

Any Old Iron?

Lydney Park and Trelech reveal their mining history

Question: What is the link between Lydney Park, the site of a Roman Temple complex in Gloucestershire and Trelech in Monmouthshire? Answer: IRON

LYDNEY PARK

Archaeological exploration

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In 1805, the Rt. Hon. Charles Bathurst started systematic excavation on the Lydney Park temple site and the results were published in 1879. Later, in 1928, the site was re-excavated in a more thorough manner by Sir Mortimer Wheeler, one of his assistants being the young Professor J.R.R. Tolkein. The artifacts from both excavations are displayed in the private museum on the site. Over 8000 coins, statues, mosaics, bronze reliefs and inscriptions have been found, the latest artefact being discovered in 2000.

History of the Site

The evidence suggests that there was settlement on the promontory hill fort where the temple is situated, known as Camp Hill, as early as 100 BC (see *Figure 1*). The pottery from this period was crude and dates from the Mid to Late Iron Age, but the metal work was of high quality. Roman occupation on the site, following the invasion, was limited and sporadic until about 350 AD. Iron mining seems to have been the main activity with evidence of timber sheds and mines, the only surviving Roman mines in Britain; the marks of the miners picks can still be seen by the keen observer. A miniature pick, thought to be a votive, was found on the site of one of the huts.

The visible temple complex buildings on the site are multi phased. Coin evidence shows that building started soon after 364 AD but it is difficult to believe that the many alterations which were carried out were completed before the official end of Roman rule in 410 AD. It is possible that the Romanised population, aware of the strategic importance of the Severn estuary, attempted to maintain the site after the departure of the legions. Little is known of the site during the 5th Century before it was abandoned and there is no clear evidence of occupation in the 6th Century.

Description of Site

The temple is the focal point of the development, facing south-east, and standing in a courtyard (*temenos*) with defensive walls on two sides, a guest house and ritual dormitory (see *Figure 1*). Behind the dormitory was the bath suite, supplied from a cistern to the north, normally used for social occasions but in this case it is likely to have had ritual uses. The temple was built with an arcaded *cella* (central area) with a walkway around it. Almost as soon as it was built, the arcade piers of one of the *cellas* collapsed into a hole which is now believed to have been a scowle (hole formed from iron mining), not a swallow-hole as thought during the 1928 excavations. (See *Figure 2*)

Mosaics were laid in many parts of the buildings and one bore a legend indicating that a fleet supply depot commander, Titus Flavius Senilis, dedicated it to the Celtic God Nodens who was a local deity and seems to have been given certain specific responsibilities, including healing. Votives found on the site include models of arms, legs, figures and pins which were common in Mediterranean healing temples. Smelting was probably carried out on the site in order to produce objects for the temple and there is still evidence of slag within the temple area.

Figure 1
Reconstruction of the temple settlement (Lydney).

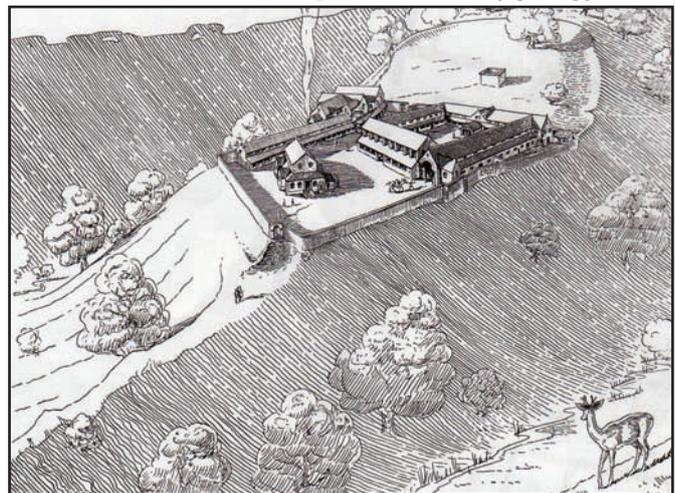




Figure 2
Probable evidence of iron
working beneath the temple
cella – from photographs taken
at the time of the 1928
excavation (Lydney).

The many representations of dogs in stone, bronze, and bone suggest a healing cult, as dogs were often used at healing shrines to lick the sores of visitors as a cure; they were probably votives bought on the site. The 'Lydney Dog' a cast bronze wolfhound, is one of the finest pieces of Romano-British sculpture.

Iron Mining

Lydney is situated on the south eastern edge of the Forest of Dean which has a particular, unique geological formation. Shallow iron ore pits in the Forest are known as 'scowles' and have been worked since Neolithic times. Scowles originated through the erosion of natural underground cave systems formed in carboniferous limestone many millions of years ago. Uplift and erosion caused the cave systems to become exposed at the surface and this was then exploited for the extraction of iron ore. Initially, however, the red haematite was particularly prized in Neolithic religious funerary ceremonies and was soft enough to be worked with antler tools. Later, it was found that it contained 38-40 per cent iron which enabled it to be smelted in charcoal furnaces.

The knowledge of iron metallurgy reached Britain around 500 BC but iron working on a significant scale did not begin until about 200 BC. After the arrival of the Romans, output increased until the late 2nd Century when the Forest of Dean became a major production area. The two adits (horizontal seams) found at Lydney Park suggest small scale iron working with the chief mining areas situated at Wigpool and Edgehill. Evidence of deeper exploitation can still be seen at Clearwell Caves. Little is known of the organisation and economic basis of the large iron industry at this time but the use of LIDAR has been instrumental in identifying over 1000 sites which are in the process of being investigated.

