

The Tumulus

North of Parliament Hill, on the way up to Kenwood, stands one of Hampstead Heath's most intriguing curiosities. You will find it in the middle of the meadow that stretches west from the Boating Pond. It is a large earthen mound covered with pine trees and surrounded by gorse, an iron fence and possibly the hint of a ditch. The origin of this tree-covered 'Tumulus' is something of a mystery, although there is no shortage of theories.

One theory that can be discounted immediately is that it is the grave of Icenian Queen Boudicca, defeated in battle by the Romans. Despite some locals still referring to it as 'Boedicea's Grave' we can be certain that this is not the case.

It was suggested by Alan Farmer in his excellent book 'Hampstead Heath' that it

might be the base of a windmill, possibly constructed in the seventeenth century. David McDowall and Deborah Wolton, however, cast doubt on this theory in their equally enjoyable 'Hampstead Heath – the walker's guide'. They suggest that there ought to be more substantial evidence of such a relatively recent structure and also question the necessity of creating a windmill here, when it would seem more rational to harness the power of the two nearby branches of the River Fleet, by way of water mills. Instead, they tentatively put forward the possibility that it never served a practical function, but was a folly visible from Kenwood House.

Another legend proposes that the Tumulus is a burial ground containing

The Tumulus (Layton Thompson)



The Tumulus in 1908 (courtesy: Michael Hammerson)

the 'dust of the slain' after fisticuffs between ancient tribes from London and St Albans. In 1883 Professor John Hales wondered whether the approaching St Albans gang were coming along the Fleet valley from the north 'when the Londoners, marching up that valley, met them at this spot, and dyed the stream with their own and their enemies' blood.'

Various other experts have looked at the mound over the years, but no argument put forward seems wholly satisfactory. One study at the end of the nineteenth century suggested that a large quantity of material had been added to an earlier structure. Perhaps it was used as a dump

for a while or maybe the material was added to make more of a feature of an existing mound.

Maps have been produced showing the Tumulus to be at the centre of a mass of overlapping ley lines, perhaps suggesting spiritual significance.

Quite recently, credible experts have again put forward the idea that it is a burial mound, maybe dating from the Bronze Age (2000-750 BC).

Perhaps the fact that no-one knows for sure only adds to its appeal. Whatever secrets the Tumulus holds, it is a distinctive and much-loved highlight of the Heath landscape.



The Tumulus (*Layton Thompson*)