

A POSSIBLE BELL FOUNDRY SITE AT ASH PRIORS, ST15042945

BY LAURIE WALKER

Archaeological monitoring of a mains water pipe trench along the roads of the village of Ash Priors revealed traces of occupation at a point 67m west of the western boundary of the churchyard, extending for 6m. The trench further to the west was already backfilled so examination in that direction was not possible. The natural soil in the area is sandy, light reddish brown and lying on sandstone which is over pebble beds and sandstone layers.

The occupation evidence consisted of a 0.2 metre thick layer of dark brown sandy soil with black, orange and grey inclusions and fragments of mortar and slate. Under this was a 0.2 metre thick layer of blacker soil with similar inclusions, both of these layers ran for the length of the site.

Within both layers were pockets of varying shades of black soil, white sandy mortar and dark brown soil and stones. The pocket of white sandy mortar and one of the pockets of black soil extended down to and across the trench bottom. Over a 2m length the trench had cut 0.1m deep into a compacted stone and mortar feature which extended across the trench and continued below the trench bottom. It is possible this was a work floor as the bronze evidence and sherds (described below) were found here. At the western end of the site there was buff coloured clay exposed and pale olive green clay at the eastern end, both of which could be natural but may also have been stockpiled.

As well as charcoal, slate, animal bone, pottery, fired and semi-fired clay the deposits contained evidence of bronze working comprising a piece of fired clay tile with adhering metal globules and ladle bowl shaped piece of dross with adhering metal globules.

The metal globules on the clay tile sherd and the dross slag were subjected to X-ray fluorescence analysis and were found to be made of a bronze alloy of a 88% copper, 10% tin, 2% lead composition. Traces of pure copper and pure tin were found on the clay tile sherd and the dross carrying the bronze globules indicating that the bronze alloy was created on the site from the pure metals. The pottery sherds were found in context with the bronze finds on the 'work floor' and have been identified as Donyatt ware made between 1600 and 1650.

Further finds were made on the higher, north side of the road in the rear garden of bungalow adjacent to the site where, with the aid of a metal detector, two pieces of iron tap slag were recovered from the top soil.

CONCLUSION

It seems probable that this site was part of a foundry, melting bronze and possibly iron in the early part of the seventeenth century and documentary evidence suggests a possible

context for this. In 1559 Roger Symson had a bell foundry at Ash Priors (Ellacombe, 1872). He cast many bells for churches in the West Country but the actual foundry site is not known nor is it known over what period it operated. Although the bronze found has a tin content of 10% and bell bronze normally contains 25% it seems likely that Roger Symson's bell foundry was on or lay adjacent to this findspot.

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REFERENCES

Ellacombe, H. T., 1872. *The Church Bells of Devon*, p. 391.

Author: Laurie Walker, Trotts, Ash Priors, Taunton, Somerset TA2 3NG

The finds and a more extensive report have been deposited with the Somerset County Museum, Taunton. Accession number TTNCM 41/1997.