

The Marlborough Mound Notes



Various Authors

The Marlborough Mound



Merlin's Mount is in the grounds of Marlborough College, only a 100 yards off the A 4, but partly concealed by the college chapel. It is freely accessible.

In the grounds of Marlborough College stands a rather bizarre conical mound of grassed earth with a spiraling path all the way round. It is known locally as 'Merlin's Mount' or 'Merlin's Grave' for here the great wizard is supposed to have been buried (or perhaps imprisoned by the Lady of the Lake). Perhaps he chose this spot as his last resting place because of its religious significance. The sarsen stones of the largest circle at Stonehenge, which Merlin is said to have built, came from the Marlborough Downs.

Whatever the circumstance, this famous burial mound or barrow later gave it's name to the town which grew up around it: 'Merlin's Barrow' becoming Marlborough.

The elaborate spiralling effect is part of a 17th century landscaping scheme, but in origin, the mound has always been known as the mote of

a Norman Castle built in about 1110. It became a popular Royal stop-over point for hunting in Savernake Forest well into the reign of King Henry III.

Yet, as early as 1215, a would-be Abbot of Cirencester recorded that the town was named after 'Merlin's Tumulus' and there has often been speculation that the mote replaced an earlier mound, perhaps a prehistoric religious spot like Silbury Hill. This was reinforced by the discovery of a number of Roman coins there and recent investigations have now confirmed that the mound does indeed date from 2,400 BC. It is the second largest prehistoric mound in Britain, perhaps Europe. Marlborough - or Merleberge in 1086 - is indeed accepted as meaning "Maerla's Hill"; but Maerla is almost certainly a shortened form of the name of a Saxon lord such as Maerheard, not a Celtic Druid. Presumably it became connected with Merlin because of both the name and the ancient religious associations.

The Merlin-form of the Arthurian magician's name is first known from Geoffrey of Monmouth's writings of the 1130's. Before this the character was known by the Welsh name of Myrddin.



Marlborough's Mound Is Now Proved Even Older and More Mysterious than Merlin Himself

Tony Millett - 10/06/2011

The huge mound that stands in the middle of Marlborough College is called by racier guidebooks Merlin's Mount and is said to be his burial mound. More reliable sources thought the sixty-two foot (nineteen metre) high mound was constructed by those domineering in-comers from Normandy so they could build Marlborough's castle on top of it and so lord it over the townsfolk down below.

Now new scientific research has confirmed that the mound was built way before any recorded sighting of that elusive fellow Merlin. Carbon dating

of pieces of charcoal found deep within the mound prove it was built three thousand and more years before the Normans rode into town.

Dated now to about 2400 BC, Marlborough's mound becomes the 'little sister' of the world famous Silbury Hill – which dominates the skyline just westwards along the A4.

Peter Carey of the Bath architects Donald Insall Associates who are overseeing the mound's extensive conservation, points out that this discovery makes Marlborough's mound the second largest man-made, prehistoric construction in Britain. And as Silbury is the largest such mound in all of Europe, Marlborough's mound may turn out to be the second largest in Europe.

Carey, who was at Marlborough College in the 1960's, admits to being "carried away" by the news about the dating of the mound. He thinks it is the most significant archaeological discovery in Britain so far this century.

How could the experts have been so wrong? A. R. Stedman in his scholarly book Marlborough and the Upper Kennet Country (published in 1960 in Marlborough) comes down, with some rather strange logic, on the side of the Norman theory:

"This sixty-foot mound is certainly artificial, but whether it was raised, as tradition asserts, in prehistoric times as a barrow—or whether, more probably, it was raised in Norman times so that the castle could dominate the town—is unknown. That the Mound was built for the castle is confirmed by the fact that the Norman rarely put his castle on a spot with religious associations"

So scholars can't be right all the time – especially when the science of carbon dating comes along to confound their theories.

Jim Leary, who led the recent English Heritage archaeological investigations on Silbury Hill, and took part in the investigations into the

mound, says “This is an astonishing discovery. The Marlborough Mound has been one of the biggest mysteries in the Wessex landscape.”

“For centuries people have wondered whether it is Silbury’s little sister; and now we have the answer.”

The mound has had three distinct ‘lives’: it was the base structure for a very important royal castle built by the Normans, used at times by Norman and Plantagenet kings and the scene for some historic events such as the general oath of allegiance to King John in 1209.

