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## MINIATURE POT-HOLING NEAR LONDON.

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GREAT and manifold as are the opportunities for climbing afforded by the buildings of London, there are nevertheless certain inconveniences attaching which more than counter-balance their attractions, *e.g.*, difficulty of access, the extreme griminess of the holds, and the possibility—nay, the probability—of being run in as a lunatic or a burglar. Most of the underground work is done in electric lifts and cars, unless one chooses to essay the sewers, which I take to be a peculiarly unsavoury form of cave-exploration. Me the gods for my sins have condemned to several months hard labour per annum in this detestable acreage of bricks and mortar, far from fell and moorland; but my lot is royal compared to that of my friend the Bookman. Him hard fate and professional advancement have transferred from the bonnie north countrie to loathly Woolwich.

One day when we were bemoaning our dreary, level existence, I mentioned to him, or he mentioned to me, "Dene Holes." His, or my, noble soul rose in enthusiasm at the suggestion, and from that moment an expedition to Dene Holes occupied our horizon. Alas and alas! that horizon was continually receding. It is not easy to obtain access. The proprietor is not only a difficult man to get at, but is chary of granting permission to exploring parties, not through any want of generosity, but because he will not risk having his woods vandalised by trippers, neither will he give incompetents the opportunity of getting into trouble down the holes.

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Photo, by E. A. Baker.

The man is standing on earth cone, 10 ft. high. Note sleeping bat on pillar, left hand side of photo. Metal pick-marks clearly visible on walls. Chalk roof intact, Depth from surface, about 50 ft.

Wherein he is wise. However, the Bookman is a speleologist with an experience ranging from Gaping Ghyll to the Mendips, and away across to Mitchellstown, and his appearance—and mine, too—when not in cave attire is more or less respectable, and in due course permission was accorded, and one fine Saturday morning a party set off on Dene Holes intent.

How, when, and where are Dene Holes? To say nothing of the why and wherefore! These—with the exception of the where—be ticklish questions. The Bookman tells me that it is a kittle point amongst archæologists, inasmuch as they fly at each others throats and assault each other with archæological hammers. I take it archæologists—the underground and stone-breaking species at least—do use hammers. I know geologists do, and I conceive the two breeds are akin. I have even seen a geologist at work. He was explaining to me that the Lake District rock was really compressed volcanic ash. As demonstration, he picked up a piece of rock, lifted his hammer, and smote—his thumb! I had no idea till then that the technical terms of geology so nearly resembled the vernacular as employed by irate cabmen. Briefly, a Dene Hole is a circular shaft about 4ft. 6in. in diameter, and anywhere between 40ft. and a 120ft. deep. These sink through the Thanet sand till they reach the chalk, where they terminate in one or more low chambers. Down either side of the shaft, and facing each other, is a row of ample footholds at convenient distances apart, enabling an ordinarily active man to ascend or descend by bestriding the shaft, and going up or down on his hands and toes, spread-eagle fashion.

The “how” of these holes, the methods and instruments by which these wonderfully symmetrical shafts were sunk, seems to be admittedly a matter of conjecture, and the “when” is another happy point of agreement. They are the work of the ancient Britons, and are 2000 years old or thereabouts, perhaps more, probably not less. It is around the “why and wherefore” that controversy rages.

Two of the party, after having heard all the *pros* and *cons.*, gave it as their opinion that the holes were simply dug for the

purposes of getting to the chalk. They are both capable, educated men, and I suppose have reasons for the faith that is in them, but their arguments, to me at least, were not convincing. The picture that most appealed to my mind's eye was a variation of Mr. E. T. Reed's "Prehistoric Billiards," with a troglodyte marker being despatched (with a stone axe) down a Dene Hole. Seriously, however, that an ancient Briton should undertake the, for his primitive appliances, stupendous task of sinking a shaft through 60ft. of Thanet sand, merely to get chalk, and that, with his primitive knowledge and education, he should know or guess there was a substratum of chalk, and such a depth seems to me unthinkable. What he was going to do with the chalk when he got it does not appear.

Other theories are that these holes were used as granaries, prisons, oubliettes, and so forth. Possibly, even probably, they have incidentally served all these purposes, but what was their primary object, their *raison d'être*. That a community of men should have sunk a colony (I use the word advisedly) of these shafts either as cells or barns is inconceivable. To my mind the only explanation of such an immense amount of labour so directed is self-preservation. These holes are in colonies, fifty or sixty in a square of a quarter of a mile. This suggests the idea of a community. They are on the estuary of the Thames, a little below London, a spot peculiarly open and, for obvious reasons, peculiarly liable to sudden attack. The Britons, as Cæsar found them, were a warlike race, apt at arms, accustomed to battle. It has been suggested that these holes were dug to escape the Romans. I take it Cæsar was not the first hostile visitant to our shores. The whole record of the northern coasts is one of piratical forays, bloodshed, and pillage. What more natural than that the inhabitants of so exposed a place should devote their energies to securing a sure refuge, a shadow from the heat, as an alternative to being massacred out of hand, man, woman, and child, by chance callers, or, if taken alive, being carved into a blood-eagle or some such æsthetic triumph of the age?

