

Prior's Moor, Billingsley

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Introduction

Priors Moor is located in Billingsley where two small brooks (now known as Ray's and Scott's Brooks) unite to form Bynd Brook, although in this article we will go slightly beyond the historic boundaries of the estate. The site has long been known, at least locally, as the site of the screens of Billingsley Colliery and the terminus of the standard gauge railway that took the coal from the mine to the Severn Valley Railway in Kinlet. Following some inept path repairs on the Jack Mytton Way and with evidence of tree clearance, we became sufficiently concerned to survey the site in case it was about to suffer serious damage. Fortunately this has not yet occurred and the survey revealed a number of features pointing to a much longer industrial history for the area.

Geology

Priors Moor is mainly situated on Productive Coal Measure strata, formerly referred to as the Kinlet Beds. However, the only coal which outcrops on the site is to the west of the main road where a fault brings in a the Highley Beds of Upper Coal Measure age. The rest of the site is dominated by outcrops of thick sandstone and the brooks have cut steep valleys exposing these beds. The area is wooded and it is unlikely that it has ever been used for agriculture.

History

Billingsley was granted to the Abbey of Shrewsbury in Medieval times and presumably the name "Prior's Moor" reflects that. Its subsequent history is obscure until much later. In the late 1750s the Bridgnorth to Cleobury Mortimer turnpike was opened and this road now cuts through the site. However a map published in 1754 before the turnpike was built shows the old main road taking a significantly different course, further to the west on a line now preserved by a public footpath. It seems that the Turnpike Trustees constructed the present road sometime before 1808 (the date of the next available map) to ease the gradients. A map of 1828 shows a second road descending to the junction of the brooks but this is described as being shut up and its significance is unclear.

Although the history of Priors Moor is poorly documented, the surrounding area was being exploited for industrial purposes. In the 17th Century the wood had been coppiced for charcoal, and ironstone mining had been going on since very early times. By the 18th Century coal was also being mined in the south of Billingsley close to Priors Moor. In the 1790s the scale of industry was dramatically transformed when a group of Newcastle business partners opened a coal works, constructing a tramway to the River Severn in Highley to remove their coal to the markets. In 1801 this was followed by the building of a blast furnace about 1/4 of a mile from Priors Moor. This first phase of industrialisation was short-lived, exhausting 3 sets of proprietors in 15 years (although greatly enriching their lawyers), but the population of Billingsley quadrupled. After 1812 when the furnace went out of blast, many of these individuals moved away but coal mining on a small scale continued until the early 1820s. The preliminary OS drawings at 2":1 mile show a set of buildings at Priors Moor in 1817 and the 1828 map (see above) shows several cottages either still present or "recently demolished". A careful study of local parish registers shows a group of families moving from Billingsley to Highley in 1819, perhaps coinciding with this demolition. The 1828 map also marks a quarry on the site. The Billingsley partners operated a quarry at Highley in 1797 and were probably also responsible for this one at Priors Moor. By the end of the 1830s only one cottage was left at Priors Moor but this was to last for another 100 years. In 1828 Priors Moor was purchased by William Childe of Kinlet and it remains part of the Kinlet Estate.

As noted elsewhere, the late 1860s brought a rival in the local mining industry with the a new colliery close to the Cape of Good Hope finding good quality coal in 1872. However this and subsequent developments left Priors Moor untouched. It was not until the Billingsley Colliery Company of 1910 began operations that new activity started. The Company needed to construct a rail link for their coal and initially the Stottesdon, Kinlet and Billingsley Railway Company was promoted, to connect with the Ditton Priors Light Railway at Stottesdon. When this failed, work began on a line from the Severn Valley Railway, up the Borle Brook and the eastwards to Priors Moor. Here the terminus was built and it was connected to the mine by a rope-worked narrow gauge incline. Tubs descended this from the pit,

the coal was screened at Priors Moor and then loaded into railway wagons for despatch to the main line. The screens were notable for having a slack washer; the first in the Wyre Forest Coalfield. The Billingsley Colliery Company also undertook an extensive house-building programme in Highley and leased a brick works in Billingsley. The local roads were unable to cope with the traffic that this created and so the Company constructed an aerial ropeway from the brickyard to Priors Moor. Slack went up the ropeway and bricks came down it to be sent by rail to Highley Station.

