

Grimes Graves, Weeting, Norfolk: Background information for teachers

Grimes Grave is the name given to 433 mines and pits in Thetford Forest. The Anglo-Saxons were so puzzled by this weird dimpled landscape that they concluded it had been constructed by the god Grim (or Woden). It wasn't until 1870, when one of the pit hollows was excavated to its base, that they were shown to have been flint mines of Neolithic date. The 10 m deep shaft was shown to have been dug down through two layers of flint, obviously considered inferior, to a layer of deep black flint (floor stone) with excellent tool making potential. Using just picks made from red deer antlers, the miners cut tunnels (galleries) from the base of the shaft to follow the floor stone seam. The tunnels were dug above the layer of flint so the miners could simply lever it up. The flint was then broken up into manageable sized pieces and put into baskets that were then either carried to the surface up ladders or dragged up by ropes (rope marks have been found on the edge of one of the shafts). At the surface, flat working areas were used by flint knappers to fabricate the flint into axes or other tools.

As each pit was worked out it was backfilled with the spoil that had been dumped around its top. As more and more shafts were dug and new tunnels made, they linked up with earlier ones and the whole area became honeycombed 10 m below the surface.

These flint mines are broadly contemporary with the great stone structures at [Stonehenge](#) and [Avebury](#) (about 2500 BC) and were worked by people who lived in houses like those at [Skara Brae](#), Trelystan and [Durrington Walls](#) that appear in [Lesson 3: Skara Brae](#) PowerPoint presentation.

Much earlier flint mines existed on the South Downs in Sussex. They are as old as the first long barrows (3800 BC).

In all 28 pits have been archaeologically excavated at Grimes Graves. One of these is still open and can be visited. Many schools bring parties to do this each year. For information on this, visit: www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/grimes-graves-prehistoric-flint-mine/school-visits

Further reading

Topping, P. 2011. *Grimes Graves: Guidebook*. London: English Heritage

Holgate, R. 1991. *Prehistoric Flint Mines*. Princes Risborough: Shire Archaeology



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