

REPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS.

REPORT

PRESENTED TO THE

Cambridge Antiquarian Society,

AT ITS THIRTY-SIXTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING,

MAY 15, 1876,

WITH AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY
(INCLUDING THE ANNUAL REPORTS XXXIV, XXXV),
1873—1876.

ALSO

Communications

MADE TO THE SOCIETY.

No. XVIII.

BEING THE FOURTH AND CONCLUDING NUMBER OF THE
THIRD VOLUME.

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XXXI. ON SOME EXCAVATIONS, APPARENTLY OF ROMAN DATE, RECENTLY DISCOVERED AT FULBOURN.
Communicated by JAMES CARTER, Esq.

[May 10, 1875.]

IN making a cutting through some rising ground, about half a mile on the Cambridge side of the Fulbourn Station of the Newmarket and Bury Railway, the workmen came upon three pits or wells sunk in the chalk. These pits were about 3 feet from each other, and were situated upon the summit of the low hill through which the cutting was made.

The largest of them, that next the Fulbourn Station, was a circular shaft sunk for about 10 feet in the chalk. It was carefully built up. The inner surface was smooth, and coated with a layer of hard cement, about 3 inches thick. Then came an outer and thicker layer of coarse concrete, about 10 inches thick, which was reddened by the action of fire. At about 6 feet from the top, the shaft was abruptly reduced in diameter from 9 feet 3 inches to 6 feet 3 inches, leaving a set-off or ledge 20 inches wide, and was carried down to a further depth of nearly 4 feet in the chalk. The inner surface of this lower and smaller portion was blackened, as if by the combustion of wood and other vegetable substances, and contained masses of black carbonaceous matter. The workmen stated that at the junction of the sides with the floor they found some slabs, placed obliquely, so

as to construct a sort of flue for draught, but of this I saw no traces. The upper and larger portion of the pit was filled partly by the surface soil, below which was a thick layer, 2 or 3 feet thick, of a very soft calcareous deposit, which the workmen called "Butter"; so soft was it, that it could readily be rubbed into a paste between the fingers. I analysed this substance, and found that it was composed of slaked lime, containing a considerable quantity of water. By exposure to the air, it became quite dry and hard. Below and by the side of this soft layer of lime was a layer of vesicular, spongy, calcareous matter, very light, and composed of pure chalk, carbonate of lime. I imagine that this layer was formed in this way; water filtered through the lime, of which it dissolved a considerable quantity, and subsequently deposited it, as evaporation took place, upon plants, &c., in the shape of carbonate of lime. It has not at all the appearance of having been produced by burning.

