

## A LATE-MEDIEVAL CHALK-MINE AT THETFORD

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IN August 1949 Group-Capt. G. M. Knocker and the writer, who were engaged at the time on the Saxon-town excavations at Thetford, visited the site of a subterranean chamber in chalk rock, which had been broken into by a mechanical excavator in a lane off Station Road, Thetford. (Marked X on detail of O.S. 6-in. Map 102 NE., Fig. 1.) The chamber (C in Fig. 2) measured about 12 by 5 ft. and was of uncertain depth. It was half-full of chalk rubble. The chamber roof was 12 ft. below ground-level, and tunnels blocked with chalk rubble and soil could be detected running out of the chamber in two different directions and at different levels. One tunnel ran out of the chamber in the direction of the station, the other along the length of the lane towards Station Road. Excavation in the soil in the chamber produced well-concentrated remains of a fire, and many bird and animal bones and eggshells, also glazed pottery, considered by the writer to date from the sixteenth century, indicating squatting in or other use of the chamber at this time. This is further discussed below.

The excavator was digging a 3-ft. trench for main drainage and was working to a mean depth of 11 ft. 6 in. Elsewhere in the faces of the 50-yd. trench examined (Fig. 2), a vertical shaft (B) 11 ft. in width was observed. This continued below the bottom of the trench at 12 ft. To the north of this shaft, another subterranean chamber (A) was broken into, and to the south another very large shaft or pit ran down from the surface-level (D, E). The approximate measurements shown in Fig. 2 were arrived at and carefully checked by pacing. Because of lack of space in the narrow lane, which was filled with throw-out from the trench, and work in progress, more accurate methods were not practicable.

The whole is thought to represent a mine for excavating good-quality chalk clunch for building purposes. Chalk blocks of good quality had been excavated from the chamber examined, and testing marks from the head of a metal hammer (Pl. III) were observed on the unquarried walls of the chamber. These mining activities seemed to have consisted of digging an open quarry, and of subsequently tunnelling out from it along the strata of suitable chalk rock for additional material. The 20 yds. of filling exposed in the walls of the mechanically dug trench at E (Fig. 2) represent part only of an excavation from the surface large enough to justify the term "quarry". The date of this mining activity is not certain, but the pottery found is apparently of the sixteenth century, and this and the rather plentiful remains of bones, eggshells, and charcoal at least show that the shafts were open at this date and suggest that the workings probably belong to the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century.







*Plate I*



*Photo: Group Captain G. M. Knocker*  
General view of the trench.

*Plate II*



*Photo: Group Captain G. M. Knocker*  
Chamber (C in Fig. 2) seen through the hole knocked in its roof by  
the mechanical excavator.





Photo: Group Captain G. M. Knocker

Hammer-head impressions on a chalk block in the wall (C in Fig. 2.)

Plate IV



Photo: British Museum

2 3 1 4  
Glazed pottery and part of perforated clay weight, found in carbonized soil in the chamber (C in Fig. 2.)



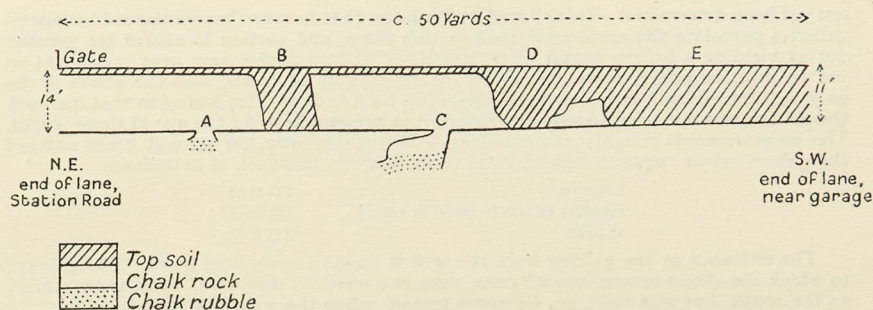


Fig. 2. SKETCH OF SOUTH FACE OF THE MECHANICALLY EXCAVATED TRENCH  
Showing approximate positions of the features described.

