

NOTES ON SOME EXCAVATIONS OF THE  
NATURE OF DENEHOLES.

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THE year 1939 has been noteworthy for the unexpected and somewhat alarming appearance of unknown cavities in the chalk. A typical Denehole was described, with a plan and illustrations, in Vol. XLVII of *Arch. Cant.*, pp. 211-18, and in Vol. L, p. 169, there is a note on a Denehole at Wingham Well. Drawings showing the site of the latter, and its ground plan, the work of Messrs. G. C. Solley & Co.'s late assistant, Mr. Douglas Spratt, are here reproduced by Messrs. Solley's kindness. The plan shows a great similarity to that of the Hammill Denehole. This, however, is not the case with this year's three artificial underground pits. The first made its presence known in April during ploughing along the edge of a field bounded by the lane and opposite Cooting Farm, Adisham. The excavation had the usual shaft from which small chambers branched out on its opposite sides, but the shaft, while about 2 ft. 6 in. wide, was only about 10 ft. deep; and the surface deposit above the chalk was very thin. A full examination could not be made as the bottom of the shaft and the entrance to the chambers were blocked by the material which had fallen in; but the whole excavation, while earlier than the memory of man, gave the definite impression of being a farmer's traditional method of getting chalk for covering his straw yard and liming his lime-free near-by land lying at a lower level.

The second set of underground chambers was exposed in May when Mr. F. G. Garlinge of Church Lane, Nonington, was digging an inspection pit in his motor-lorry shed. This was on previously unoccupied ground near the corner of a field sloping north. At about 18 in. down a brickwork dome

was uncovered, and when this was broken through a vertical shaft about 3 ft. diameter was disclosed. There was a surface bed of 5 ft. to 6 ft. of loam and the shaft was lined with brickwork down to the level of the solid chalk. Contrary to the typical Denehole (see plan, Fig. 2), the large shaft here descends directly into a central space from which four domed chambers open. Hence a ladder, or windlass and rope, would be needed for descent and for bringing up the

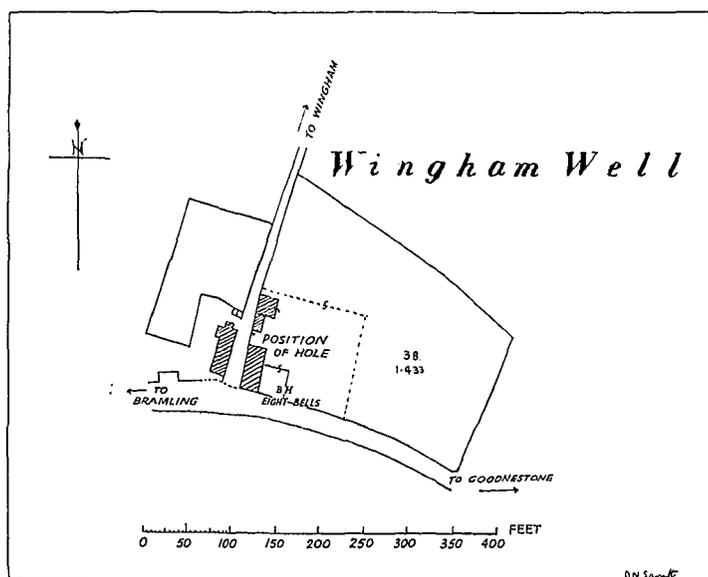


FIG. 1. SITUATION OF DENEHOLE.

excavated chalk. The total depth is about 30 ft. but, as is usually the case, the mound of fallen earth and chalk at the bottom prevents exact measurement.

The four chambers are of different dimensions and differ in height, but in the largest there has been such an extensive fall of chalk from the roof that the overlying loam has been exposed. Here again the safe principles of the Denehole have been ignored, as the span of this chamber at Nonington is too wide to resist falls from the soft and shattered chalk.

Marks of the picks used for hewing the chalk are plentiful. The bricks used for lining and for the dome are of the type used within the last 150 years, and the only find in the