How far industrial activity carried on after the Romans is largely unknown but with the arrival of the Normans it developed rapidly, although Domesday made no assessment of the mineral wealth in the Forest of Dean. Only in the 13th Century are there many records of local industry when permission to win ore was regulated by the Crown in 1244. It was between this time and the 1280s that Trelech grew to become one of the largest industrial towns in South Wales.

TRELECH

History of the Site

Until recently, the 13th Century 'boom town' of Trelech was thought to lie under the present village. However, over many years, numerous archaeological explorations produced no evidence to suggest that the 378 burgages, recorded in medieval times, lay within the village 'grid' settlement pattern. At its height, Trelech had a population of approximately 10,000 and a flourishing iron industry, with the ore and charcoal being brought, presumably by packhorse, from the Forest of Dean which lies only 12 miles to the east. The settlement was largely abandoned after incursions by the Welsh in the late 13th Century, followed by the Black Death and finally, attacks by the Welsh under Owen Glyndwr.

In 2005, Stuart Wilson bought a field just south of the present village, convinced that the remains of the Medieval town were to be found in this area. He was to be proved correct in his assumptions, as the scale of the finds relating to the Medieval town are extraordinary and there is also evidence of earlier occupation in the Iron Age.

Excavations

All archaeological excavations carried out in three different fields and on the roadside south of the Olwy River, along the Catbrook Road (marked TOWN in *Figure 3*) have revealed stone foundations

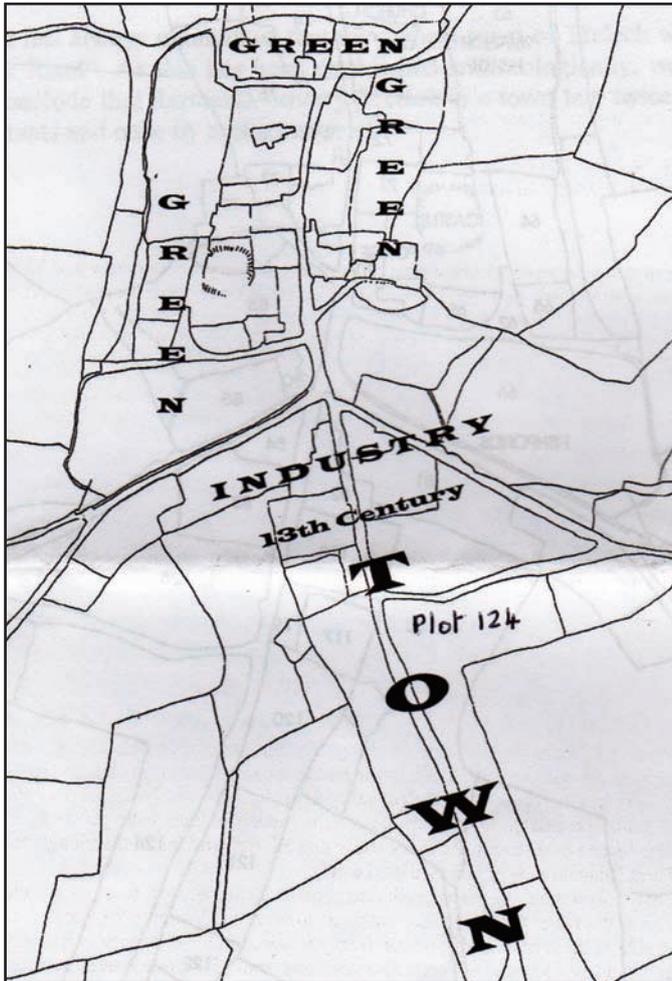


Figure 3
13th Century Trelech.

Figure 4
Stuart Wilson explaining the layout of medieval houses in Plot 124 (Trelech).



of medieval houses, medieval pottery, glazed ridge tiles and stone building debris. On the day of our visit, excavations were continuing in Plot 124 (see *Figures 3 and 4*) where substantial stone foundations of houses have been found along a 70m stretch of the field. Evidence of 13th Century pottery and roof furniture indicates that they are medieval but at least one was occupied into the 17th Century. The buildings have cobbled frontages sloping down to the main street of the town. Elsewhere, parchmarks in the field have shown up further buildings.

Iron Working

The evidence for the centre of Trelech's iron industry and its greatest slag heap come from a site near to the road junctions on the Tintern Road where a metre of black dusty loam was discovered in 2004, being the residue from riddling the slag. It is identical to that found in Monmouth, where in the 17th and 18th Centuries the mining of slag from Roman and Medieval times became a major industry and over 4 metres still remain on the banks of the Wye. Heavy concentrations of bloomery slag are recorded to a depth of 1.5m in areas near the road junctions and to the south of the Olwy River. It is thought that pure iron was being made, mainly for military purposes, with the Norman centres of Monmouth and Chepstow being close by. After 1314 the population and production started declining and within five years the industry had collapsed, being overtaken by the two local centres. By 1414, 70% of the population had gone and the industrial town was finally abandoned in 1650.

Summary

Both sites are located in close proximity to the rich iron ore deposits of the Forest of Dean. Whereas the Lydney Park site has evidence of small scale mining and smelting during Iron Age and Roman times, Trelech was the site of major industrial scale production at a much later date. Excavation work is ongoing (see *Figure 4*) and the 'lost town' of Trelech has many more secrets to offer.