The castle then passed from the Kings of England to their queens and eventually fell into disuse, before coming into the hands of the Seymour family of Wolf Hall fame. Another ‘life’ started in the eighteenth century, when a house on the site was home to the Marquis of Hertford and his family, and Lady Hertford created what Peter Carey describes as “a wonderful and extravagant garden” - with the mound as its centre piece.

Lady Hertford gave the mound an extraordinary spiral ramp right round the outside, shielded from the common gaze by a hawthorn hedge. And she adorned it with several notable features including a shell grotto, a belvedere or viewing point and a water feature at the summit.

That the Hertford’s home was later the Castle Inn and a meeting place for Tory politicians need not detain us. It has since become part of the College buildings.

Now we know the mound had a third, much earlier ‘life’ – a prehistoric ‘life’. And the reason it was built around 2400 BC will almost certainly remain as lost in time, as mysterious and as subject to speculation, as Silbury Hill itself.

In an expensive and delicate operation, probes were drilled into the middle of the mound and surrounding ditch areas, and the carbon dating of the samples was carried out with the help of English Heritage. Six cores were drilled and four samples taken from different levels within the mound itself provided shards of charcoal that could be carbon dated.

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This work – and plenty of careful conservation still to come – was made possible by initial gifts and a £1,200,000 legacy from former college student, Eric Elstob. On his initiative, the Marlborough Mound Trust was set up in 2000 and the first investigative work begun.



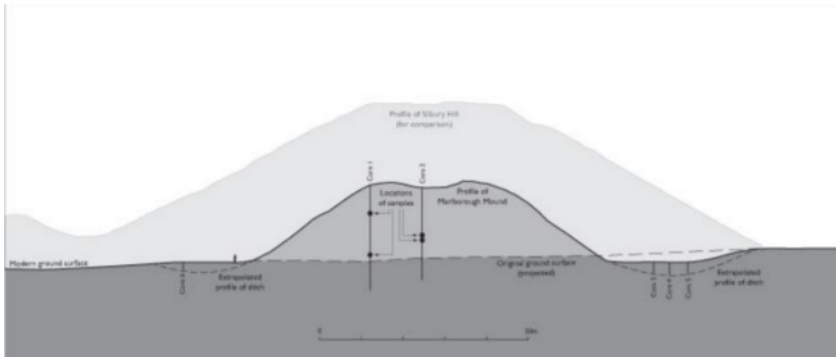
October 2010: lifting the drill gear to the top of the mound - copyright Donald Insall Associates

For more about Eric Elstob and the work to conserve and renovate the mound, see our companion story: “Marlborough Mound’s past is suddenly longer – will its future be longer too?”

And what about the Merlin connection? If Merlin was ever more than a brilliant invention of ancient story-tellers, he belongs in the so-called ‘dark ages’ rather than prehistoric times.

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Perhaps the slight similarity between the words Marlborough and Merlin was too much of a temptation for tourist guides of yore. It is important to emphasise that as part of the College grounds, the Marlborough Mound is on private property and not open to the public. In fact at present there's not a lot to see anyway – just a mound of trees. For further information contact: [HERE](#)



Above: Comparative outlines of Silbury Hill & the Marlborough Mound - with drilling sites. Copyright English Heritage



Marlborough College Mound & Other Mounds **David Moseley 15/08/21**

The mound in Marlborough College is quite well known, it appears to have had to endure a lot of disrespect through history, including being the motte of a Norman castle which was probably eventually used as a prison, then a wealthy families garden feature with a gaudy grotto burrowed into its side, before becoming the go-to location for furtive teenage fumbling's and first cigarettes in the grounds of a college.



The Somerset Mump



The Windsor Mound

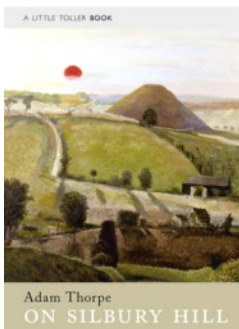
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After really trying hard not to, academia has recently had to acknowledge that it is indeed ancient, analysis of core samples dating its construction to around 2580-2470 BC, which makes it possibly contemporary or a little younger than its near and infinitely more famous neighbour, Silbury Hill dated to 2900 - 2340, - around the same time that Avebury was built and successively modified. (It is important to remember that these dating's are 'scientific' - ie involving technology and procedure, technology has a habit of becoming obsolete, and procedure has a habit of being cocked-up).

