

GRIMES GRAVES

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The Society paid a visit to Grimes Graves at Weeting in South-West Norfolk on September 6th and inspected this celebrated flint mining site, the most extensive and best explored in Britain, now in the custody of the Ministry of Works. 16½ acres are occupied by 366 infilled mine-shafts, visible as cup-shaped hollows, while excavation has detected other shafts, invisible on the ground, over a further 17½ acres. The earliest investigation, by Canon Greenwell in 1869, established the function and Neolithic age of this site and further excavations, principally by A. L. Armstrong from 1914 to 1939, confirmed this, though for many years there was an unfortunate tendency to believe in a hypothetical sequence of mining ranging from Upper Palaeolithic to Neolithic times. Pottery of Windmill Hill and Peterborough types from the shafts and galleries attest their Neolithic date and show the mixed culture of the mining community. It is probable, from the time taken by 20th century flint miners to dig and exploit a single shaft, that the total mining activity at Grimes Graves was the result of a few centuries' work by a small group of full-time craftsmen who depended on farmers and hunters for their food and supply of deer antlers. This short intensive development was probably a result of the need of the Neolithic farmers of Breckland to expand their area of tillage by woodland clearance, as the population increased and the soil of the open country became exhausted. This clearance was effected by the slash and burn technique for which large quantities of flint axes were essential, and the primary function of Grimes Graves was, therefore, the production of these axes for tree felling. The best quality flint occurred at varying depths from the surface, so that some of the mines are open-cast pits not more than 15 ft. deep, though it was often necessary to dig deep shafts, some 30 ft. deep, with radiating galleries at the level at which the flint occurred, a hazardous and less economical undertaking. The principal tools employed were polished axes of flint and stone, while long bones of oxen and red deer antlers were used as levers, the waste chalk being dumped in the fully exploited mines. Sometimes the supply of flint was deficient, as in Pit 15, where a remarkable ritual assemblage was discovered and the principal feature was a carved chalk figurine of a pregnant female. It has been suggested that the offerings to this "goddess" were placed there to ensure that the next pit dug would yield a more abundant supply of flint. The flint was hauled to the surface and there trimmed into the shape of axes on one of the working floors, of which over one hundred have been excavated, and traded unfinished to farmers in the surrounding district.

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