Trephining

The facts
Trephining, or trepanning as it is sometimes called, is a surgical operation. It involves cutting a hole in the skull and removing a piece of bone. When it was first done, in prehistoric times, stone tools such as flint scrapers or obsidian stones were used to gouge the skin and bone to the brain beneath.

Some skulls, up to 10,000 years old, have been found with as many as five pieces of bone removed and the largest skull hole found to date is more than five centimetres wide. Many of the excavated skulls also show signs of healing, which suggest that the operation was sometimes successful and that the patient survived.

Many theories have been put forward to explain the phenomenon of trephining, but the most accepted one states that it was to release evil spirits and to deal with the symptoms of epilepsy and migraine. Skulls have been found at sites throughout the world, so this was an operation that was carried out in many different societies. It is believed that the piece of bone removed was sometimes worn as a charm.

Memory time...

- Trephining is an operation in which a round piece of bone is cut out from the skull.
- We know from excavated skulls that some patients survived the operation.
- No-one knows exactly why the operation was performed.