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Photo, by E. A. Baker.

The "where" was decided by a laconic postcard from the Bookman—"Charing Cross, 10.30 book to Bexley!" Arriving well up to time with a bulky Eastindiaman, who has the letters A. C. after his name, in tow, I saw that others had heard the alarums and excursions. Tough-looking beings with heavily nailed boots and rucksacks came strolling on to the platform. Notable amongst them were the Bondman, a noted Potholer, and the member for Dene, 6ft. and a few inches of bulk, who had been "down there" before. On the way we were joined by the Beerman, also an Alpine Clubite, and by the time we reached Bexley our party had mounted to a round dozen, the odd, or baker's number being supplied by a real live archæologist. Bexley is a poor sort of a spot for an excursion. There are one or two places of worship, about a score of public-houses, one, only one, room where a man can get bite or sup, and not a bed to be had anywhere, much to the annoyance of the Eastindiaman, who had brought his night-kit along.

After a short time spent in foraging, we started for Stankey's Wood and the Holes, guided by the Bookman and the Member, neither of whom knew the way. In due course, after many inquiries, we reached our destination, the keeper's lodge. The Bookman showed his permit, and away we started, bearing with us, in addition to our other impedimenta, a rope ladder that weighed half a hundred weight, hooked itself in every available bush and branch, was constantly losing itself and getting left behind, and was no possible use whatever. Stankey's Wood is not a nice place to be benighted in. It is literally honeycombed with shafts. Let us imagine that a Pompeii-like disaster had overtaken a town like Wigan, and that the scorix and mud had risen to just flush with the tops of the chimneys. Grow a small wood of bramble, ash, elder, hazel, &c., over this, and you have a fair picture of Dene Holes. The keeper had the usual local knowledge of the particular holes, viz., to scratch his head and think, and generally to think wrong. The first to take a leap into the dark was the Bondman, whilst others were getting

into boiler suits, under the vain delusion that they would thereby save their clothes.

The descent of the Bondman caused one to think. A simple mathematical calculation told me that if he took five minutes to rope up and get down, spent five minutes at the bottom, and took another five minutes to climb out and unrope, each hole would take a party of a dozen three hours. I therefore voted that we should divide forces. This was carried unanimously, and off I started with the Bookman and two others. On the way I essayed a hole with a false bottom. I started by conscientiously playing the game. Wedging the nape of my neck against one side of the orifice, thereby discharging ounces of sand down the inside of my shirt, and my feet against the other, I backed down till I could reach the sound old prehistoric holds. We were beginning to find out things already. The first was that the first 5ft. or 10ft. of every shaft had weathered away and that the firm holdful sides were replaced by loose, holdless sand. Every one of the experts started his first hole as a stylist, to his huge discomfort, and everyone before the end of the day was content to be quietly lowered away like a bale of goods till he reached the sound walling of the shaft. Of course, I said nothing about my experience; I am no advocate for a monopoly of such luxuries as sand-shirts. I noted the same Christian spirit in my companions.

The sides of these shafts are for the most part as sound and reliable as sandstone. A friend of mine, who has studied the subject, is of opinion that the Druids had some means of silicating the surface of the Thanet sand, and certainly along the sides of the shafts, and along the sides of the shafts only, it is very firm and closely knit. The top few feet are, as I have said, loose and unreliable. We were to make another discovery at the next hole. This was that the bottom of a shaft has occasionally fallen in, or fallen out rather, if such a term be permissible, so that the chimney comes to a sudden termination, and the explorer has to be lowered 10ft., 15ft., or in some cases 20ft. Now, to lower a man is one thing, to

haul him up again is quite another. I, having already been down one shaft, formed, with the keeper, the open air party ; the remaining three were lowered in safety, and, to me, most satisfactory discomfort. By and bye came a shout to haul away. They tied on the heaviest man first, which was foolish. Still, with a prodigious effort, we did get him up a few feet, and then he stuck, or our strength failed ; anyhow, we could not budge him, and down he had to go again. I above, and they below, had both learnt something ; I, that the suspended weight of a man cut the rope deep into the soil round the shaft's mouth, the groove forming about the most useless kind of pulley I have met ; they, that the said grooving dislodged cataracts of sand and pebbles which fell vertically. Now, the joy of being hauled out of a chamber is that you are right in the line of fire. If you stoop your head the sand fills up the back of your neck ; if you look up your face gets peppered, whilst you the while are swinging like an up-to-date version, or perversion, of Poe's Pit and the Pendulum. The Beerman did get what looked like turning into a most artistic black eye, and the Bondman had a nail split.

Neither did I escape scot-free. I was first man down the next hole, and found that there was an opportunity for photography. The camera was accordingly lowered, and, after the manner of its kind, just as I was reaching up to take it, pirouetted unexpectedly and tried to spike me in the eye with its tripod. I dodged it, and was laying it gently on its face preparatory to loosing off the rope, when a really respectable stone came down, hit me on the back of the head, and bounded off into the bottom chamber with quite an echo. However, if my head had not been there, it would have gone smash through the glass at the back of the camera.