As noted in the accompanying article, Billingsley Colliery proved an expensive liability. It was sold in 1915 to the rival Highley Mining Company, who eventually closed it in 1921 after the national coal strike. Although the tramway to the colliery was dismantled the screens buildings remained and the site was leased by the Burwarton Coal and Trading Company, who used it as a landsale wharf, predominantly for coal from Kinlet Colliery. It was the closure of Kinlet in 1937 that finally brought industrial activity at Priors Moor to an end; the site was cleared and it has reverted to scrub, although there is a commercial conifer plantation on the higher slopes.

Archaeological Features

Pre-19th Century

Remains of many different phases are still present at Priors Moor. High on the steep bank north of Bynd brook a prehistoric flint knife was found, although presumably its owner was not involved in mining. As far as industrial history is concerned, it is perhaps best to begin west of the road on the outcrop of Sulphur Coal. This has obviously been worked, although the ground is now very confusing with a series of holloways and low mounds. Most if not all of these workings are just outside the old boundary of the Prior's Moor estate; there may have been mining within the estate itself but a combination of land slips and conifer planting make the ground difficult to read. In the 1930s the surveyors from the Geological Survey interpreted this as evidence of adits and shafts and this seems reasonable. However it is difficult to pin-point individual adits and there are no obvious shaft depressions. At the eastern end, much of the surface is covered in red ash. The quantity of this seems much too great to have come from the workings on this site and has probably been tipped from the early 19th Century mines to repair the embankment of the road.

There is documentary evidence from 1793 of one Richard Chidley supplying coal from Priors Moor to the Kinlet Estate and some at least of the remains may be of his mine. However most of the workings are very close to the course of the main road, and it seems unlikely that the Turnpike would have tolerated their highway being disturbed by mining. On this some of the work may predate the construction of the turnpike, ie 18th Century or earlier.

19th Century

The main features from this period are to be found north and east of the brook. The "stopped-up" road on the 1828 map is still present, having been used for haulage until comparatively recently. There are two quarries north and south of this. The southern quarry is very large and is probably the older of the two; in the early 19th Century a child was killed in the "New Buildings Quarry" when hunting swallows. The upper quarry is harder to date; it roughly coincides with the site of a cottage on the 1828 map, and a track heading north west on the 1882 and 1902 OS maps. It may be late in date. On either side of the road are traces of blast furnace slag, coal and pottery. The slag and coal waste probably came from Billingsley furnace and was used to repair the road; the pottery represents domestic waste.

The 1828 map marks five cottages, four alongside the old road. The southernmost was where there is now a flat space but there are no obvious surface remains. The second is that which remained until this century; it was stone and thatch and there are remains of the foundations. The third and fourth look to have been obliterated by the quarry although there are a few shards of pottery by their site. The fifth cottage on the 1828 map was significantly further east. A track can be followed past the southern quarry, then it is cut into a ledge above the brook. It crosses a minor stream leaving traces of bridge abutments and then opens out into a level area 50 yards long. This is marked by a stone retaining wall running parallel to the brook and a substantial scatter of pottery. Although only one cottage is shown on the 1828 map, there would have been room here for a significant terrace. Furthermore a track leads east to another platform cut in the hillside. Although no pottery was noted on the surface, it would certainly have been big enough for more cottages. It seems possible that Priors Moor was the

site of numerous houses, almost certainly for the miners and furnace men at the nearby works. It was a small industrial settlement.

20th Century

The railway and screens have left obvious traces. A comparison of the 1902 OS map with the current alignment of the brook indicates that a substantial remodelling of the valley bottom took place to create the space for the new works. The brook was straightened and its sides built up; it now runs between high stone retaining walls. It is possible that the northern quarry was opened for this work, although another was also operating at New England nearer Highley. The area available for the screens was also extended south of the brook by construction of a substantial concrete retaining wall. The railway kept close to this feature before eventually fanning out into sidings and crossing the brook on a wide bridge which survives.