Seers, Mystics and Shaman put the date of Silbury's construction as much earlier, by about 2000 years.

It looks like the Marlborough mound is part of the wider 'ritual landscape' centred around Silbury Hill and Avebury.

What could be important to further understanding these large mounds is their proximity to river confluences; as with nearby Silbury, the Marlborough mound is near a confluence of the River Kennet, the mound under what is now Windsor castle is near the Thames, and Barrow Mump in Somerset (though the later is generally considered to be a modified natural feature, its chalk geology in the Somerset wetlands has been furrowing geologists brows) overlooks the confluence of the River's Tone, Cary, and Parrett. All of these water levels would have been a lot higher back in the day.



Adam Thorpe was a student at Marlborough College, he writes about 'Merlins Mound,' as it was once known, in his book *'On Silbury Hill'* (Little Toller Books 2014).

What it has been subjected to makes for uncomfortable reading; A Norman era wooden tower followed by a stone version, Victorian water tanks on the top and the flue of a new boiler house cutting a groove in the mounds flank in 1912 are just a few of the scars. But there is a lot of helpful info, he mentions the nearby springs which fed the moat and fish ponds, and he also tells us about a further equally large

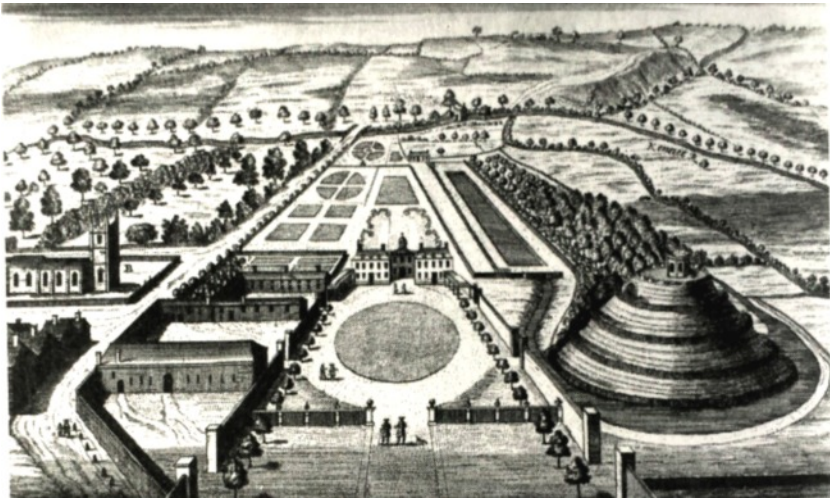
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mound in the area, - 'within the vast Marden Henge, said to be almost as high as the Mound, but it collapsed as it was being excavated by Sir Richard Colt-Hoare and William Cunnington in 1807'.

A small part of this Mound still survives but is distractingly known as the Hatfield Barrow (Left).

Here are a few relevant pages from the book:



Above a bird's eye view of the house and grounds in 1723: we see a neat, spiral-stepped 'Mount' topped by a summer house and a cleaned-up ditch circling the base, full of water that feeds into a long and narrow fishpond. Stukeley noted the number of springs welling up in the ditch: what was called the Moat in my day, a survival of the Norman castle's defences and the subsequent fishpond, was still fed by the springs: the Moat stayed icy cold even in the summer.

This was the school swimming pool, alas - and a lure for our sadistic P. E. teacher in my first year, a huge Australian called Murray, who chose

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especially wintry days to use it for lessons. When he forced our classmate David to jump in, or rather pushed him in, on the basis that a non-swimmer would rather swim than drown, and the basis proved mistaken, I was ordered to dive in and pull him out. I did so, aware that my friend was already underwater in the deep end, but he proved heavy, and a panicked arm, slippery as a tentacle, was wrapped around my neck: I all but saw my thirteen years of life ending.



