

DIGGING • MAKING DEEP • MINES

The search for better quality minerals probably drove the earliest kinds of mining. However, this did not begin with the exploitation of metal ores. Neolithic mines and quarries for high quality tool stones were also widespread.



At Grimes Graves, in Norfolk, hundreds of shafts were dug into the ground to reach deposits of black flint which was not only perfect for making tools, but also very beautiful.

Mark Edmonds (the well known British archaeologist) used his knowledge of the archaeology of this site to write a vivid account of a prehistoric mining expedition:



Within hours, talk which had ranged from one family to another became more focussed. Greetings and gossip gave way to plans. Squatting near the fire, the older men deliberated on where the new shaft would go and on where old galleries were to be avoided. The children heard of shafts dug many years before, their backfill now concealed beneath coarse grasses. They heard of the old times, when the good stone lay close to the surface. Names they remembered and names that were new. As plans turned to stories, they learned of the stonechats who lived at the mines. To hear one was a blessing, for the birds were spirits. Their percussive song was an echo of the first hammer on the first stone. That was how it was. Some of the women laughed. What if the men used their strength in digging and not in talking? That was also how it was when there was work to be done. Laughter cut the knot around the fire and discussion came to a close.

Work began, a chain of hands recieved the quartered nodules as they were pulled from the shaft. Inserting himself in the line, one of the boys took his turn, receiving the stone from his sister. Careful to keep the sharp, black meat of the flint away from his arms, he passed the block to a cousin he had not seen since his initiation. There would be other stories to hear later on. The younger boy could not carry stone with the ease or pace of his elders. He stood to one side, peering into the shaft and jumping out of the way until he learned the pattern of the work. Seen from above, the bodies of those in the galleries took on the colour of old bones. Smeared with a rime of chalk and clay, they crawled led out of the dark tugging ropes they had wound around the floorstone.

Sometimes the birth was easy. Nodules slid across the greasy chalk and emerged into the light to be quartered. At other times, the belly of the earth would not be relieved of its burden so readily. A figure would disappear back into a gallery to help in the labour and those in the shaft would fall silent. This was when rockfalls were most likely and ears were set for the creak of moving chalk. Only when the figure reappeared would talk and encouragement begin again.