Interpretation of the screens complex is helped by the survival of several contemporary photographs. It is easiest to first consider the remains on the south of the brook. Moving west to east, the first feature to be encountered is the aerial ropeway terminus. The bases of the ropeway pylons are found either side of the brook and they can also be seen at the very northern edge of the site and elsewhere in Billingsley. A concrete bunker is set in the ground; slack was stored in here, to be picked up by an elevator to be loaded in the ropeway buckets in exchange for bricks. The screens complex proper then begins. The buildings were predominantly corrugated iron sheds mounted on wooden posts, allowing the railway wagons to run underneath. Some post-holes for the supports are still clearly visible, marked by iron brackets which were attached to the timbers. The tramway crossed the brook about 30 feet from the ropeway terminus; the brook retaining wall dips at this point and there is a slight depression in the ground. Here are a set of six 12" holding down bolts of unknown purpose, set in the ground. Between the tramway terminus and the ropeway terminus was a substantial building with some kind of gantry projecting out. Although the ground here is obscured by large chunks of broken concrete, one post hole is visible, fixing its location. The building may have housed some of the motors for the screens machinery and

probably also formed part of the circuit for tubs arriving down the tramway.

East of the tramway terminus a series of post holes define a long shed which probably housed the jigs for grading the coal. Moving further along the brook there is a concrete base containing a substantial iron bracket which presumably supported some structure. Beyond this the retaining walls alongside the brook are raised and thickened and there is a substantial concrete platform next to the brook, with 5 large post holes for horizontal timbers. It seems likely that these spanned the brook, supporting an extension of the screens building. One photograph shows a tall building here, with perhaps an elevator leading to its top from the adjacent building, the iron bracket may have supported this elevator). An unusual feature either side of the retaining wall is a slot for timbers to form a "stop lock" to dam the waters of the brook. It seems reasonable to conclude that this complex housed the slack washer, with the stop lock ensuring that water was always available. Moving away from the brook, close to the railway are two concrete plinths which the photographs show supporting a gantry (for a walkway?) or a crane. One large post-hole can be found by the concrete base, and alongside the course of the railway are 3 wooden baulks, about 1'x 1' x 1'. Inspection of one of the photographs shows that these supported another raised shed, with railway tracks and trucks beneath. This must have housed the discharge hoppers for loading the railway wagons and perhaps also had a picking belt for cleaning the coal.

The retaining wall along the brook continues for about another 200ft, and there is a substantial platform of earth and spoil kept up by a low brick retaining wall facing the brook. This must have provided sidings accommodation. Between the brook and the earth platform there is a small brick plinth towards its eastern end and also a scatter of bricks. A photograph shows what seems to be a substantial post in this area, towering above the rest of the buildings. It is not known what function it served. Beyond the platform there is a considerable earth rampart between the railway and the brook extending for several hundred feet until an over-bridge is reached. Beyond the over-bridge was the engine shed (foundations remain) and a weigh-bridge (walls still intact) with apparently more space for sidings. The purpose of the earth rampart is unknown; it

may just be spoil from levelling the site, but it seems very well formed if this is the case.

To the north of the brook there is less connected with the screens. The tramway itself went through a cutting and then was supported by a metal gantry on its final few yards to the screens. This has vanished, but tramway route is obvious. Almost opposite the proposed site of the slack washer there is a brick platform which probably housed a pump. A pipe can be traced from this along the north bank of the brook until the end of the retaining wall where until the 1970s it could still be seen crossing the brook, to continue underground to the engine house.

It is possible to make some guesses as to how the screens worked. Tubs arriving down the incline would be immediately unclipped and emptied onto the tippler before being sent back up the incline. The coal would probably be sorted into bests, seconds and slack by a jiggging screen and the slack would be taken by elevator to the washer. It would be cleaned by flotation and taken by conveyor to be dumped close to the tippler building. The larger coal would be taken by conveyor to picking belts and then discharged into wagons. The aerial ropeway took slack by an elevator into the buckets, exchanging this for bricks which were discharged by a chute into railway wagons.

Other Features

Just east of where the brook goes under the main road is a short brick culvert, D-shaped, about 3ft high ending after some 4ft in a stone wall. It has been suggested that it was a cellar for a long-vanished cottage.

At the far west of the site where the earth rampart starts, there is a cutting running parallel to the brook, about 3ft wide and 100ft long. It leads to wide flat area by the brook. In appearance it resembles a water course but there is no evidence of a dam or any building at either end. Further investigation is needed.

Conclusions

Priors Moor has had a rather more complicated history than was previously realised. West of the main road are perhaps pre-1750 coal mines. North of

the brook is the remains of an early 19th Century industrial hamlet. South of the brook is the 20th Century screens. As little has been recorded about the survival of coal preparation plant, these remains are particularly important. The site is heavily overgrown and much probably lies buried beneath the surface. It is very likely that much more information could be recovered by excavation. Miraculously it has suffered relatively little damage in recent operations. We will continue to keep a close watching brief on it.