

**Robin Holgate, Prehistoric flint mines,
Princes Risborough 1991, pp. 56, 28
figs. Shire Archaeology 67**

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Reviewed by Jacek Lech

The series, *Shire Archaeology* is well known both to professional prehistorians and the British public interested in the prehistoric archaeology. For its 67th issue, the series has published Robin Holgate's study of British flint mining. This is the first general publication on this topic since 1933, when the famous paper *Age of the British flint mines* by J.G.D. Clark and Stuart Piggott was published in "*Antiquity*". Holgate, now at the Luton Museum Service, spent several years studying British flint mines, concentrating on those located in southern England. His report summarises knowledge gained both from his own field-work and from a comprehensive study of British museum collections and literature.

Holgate presents his subject matter in six concise, clear and well organized chapters. In the introduction, the author describes the prehistoric background of flint mining. More than 20 flint mines are known in the British Isles. Some basic questions which Holgate discusses are: where were mines situated; when were they in operation; who were the miners and how did they mine for flint; why did they mine certain seams of flint and not others; what was the output and scale of production at these sites; and when and why were these sites abandoned?

The next chapters give the author's answers. Most flint mines are located on the South Downs in Sussex (*e.g.*, Cissbury, Harrow Hill, Blackpatch) and in Wessex (*e.g.*, Easton Down). However, the most extensive flint-mining site in Britain is at Grimes Graves, located on the Norfolk/Suffolk border in eastern England. Chapter 3 describes, in a short and competent way, the mining process and treatment of the exploited raw material: shafts and galleries, mining tools, flint roughouts and implements. Holgate notes that axes were the main product of the British mines and that discoidal knives are known only from prehistoric Britain.

Probably less interesting for the general public, but important for prehistorians, is chapter 4. The author discusses here the history of flint-mining research, beginning with the mid-nineteenth century work at Grimes Graves and Cissbury. Excavations at these mines were among the earliest in Britain. The history of excavations at British prehistoric flint-mining sites is probably the richest and the most complicated in Europe. Archaeologists can therefore be grateful to Holgate for this brief outline which successfully condenses a great deal of information.

The fifth chapter offers the reader a review of the most important sites or groups of sites, starting with Grimes Graves. Holgate then describes mines on the South Downs north of Worthing (Blackpatch, Harrow Hill, Cissbury and Church Hill), two mines on the southern edge of the South Downs north of Chichester (West Stoke and Long Down), another from Sussex — at Windover Hill, several from Wessex (Easton Down, Durrington and Hambledon Hill), Oxfordshire (Peppard Common), Buckinghamshire (Pitstone Hill), and finally East Horsley in Surrey. The distribution of these mines is shown on a map in chapter two.

Chapter six broadly summarises knowledge about British prehistoric mining. The oldest mines, late fourth and early third millennia bc, are known from Sussex. Grimes Graves and Peppard Common date from the third and the beginning of the second millennia bc. The Wessex mines were exploited in the late 3rd millennium, but it is possible that exploitation of flint at Easton Down started contemporaneously with the Sussex mines. However, mined flint is quite rare in finds from settlements and other Neolithic and Early Bronze Age sites in Britain. According to Holgate, flint collected from local beaches, gravels, and clays provided the basic raw material for chipped industries. Therefore, Holgate concludes (p. 42), British flint mining "appears to have served as source of flint for specific purposes".

The author then briefly summarises John Burton's studies of stone quarrying for axes in Papua-New Guinea. This portion of the publication may serve to make prehistoric flint mining more familiar to readers. Following this, there is a short discussion of British prehistoric flint mining and its scale of output, calculated primarily on information from 120 years of Grimes Graves studies. The role and the end

of Neolithic flint mining is then described. The author closes chapter six by investigating flint mining since prehistory. Starting with the Romano-British period, flint has been commonly used for building in southern and eastern England. Production of gunflints, glass, and pottery is also mentioned.

Eight prehistoric mines from England that can be easily visited are described in chapter seven, while a list of museums, with addresses and telephone numbers, in which visitors are able to view finds excavated from flint mines, is given in chapter eight. The publication closes with a selection of literature for further reading and an index.

Holgate's publication is very useful, well prepared and can be recommended. Many interesting and carefully selected photographs as well as especially prepared drawings help the reader to understand the author's presentation and material.

There are only a few suggestions. The antler from figure 5 resembles a lever rather than a pick. In addition, some reconstructions, drawn clearly by Christina Unwin, could be corrected. For example, figure 8, a reconstruction of a typical flint mine in operation, should have considerably higher waste heaps adjacent to the mouths of the shafts, and differently cut tree trunks. Transport of flint from the shaft bottom to the surface was probably done by rope, or carried on the back, rather than by hand, as any practical experiment will show! Finally, a short chapter on the petrography of flint, and the geology of flint deposits, with a description of the relationship between geological conditions and the type of mining would have been useful.