

The Queenstock furnace at Buxted, Sussex: the earliest in England?

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ABSTRACT: Recent work suggests that Queenstock furnace at Buxted dates from at least as early as 1491. It thus predates the 1496 blast furnace at Newbridge in Hartfield, hitherto accepted as the first to be established in England.

Work carried out over the last four years by various members of the Wealden Iron Research Group suggests that the 1496 blast furnace at Newbridge in Hartfield, Sussex was probably not the first to be established in England.

At the suggestion of Christopher Whittick, documents in the Public Record Office relating to the Archbishop of Canterbury's lordship of South Malling in Sussex were examined by Brian Awty. South Malling included the ironworking parishes of Framfield, Buxted, Mayfield, Wadhurst and the Sussex portion of Lamberhurst, and the earliest documents were two consecutive court books running from the 1490s to 1513. In entries for courts held at Uckfield in July and December 1509 there were two mentions of an unnamed furnace at Buxted.

In July 1509 three crofts of old assart adjoining the 'Furnes in the said parish [Buxted], which land was used for the manufacture of iron in the days of lord Sir John Morton, Cardinal, Archbishop of Canterbury' were granted to Robert Mauncer the younger. Because the archbishop died in 1500, this furnace must be presumed to date from the fifteenth century.

In December 1509 four acres of waste land called *Jenensy* and *Jenensey Medue* in Buxted adjoining the 'Furnes' were granted to Thomas Hudson. Using local maps, of which the principal were the Buxted Tithe Award of 1840, and a map of Totease Farm made when it was acquired by the Buxted Park Estate in 1859, Pam Combes was able to identify Jennys Mead and Jennys Mead Hop Garden on the ground. These two fields are separated from the Uckfield stream only by Pond Bottom, which itself lies immediately above the field named Iron Plat, which Ernest Straker identified in *Wealden Iron* as a furnace site of unknown date.

Around the time this piece of research was begun another WIRG member, Judith Brent, had drawn attention to an inquiry held by the Commissioners of sewers at Uckfield in May 1537, which resulted in the discovery of the ancient name of the site. Among the landowners liable for rating towards the new cut at Newhaven were Thomas at Well and John Page for land 'in the hammer pond at Osborne [Howbourne forge]', and William Olyffe and Thomas Hudson for 6 and 3 acres respectively 'in the hammer pond at Quenstoke'. Thomas Hudson's name suggested that the second hammer pond might be the one immediately above Iron

Plat. This was confirmed by Pam Combes' examination of the 1859 plan which showed that Queen Stock Meadow was separated from Jennys Mead Hop Garden by only Mine Pit Wood and Rough Pasture, whilst upstream from Queen Stock Meadow lay what in the tithe award was called Queen Stock Wood, and in the plan of 1859 the Great Wood.

A re-examination of the Iron Plat site carried out by Dot Meades and Reg Houghton in 1990 had already established that Queenstock incorporated both a forge and a furnace, the forge cinder concentrated towards the west end of the bay near the stream, the furnace slag concentrated below a bank adjoining the eastern end of the bay. The presence of a forge is also confirmed by the field name Hammer Croft, downstream from the site and separated from it by only Bingate and Banky Field, but in 1859 named Lower Percys.

The association in the mind of the steward of South Malling of Queenstock furnace with the former archbishop suggested to Brian Awty that it might be advisable to look again at the Lambeth Palace document of 1491 which mentioned 'ye irenefounders of Buxstede'. He found that the reference occurred in an account of money received by Archbishop Morton's cofferer John Ryse for the period Michaelmas 1490 to Michaelmas 1491 from Roger Lewkenor of Tangmere, Morton's general receiver for his properties in Sussex, Surrey, Middlesex and Hertfordshire. In this account, allowance was made to Lewknor for £67 2d he had paid on 31 December 1490 to Morton's master surveyor for 'iernefounders at Buxstede'. The payment had no connection with Canterbury Cathedral and was presumably made as part of the archbishop's building campaign designed to improve and repair his properties following the Wars of the Roses and subsequent neglect. This, and the very special mention accorded him in the grant of July 1509 by the steward of South Malling lordship, suggest that Archbishop Morton should perhaps be regarded as

England's first ironmaster.

The 1859 plan of Totease Farm showed that, uniquely, the ownership of Iron Plat was still linked to property on the western side of the present stream, where downstream both Parsonage Wood and the former Rectory lay. Building the bay and the construction of sluices may well have diverted the main course of the stream from one side of Iron Plat to the other and occasioned the present curious ownership pattern. Although clearly out of blast in 1509 and again apparently in 1537, it is suggested that Queenstock furnace was the one at which the magnificent iron railings supplied by Archbishop Warham for Rochester Bridge were cast between those two dates, and also the one at which William Levett subsequently cast cannon for the Ordnance Office. Finally it will have been the furnace at Buxted which was used by the gunfounder Ralph Hogge in the 1570s and the one whose 'great water' was mentioned in 1573 as abutting onto land of Thomas Hudson.

Sources

- Meades D M and Houghton R G 1992, 'Iron Plat, Buxted, Sussex, furnace and forge site survey 1990/1 (TQ/497240)', *WIRG Bulletin* 2nd series 12, 23-6.
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The author

Brian Awty, a linguist by training, has undertaken extensive research on archive and archaeological evidence for the iron industry of northern France and the Weald in the 15th and 16th centuries.

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