulation.

The piece of 'an unglazed urn', thought by R. F. Jessup (1930, 81) to have been a beaker, could have survived from the sealing deposits. Indeed, beaker pottery may have been present as some chambers were not sealed until later Neolithic times (Piggott 1962, 26) and thus pieces could well have found their way there. It should not be forgotten that small beaker sherds were found associated with Kit's Coty House (Cook 1936) and intensive field scrutiny would, even today, probably detect more at that site and elsewhere.

Unless the 'smaller stones' seen by S. C. L. were the remains of walling, carried by the basic sarsen stones of the chamber remnant, the original chamber could have been little more than 4ft in height. Were this so, it would have been one of the more modest in the series,
for the Chestnuts’ chamber, at least at the entrance, was 9ft high (Alexander 1961, 8; Ashbee 1993, 61). The Coffin Stone chamber could have been 8ft in height, while the chamber of which Kit’s Coty House is a remaining part could have been more than 6ft high. It seems possible that chamber dimensions were determined by those responsible for their planning and realisation, for large sarsen stones still remain on Blue Bell Hill, Nowhere, except by the Medway, is there such an adherence to grandiose chamber dimensions.

It would seem likely that the lineaments, and stones, of the Warren Farm long barrow, like the long house, also on Blue Bell Hill (Glass 1999, 192-4; 2000, 453, ill.), lie beneath an accumulation of hillwash. This has resulted from woodland clearance and tillage on downland slopes which have led to the downward movement of chalk and soil by rainwashing and amassment at lower levels and skirts. The environmental and archaeological potential of such deposits is considerable and much pertaining to the progression of Kentish prehistory will undoubtedly emerge when those mantling the Blue Bell Hill long house are evaluated. A not dissimilar situation at Cherhill, in northern Wiltshire, on the fringe of the chalk massif, revealed, upon analytical excavation, a sequence from later Mesolithic material to Late Beaker and Food Vessel sherds (Evans & Smith 1983). Closer to Kent, there has been the excavation of sediments in the chalkland valleys of the South Downs which has produced artefacts (Bell 1983, 123), while, in Kent, dry valleys have yielded molluscan series, some with pottery, at Brook, near Ashford (Kerney et al. 1964; Burleigh & Kerney 1982) and Folkestone (Kerney et al. 1980). Indeed, such sequences have emerged in lynches which are formations of similar, although agricultural, origin (Bell 1977).

As the Warren Farm chamber remnant came to light in 1822, almost half a century before the emergence of the outlines of present-day prehistory (Lubbock 1865), it is necessary to sketch the characteristics of those involved, and the vehicles of the brief published notices. Clement Taylor Smythe, a solicitor who was Town Clerk of Maidstone (1836-8), was the subject of a note by Charles Roach Smith (1883, 147-9). He assembled materials for a history of Maidstone, was involved with the Slade Field Roman villa (Roach Smith 1842a) and the Sutton Valence walled Roman cemetery (Roach Smith 1842b; Detsicas 1983, 151). He talked about founding a Kent Archaeological Society and apparently published little.

Thomas Charles, who lived in the Chillington Manor House in Maidstone’s Faith Street, also chronicled by Smith (1883, 144-6), was an active antiquary who visited the various sites that were investigated in Maidstone and its surround during the early part of the
nineteenth century, although he was a busy medical practitioner. His collection of antiquities, books and pictures were the nucleus of Maidstone Museum, opened in January 1858. He was a skilled and sensitive artist and his pencil drawings of antiquities and ancient buildings are one of its treasures.

Apart from his book (1834), notable for its eulogistic versification, little is known of S. C. Lampsyes. It is likely that he was one of Maidstone’s literary, and also antiquarian, circle. With Thomas Charles, he witnessed the ‘breaking up’ of the Roman villa at Thurnham, in 1833 (Glass 1999, 201-5; 2000).

The Maidstone Journal was, in 1786, established and edited by John Blake (Clark and Murfin 1995, passim) and like other early newspapers it recorded encounters with ancient remains. Notable for its antiquarian information, the Gentleman’s Magazine was founded in 1731 by Edward Cave (1691-1754), who edited it under the pseudonym Sylvanus Urban, and continued, with changes, until 1914.

It emerges that the detailing of the bones from the Warren Farm chamber, was not to be equalled until later in the century, in the days of Thurnam (1862, 224-8), also a medical man, and Greenwell (1877, 557-718). The report by Thomas Charles was brief, but it was, in terms of early archaeological endeavour, ahead of its time and presaged what was to come. The disinterment and destruction of the megalithic chamber would have been, in certain circumstances, a commonplace in an age of agricultural improvement, particularly in an area such as Blue Bell Hill.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Midgley, M., 1992, *The TRB Culture, the First Farmers of the North European Plain*, Edinburgh.
Roach Smith, C., 1842a, 'Account of various Roman remains discovered in
a field called Slade, in the parish of Boughton Monchelsea, in Kent', *Ar-
cheologia*, XXIX, 414-20.
Roach Smith, C., 1842b, 'Roman remains found at Sutton Valence in Kent',
*Archeologia*, XXIX, 421-3.
Thurnam, J., 1868, 'On ancient British barrows, especially those of Wiltshire
and adjoining counties: Part I, Long Barrows', *Archeologia*, XLII,
161-244.
biological and archaeological evidence from British earlier Neolithic