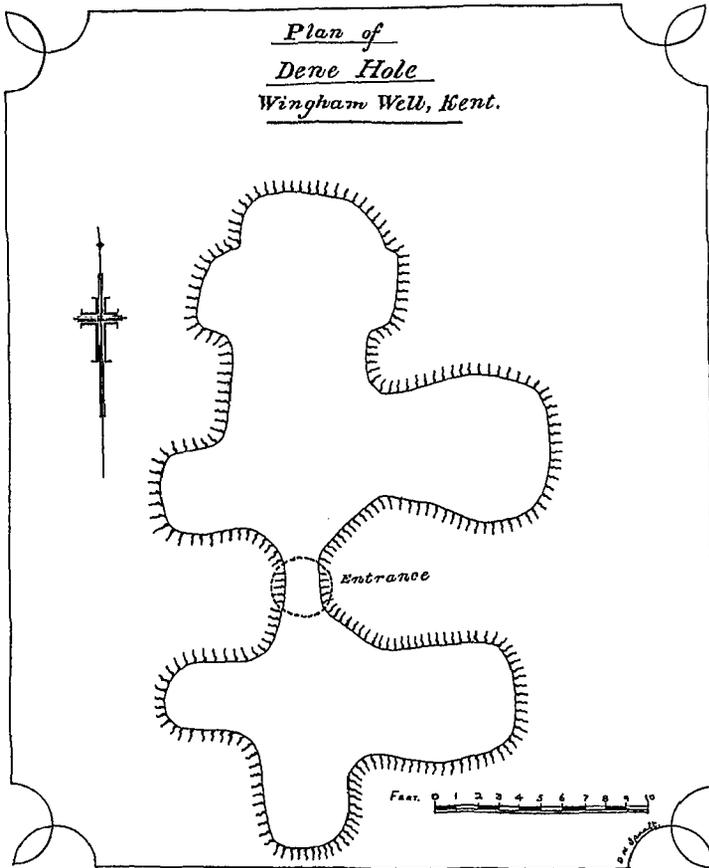


FIG. 2. DENEHOLE AT WINGHAM WELL.

débris at the bottom, beyond a few small mammal bones and a piece of wood, was an iron lamp of an eighteenth century type which had lost its spout. The writer's conclusion as to the purpose of this subterranean excavation is that it must have been dug for chalk for liming the land in the

vicinity and that its beginnings were in the eighteenth century. Mr. Garlinge, to whom thanks are due, stated that from the recollections of his forebears the site had been an undisturbed meadow for the last 100 years. Dr. F. W. Hardman, Mr. C. W. Knox, Admiral R. G. and Captain A. G. Morton and the late Mr. Western Plumptre visited the site. Their view was "that whatever was the original purpose of this and other Deneholes they were made to obtain the use of underground chambers and not for the use of the chalk that was excavated from them". Mr. G. C. Solley also does not agree with the theory that Deneholes were made only for the sake of the chalk for agricultural purposes but were sometimes dug for some such purpose as refuges. But is any other theory so simple or rational?

Mr. Solley, in some notes on this subject, refers to the extensive cave at Eastry which he has known from his youth. He says that he has "ever felt that it was of pre-Roman origin; and was later on used by some of the early Saxons for the practise of their pagan mysteries and again later by some of their less scrupulous Christian successors for the performance of 'miracles.'" He goes on to refer to the Rev. W. F. Shaw's statement in 1870 in his *History of Eastry* that "the cave was of comparatively modern origin, having been excavated by a previous owner of the property, a Mr. Foord, a builder. Mr. Solley is inclined to think that it was accidentally discovered by Foord when excavating chalk, and that he made the steps down into it as a more convenient means of access than by way of the well [i.e. shaft] from which the passages to some extent radiate. He may perhaps have preferred to have claimed it as his own handiwork rather than his discovery." The maze of narrow passages is of varying depths below the surface, and it is possible to walk round and come back to the well at a lower level. In one part there has been an enlargement of a short passage into a chamber called "the church", and at the farther end is a crude figure carved out of the solid chalk. It should be noted that here the original excavation was probably begun by digging the shaft from the surface (this may be seen), but that later it was found easier to get the chalk, when large

quantities were needed, by driving into the hillside. Off one of the passages has been sunk a well which taps the underground water in the lower ground.

The third subsidence exposing a shaft and openings leading from it made its unwelcome appearance on October 19th close to the walls of the Administrative Block belonging to the Duke of York's School at Guston, above Dover. Before the school was built on this unoccupied land Mr. Amos remembers that there was a funnel-shaped hole ending in a shaft at this particular spot down which it was amusing to throw anything handy and that later it became a dump for kitchen midden rubbish, iron bedstead laths, blacking pots and other troublesome matter of civilization. No testing of the ground could have been made, as pipes for various services were carried across the filled-in hollow. Suddenly this hole, about 16 ft. by 14 ft. appeared which let down a drain pipe and exposed the rubbish. Below could be seen the chalk, and headings were visible.

Under arrangements made by the Office of Works and with the help of the surveyor to the school—Mr. S. Garwood—the hole was descended on the 4th of December. It was found that after solid chalk was reached at about 12 ft. headings of beehive section had been driven N.E. and S.W. The former was about 20 ft. long by about 8 ft. wide, the latter about 10 ft. by 5 ft. 6 in. wide. A third heading, shorter and lower, had been started to the N. The entrance opening in the chalk was 5 ft. 6 in. in diameter, and the headings ran directly from it so there was no comparison with the typical denehole but a similarity in many ways to the Nonington hole. A bedding-plane of chalk formed the roof of the main headings which in the case of the N.E. one was something like 25 ft. high, although measurements from floor level were impossible owing to the huge cone of material which had spread to the end walls. The approximate total depth from the surface was 43 ft. The hewing of the almost flintless chalk was by sharp pointed picks which had trimmed the walls to a very fair surface. No countenance can be given to the suggestion that this was the landward end of a tunnel from the Castle, or that it is of any great antiquity. Air raid

trenches have exposed much loam, and clay with few flints on the swallow-holed chalk.

This subsidence came to the notice of the writer through the kindness of Mr. Bavington Jones of Dover, and it has been seen by the leave of Col. W. A. T. Bowly, Commandant of the Duke of York's Royal Military School.