For my part, I had always felt in my own green bones that the Mound was prehistoric: far too mysterious, too looming a thing, too dark and enigmatic, to be nothing more than a dull motte under a Norman keep. We had to walk around its great bulk every day, it cast the area around it into gloom, its effect exaggerated by the trees and bushes that used it as their earth-ball, probing its depths with their roots. The 1960's Art School block looked straight out through plate glass onto its eastern slopes a few yards away across a gravel footpath: a wall of light-speckled dark green, a kind of verdant waterfall entirely blocking the view.

Modern and ancient cheek-by-jowl, and the ancient always dominant, despite the smell of turps and ink and paints and glue, the chatter of the arty types the classical music that helped to create an ambience, there was much that swirled about in between those two temporal extremes. Recovered Roman coins suggested a Roman fort; the Normans built a wooden tower on top, then a keep in stone that dominated their impressive castle, spread at the foot of the Mound, where a succession of kings stayed including bad King John who liked to hunt in Savernake Forest. The castle's stout walls tumbled into heaps of rubble, but the Mound's height was useful during the Civil War.

Peace came, and the hill, described by Sir Robert Moray in 1664 as 'an Ancient Tumulus' with a 'handsomely graveled walk and a 'pretty green' at the top set to fruit trees, was now the fashionable main feature in the picturesque garden of the Seymours. The latest Seymour, the sixth Duke of Somerset, demolished the old house and gave the new one to his son, Lord Hertford. This attractive manor was to become a mere coaching inn and then, in the 1840's, the poshest element in a new charitable school for the sons of vicars. (The building's comfortable grandiosity must be an essential selling point, now that the school is for the seriously rich and the genuinely royal.)

None of these afflictions tamed the shaggy monster, its late picturesqueness added to by Lady Hertford with a fashionable grotto scooped from the base and encrusted with shells. Grottoes were a link with the pagan past, albeit a classical one: natural caves originally dedicated to water nymphs in Greek and Roman times, the neo-classical version revived a relationship with nature that Christian belief had desiccated.

Lady Hertford liked to have a personal poet in residence during the summer. In William Kent and Nicolas-Henry.

I thought it should be known that the mounds antiquity has now at least been grudgingly acknowledged by the 'experts'. A number of authors who have written about Silbury Hill do mention the Marlborough Mound. There is also a curious mound that appears bigger and steeper-sided than the average tumulus to the south of the A4 and only a few hundred meters to the east of Silbury Hill. Part of it can be seen in winter from the pathway leading to West Kennett Long Barrow from the A4 lay-by. I noticed it on the way back from WKL B one evening but could only get within about 75m of it because of fences and private land. I haven't found any info about it.



Twmbarlwm Prominence A Competitor For Silbury?

Siân Morgan 11/8/21



TWMBARLWM PROMINENCE 48 m (157 ft) - Silbury At 39.3 metres (129 ft) high, it is the tallest prehistoric man-made mound in Europe. (wiki) Am I reading this right - Twmarlwm is higher than Silbury but never gets a mention - Does anyone know why that is - Is it more hidden history? Please correct me if I'm wrong.

There's a bit of drone footage at the bottom of this [article](#).. But the droner couldn't have picked a worse time to go because they chopped pretty much all the forest down because of some manky tree disease. I like it up there in the night at this time of year for the meteor showers. I'm sure the ancestors would've done the same. They say the Silures built it. It's a magical mystical place especially at night.

Further Comments

David Moseley: Thanks again Siân. That Mound certainly is nowhere near the height of Silbury on its own, the measurement must be including some additional part of it's location, or they mean it is the largest Mound on top of a hill. From this photo and the drone footage the ditch and embankment are quite typical of hill fortifications.

The magikal and mystical other world that these places share with us is one the most valuable aspects, it is sad that so many people have lost any sensitivity or respect for them.

There are many books out there looking at the history and physical characteristics of many of these sites if you are interested, one stands out for the magickal and mystical side - Alan Richardson's '*Neurolithica*'.

Siân Morgan: David Moseley I've just been looking into that book and his other books but then got distracted by Dion Fortune. I've had her Moon Magic book for about 15 yrs but couldn't read it before I found the 1st book, The Sea Priestess.. So I've just treated myself to a copy because I doubt if I'll ever find it in a second hand bookshop. Fair-dos to Dion, her books are not going down in price. Do you think the words - princess & prince came from the words - priestess & priest? With the former being total imposters with no real power other than being the biggest bullies.



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