Chislehurst Chalk Mine (known to its friends as Chislehurst Caves).

Earliest records are from about 1200, when the area was already known as Chalkpit Hill. Became redundant about 1860 as a mine when steam power became available to replace pickaxes, when it became partly used as a mushroom farm. In 1900 when the talk of the day was Darwin’s Theory of Evolution and the craze was fossil hunting, an intrepid explorer heard of the existence of old mines in the area, and found that three of them had been dug in the same chalk strata, so although they were at different depths below the surface (because of a steep hill), they were basically horizontal. He encouraged local workers (some of whose fathers had worked in the Mine when it was still producing chalk) to dig some short linking tunnels so that the whole system could be accessed from one entrance, which is the one still in use. The Caves were available for public tours from that time on, except for the First World War when it was taken over by the Army and used to store high explosives. Between the wars it was again used as a mushroom farm until the Government closed it down on the grounds that the manure needed would be better used on other crops. The Caves were then locked up and left. However, when bombing started in London, some people broke in and camped there. Soon thousands of people, particularly from South and East London, came down to shelter each night. At that time, the Caves boasted a hospital, church, canteens, toilet blocks, theatre, Ladies’ Hairdresser and thousands of three tier bunks.

After the war, there was a period when it was used for music – folk, skiffle, jazz and rock concerts were weekly events until the local council found a way to close it down by reminding everybody that it was really a mine, and the laws of the Mine Inspectorate must apply, and you can’t have parties down a mine.

Then it reverted to a Tourist Attraction, with Guided Tours for the visitors. This continues today, making it probably one of the easiest mines to visit. The floor is like cobbles, but we can accept pushchairs or wheel chairs (although tiny wheels are difficult to push!) and take visitors from babes in arms to OAP’s. It’s a regular attraction for local schools, fitting in to the WW2 studies. Tourists are shown round the Caves by the light of oil lamps and tours start every hour from 10am to 4pm, with extra tours for booked groups like schools or birthday parties. One explorer who visited in the 1900’s was a Vice President of the British Archaeology Association, and gleefully reported to them that he was sure that one section was 1200 years old and dug by the Saxons, another part was 2000 years old and dug by slaves for the Romans, and the part furthest from the entrance and deepest underground was a Druid temple. So as not to disappoint the visitors, some Guides still tell these stories! Many visitors expect to experience Ghosts, so there is a collection of Ghost stories too. There’s not many old mines where you can take your baby sister and your Granny along with you!

See the Caves website www.chislehurstcaves.co.uk or my website www.nullpublishing.co.uk for further details. Or you could contact me direct.