

Industrial Area in Tintern Abbey Precinct.

We visited this site on 21st August 1930 and saw a very interesting industrial area which was tentatively dated to the mid-16th century. It consisted of stone-built platforms and small bowl hearths. These had been arranged in a very orderly fashion quite unlike the Roman examples that we have seen at Alcester, Manchester and Usk, and the Saxon ones at Southampton.

The stone-built platforms could have been bases for more elaborate smithing hearths and indeed one was found, but at ground level in the "annex" at the east end of the area. This appeared to have a chimney attached to it and a very nice circular hearth but no water bosh. In front was a post hole that might have held an anvil but there was no hammer scal around it.

The round bowls had been lined and protected by a lean-to shelter according to the excavator, Paul Courtney. But only one bowl had a lining partly intact. This lining had been placed on a mass of lead, probably spilt in the bottom of the hearth. The others were nicely hemispherical and burnt red and black. Their lining was undoubtedly in the packets labelled "slag". This was burnt clay with a wood-ash vitrified surface mistaken for slag. In the southwest corner of the area was a small oven or kiln with a fire-hole attached; in the centre of the oven was a pot which may have served as a support for the base of the oven.

To the north of the area was a drain or race which could at some time have provided water power from the mill behind (west). The excavator believed on purely circumstantial evidence that the area was the site of the short-lived Tintern brass works of 1568. But there is nothing to indicate brass rather than bronze. But one feels that these hearths were for melting copper-base alloys rather than anything else. Slaggy material was found which may be related to iron working. The fuel was charcoal. No crucibles were seen but some pieces of scrap copper-base metal were found. No tuyeres were found.

The exact dating of this site will be difficult to determine as the pottery is not likely to give a date better than \pm 50 years, nor will the C-14. Archaeomagnetic dating will be tried on the hearths.

The hearth with lead in it could have been a pre-dissolution hearth re-used for melting up dissolution lead and re-lined for post-dissolution activities. It is possible to imagine that the bowl hearths were monastic (c.f. Kirkstall) and that the stone-built platforms held sophisticated blacksmith's or annealing hearths such as those to be seen at the Gloucester Pin factory - now the Polk Museum (see R.F.Tylecote Post Med. Arch. 1972, 6, 185).

At some stage, probably in the late 16th century, the whole area was cleared and flattened so that all traces of higher level and later activity have been removed.

I can see no objection to the abortive brass works but either the stone platforms must have held some quite sophisticated equipment or it must have been incredibly primitive.

No doubt further evidence of date and purpose will come with further excavation.

August 1930.

R.F. Tylecote.