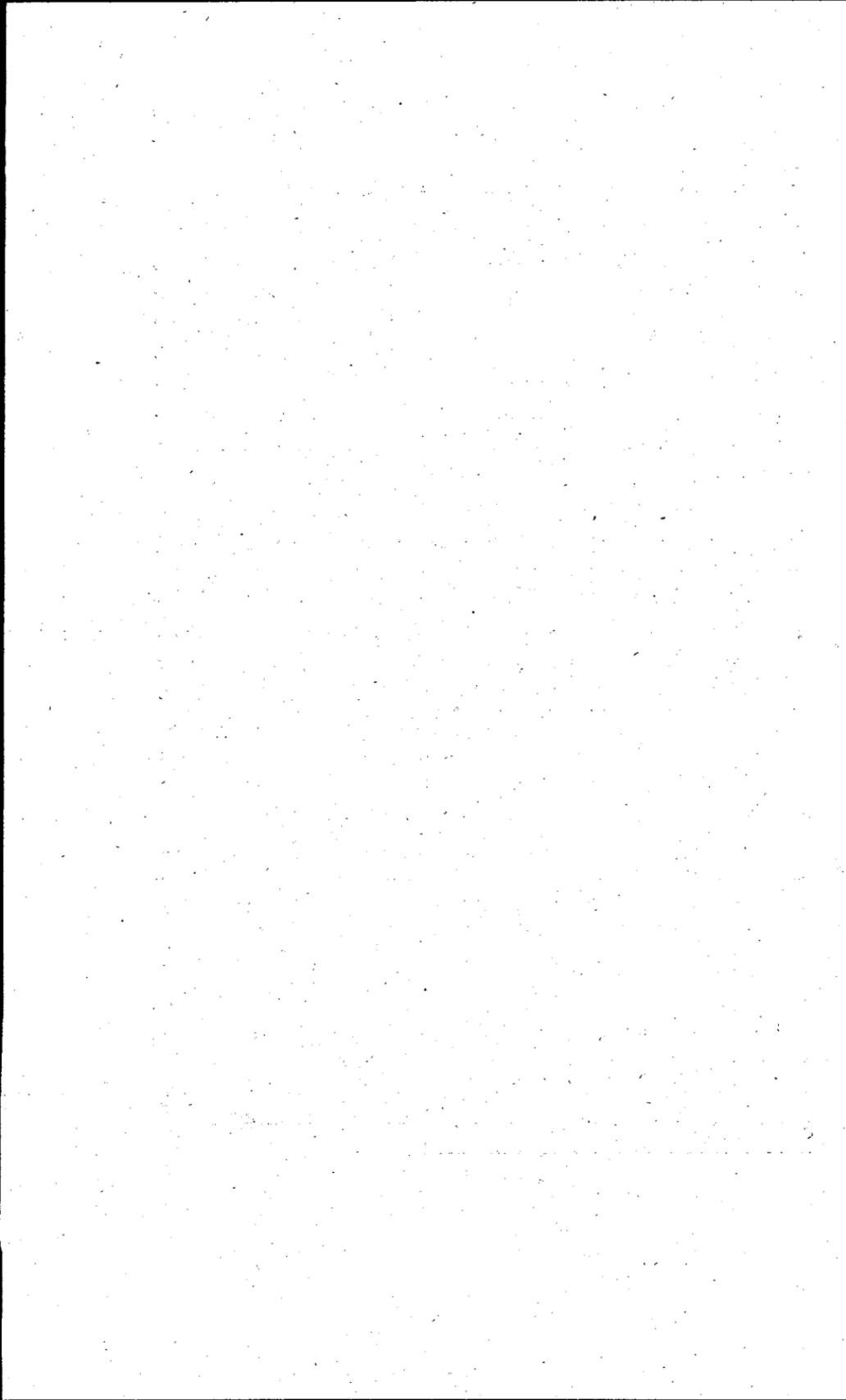
At the point of junction of the wide and narrow portions of the shaft was a round-headed opening, which led into a second excavation by a short passage about 2 feet 6 inches long. This second pit was simply sunk in the hard chalk, and was not built up, after the fashion of the first pit, by boundary walls of concrete and cement. It was of equal diameter throughout its whole depth and not narrowed at the lower portion. I could not detect any traces of the action of fire, but the sides of the opening communicating with the first were burnt and reddened.

The side of the shaft, opposite the aperture from the first pit, was perforated by another similar opening, cut through the chalk, which led into a third excavation. This has been only partially cleared out: it appears to be not a circular shaft, but a cutting with parallel sides, the floor of which inclines upwards, and which the workmen suppose to have led to the surface, as if for the removal of substances from the second pit; on this point, however, I cannot speak with certainty.

As to the purpose for which these pits were constructed: it

is quite evident that the largest and deepest of them was used as a kiln of some kind. It could scarcely have been for burning bricks or pottery; nor could I detect the slightest evidence that, as has been suggested, it was ever used for cremation. The occurrence of a considerable quantity of slaked lime seems to prove positively that it had been a lime-kiln: this appears by far its more probable use. I suppose the chalk was put into the upper and wider part of the kiln and the fuel in the lower narrower portion. The opening would admit of the removal of the lime and of the introduction of fuel; but it is not very evident what could have been the use of the second pit, unless it could have been for the storage of the quick lime, and to protect it from the weather.

We have no very positive evidence as to the date of the construction of these works, but so far as an opinion can be formed by the objects found in the surface soil by which these pits were partially filled, they may be regarded as Roman. I saw no object which had been found in the lower part of the excavations; but the soil which filled the upper portion contained broken pottery, both red and black ware of Roman date, and also human and other bones: ox, horse, and a horned sheep. A good many human skeletons, perhaps as many as thirty, were discovered in making the cutting between the Fulbourn Station and the site of the excavation—about half a mile. The soil also contained abundant fragments of pottery and bones of animals. The bones have evidently been long buried, and, as is usual, the crowns of the teeth in the skulls are worn very smooth by the mastication of coarsely ground corn. The discovery is of great interest, as evidence of the manner in which the Romans in this country prepared lime, and, so far as could be ascertained, is the only evidence of the kind which has hitherto been acquired.



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