

Bartlow Hills

Roman Burial Mounds

This is a short walk (less than a kilometre in total) along attractive public paths to an important archeological site.

Bartlow Hills monument comprises a group of Roman barrows dating from the late 1st and early 2nd Century AD. It is now designated as a Scheduled Ancient Monument and is located on the privately owned Bartlow Estate. It is an important wildlife site, managed through the Monument Management Project.

Public access is granted to the three largest mounds. Visitors can park in Bartlow village and access the site from the footpath to the left of St Mary's Church, or from the footpath on Ashdon Road.

Bartlow Hills Roman burial mounds, or tumuli, are the largest in Western Europe and were part of a large funerary complex associated with a nearby villa and metal working area, highlighting its exceptional importance. The group originally formed two parallel rows running roughly north - south. The western row was probably made up of five small mounds, two of which were possibly destroyed in the 16th Century and one by the construction of the railway in the mid-19th Century, while the remaining two were almost totally levelled by ploughing.

Four huge steep-sided conical mounds make up the eastern row; the largest is approximately 15 metres high and 45 metres in diameter. These larger mounds are slightly later in date than the western row, suggesting that the wealth and status of the people who built them had increased considerably since the smaller mounds were constructed.

North of the Alps, this method of barrow burial is only found in eastern England and Belgium and reflects the importance of cross-channel trade and contacts during the period of the Roman occupation. Indeed, many of the artefacts included in the burials had been imported from the Rhineland (the border area between Belgium and Germany) and the mounds must have been the resting place of wealthy Romano-British landowners with strong European contacts. The people who came to be buried in the mounds presumably lived nearby and while Roman villas have been found at Bartlow and Ashdon, they are rather small and unimportant; however, a much grander villa at nearby Linton would have had an excellent view over the imposing mounds.



Roman burial mound at Bartlow

In 1815 one of the mounds was opened by Sir Busic Harwood who discovered grave goods. The artefacts were distributed amongst those present before records were made. Further excavations took place between 1832 - 1840, under the direction of John Gage. Gage found that seven of the mounds contained central walled graves containing cremated human bones accompanied by elaborate grave goods of exotic glass, decorated bronze vessels, fine pottery and sacrificial offerings. Fortunately detailed reports were published soon after the excavation, as a fire destroyed virtually all the artefacts in 1847.

Regular conservation and maintenance works are required to preserve the monument and a fence now surrounds the base of the largest mound, to prevent damaging erosion scars, although a set of steps allows visitors to climb to the top. Nesting boxes have been provided for the Great Spotted Woodpecker, owls and bats, while the cutting back of scrub on the mounds has encouraged the growth of Pyramidal Orchids, Cowslip, Oxeye Daisy, Wild Mint and Wild Thymus.

On your return why not complete your Bartlow visit at St. Mary's Church, which dates from 1100 and has an unusual Norman round tower? The five feet thick walls enclose important medieval wall paintings.

The site is owned by Cambridgeshire County Council's County Farms Estate and managed for the benefit of archaeology, wildlife and nature conservation. Please treat the site with respect and follow the countryside code. It is a criminal offence to metal-detect on a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

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