The following items, found in the chamber, may be listed. They are now in the Ancient House Museum, Thetford:

1. Base and side of a small, three-legged cooking pot, blackened on the outside. Hard red ware, the interior showing a glossy glaze over the base and lower parts. The glaze varies in hue from apricot to greengage and is full of dark-green flecks of undissolved pigment. Base diameter 4.1". (Pl. IV, 1)
2. Two small sherds from a pot of very similar fabric, fire blackened on the unglazed exterior. The interior shows a very thick glossy glaze of deep apricot colour, without green mottling. (One illustrated Pl. IV, 2)
3. A small sherd, also glazed internally with a thin wash of brown glaze of "sticky" appearance. Red ware.
4. Handle-fragment of small bowl, similar to no. 2, showing glossy dark-green glaze both on the inside and outside of the vessel. The handle is a simple "strap" handle, with central groove; maximum width of handle 0.85". (Pl. IV, 3)
5. Fragment of perforated brown clay, resembling part of a bun-shaped loom-weight. (Pl. IV, 4)

There are in addition part of a brick, burnt stones, an iron nail, part of an iron strip, and a number of burnt stones and pebbles.

Mr. Percy Millican, F.S.A., has drawn my attention to a passage in A. Leigh Hunt's *The Capital of the Ancient Kingdom of East Anglia*, published in 1870, which describes a discovery very similar to that reported above. Leigh Hunt's account is not well known, and it seems advisable to reproduce it here in full, so that the present note may give as full an account of the Thetford chalk-mines as is at present possible. The approximate site of the galleries referred to by Leigh Hunt, below the yard of the Black Horse Inn, Magdalen Street, Thetford, is marked Y on Fig. 1 (in the bottom right-hand corner), and it will be seen that the two sites are some 700 yds. apart. There is no possibility of confusion between them.

Leigh Hunt's account (*op. cit.* p. 162) is as follows:

On the premises of the Black Horse Inn, Great Magdalen Street, is a well which opens into a subterranean gallery, made in the chalk, and which was discovered when the well was being sunk some fifty years ago. Whether this cave was made for working out flint in early times, or to obtain chalk for building purposes at a later period, has



not yet been determined. It is alleged by tradition that many other similar subterranean galleries percolate the cretaceous rock in this town; and certain localities are pointed out as yielding a hollow sound when tested, or when vehicles pass over them; but as yet no positive proofs have been given by the sinking of shafts, and the above is the only solitary instance in which one of them has been broken into; and as in that instance the gallery was not scientifically examined, it is impossible to fix the age of these works. The measurements roughly estimated by a well-sinker who has several times entered the gallery when engaged repairing the machinery in the well, is as follows:

Length	50 feet
Height of arch (well formed)	20 feet
Width	10 feet.

The entrance to the gallery from the well is about twenty feet down. The gallery, to which the above measurements refer, runs in a westerly direction. Another extended to the south, but was built up, for some reason, when the well was sunk.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> When the discovery of the above gallery was made, and the entrance cleared, a large number of persons entered it out of curiosity, and a dejeuner was provided in it, of which a numerous party partook.

It is interesting to note in Leigh Hunt's footnote that a picnic was held in the Magdalen Street tunnel when it was discovered in the early nineteenth century, for indications of an elaborate cooked meal that had taken place in Tudor times were found in the Station Road gallery when it was broken into. Perhaps the tradition of picnicking in these subterranean galleries goes back to the Tudor period. The bone remains found in the Station Road tunnel, however, do not entirely support this explanation. They have been examined at the British Museum (Natural History) by Dr. F. C. Fraser, Deputy Keeper of the Department of Zoology, who reports that they include horse, cat, and dog bones in addition to ox, pig, and sheep. The bird bones, eggshells, and mollusca identified at the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh by Miss Platt include bones of domestic fowl, eggshell of (?) goose, and the marine shells *Cardium edule*, *Mytilus edulis*, *Ostrea edulis*, while the land snail ? *Helix* was also represented.

A short note on the above discovery appeared in *The Archæological News Letter*, Vol. II, No. 6, October 1949, p. 100.