I shouted to them to tie on the lightest man, the Bookman, but it was too late. We might have got him up when we were fresh, but our strength was spent with our previous efforts at pulling, and we had to send for help. In a few minutes four lusty men, including the Ghoulman, came up, and ere long we had the Bookman at the

surface. I have been trying to avoid mentioning the Ghoulman, because he really was an expert at Dene Holes, and omitted to warn us of the futility of being stylists. I am thankful to say, however, that he was as well sanded as any of us before the day was over. Each man as he arrived at the surface was commandeered into the tug-of-war team, and all went well till we came to the last and heaviest of the party. Six lusty men and valiant could not get him up. When at length he did arrive at the pit's mouth we discovered the reason. He had caught his head against the roof of the chamber close to the entrance of the shaft, and we had been doing our best to pull his head off or break his neck. He was not hurt much, however, and was at it again at the next hole. I was first down this time, and, as narrated, had an adventure with a stone and a camera. We spent some time photographing below, one of the features of the picture being a bat we caught, and so to lunch.

Whilst eating and drinking we discussed what we had seen. It seems that the holes are for the most part very similar, the shafts opening out on reaching the chalk into three chambers, or alcoves, some 15ft. high by 12ft. across, arranged in the shape of a trefoil, with the shaft as the stem. In one, the sides of the alcoves have been cut through, thus forming a single pillared chamber with five arches. In this same hole there is also a large cavern on the other side of the shaft, facing the ordinary trefoil arrangement. It is some 70ft. in circumference, and the roof has fallen in, forming a cone some 15ft. high. These cones are not uncommon in Dene Holes. After lunch we came across the most sporting hole of all. The last 20ft. of the shaft had fallen away on all sides but two, thus leaving two pillars about 5ft. apart, down which it was necessary to climb. The Bookman came down with his feet against one side and his hands against the other. When my turn came, I was idiotic enough to allow myself to be persuaded into letting myself down by the life-line. I was feeling about for holds in the twilight, whilst my companions were chaffing and jeering, delighted to see a man in the same

difficulties they had gone through. Consequently, I waxed impatient and came down the shortest way, which was unnecessary, unartistic, and flayed one finger to boot. As a matter of fact, the shaft can be climbed quite safely without a rope to within 5ft. of its mouth. This the Beerman demonstrated. When the Member came down we did not give him a chance. The upstairs party belayed the rope, by conspiracy, on a given signal, and there he was left, like a gigantic St. Andrew's Cross, between the pillars, whilst we photographed him. I imagine in the negative his lips will be found to have moved.

A visit to Dene Holes affords a very pleasurable excursion, provided the party understand their business. One caution must be given. Where haulage is necessary it is advisable to send down another rope, so that the explorer may help himself up by swarming with his hands, thereby relieving the strain on his own ribs and the muscles of the party upstairs. The greatest care, however, must be taken that the ropes are not twisted, and that the man ties on to the right rope. Both these accidents happened the following day, and gave rise to the only real trouble we experienced. Our party was a smaller one, consisting of myself, the Bookman, the East-indiaman, the Son of his Mother (an expert climber), and the Popular Mystery (a novice). I call him the Popular Mystery on the authority of Gilbert in "Patience," because he was at one time a Heavy Dragoon, which we know to be the residuum of all the virtues. The Bookman and the Son of his Mother were down. The Son of his Mother came up first and gave us all the work we required. However, he is an exceedingly powerful fellow, and solved the difficulty by swarming up the necessary distance. He then explained that the ropes were twisted, and that consequently much of our energy was neutralised, as we were pulling against the life-line. The ropes were therefore disentangled, and instructions shouted down to the Bookman, who forthwith twisted the ropes again and tied himself on to the wrong one. With a mighty yeo-heave-oh we lifted him a few feet, and then the inevitable

happened. Our pull naturally twisted the twisted rope still more, and he began to spin. Loud shouts to lower were of no avail. We could not do so, the tangle prevented us, and the trouble had to solve itself. This took some time. The ropes would gradually untwine until they were disentangled, and then by the force of their own revolution, aided by the spinning body at their end, would twist themselves up together the other way round. Consequently the poor Bookman was twirled about like a suspended tee-to-tum for about ten minutes before he could be let down to the welcome haven of the floor.

It was some time before he felt equal to another effort, and we were glad of the rest. We were none of us weaklings, and the Eastindiaman and the Son of his Mother are exceptionally strong, but we had all had just about enough of it. Never shall I forget the Eastindiaman as he sat with his feet braced against the trunk of a tree, with the great veins swelling up on his temples like whipcord, as he put all his mighty back into the pull. Eventually we got the Bookman up by the "Stirrup." It is usual in such cases for the climber to do his own lifting, but the Bookman was so exhausted, as well he might be, that we had to lift his feet.

