

A Tunnel System at Hampton Loade Forge - by David Poyner

At the end of the Eighteenth Century, two iron forges were established at Eardington and Hampton Loade on the River Severn between Bridgnorth and Highley. Their histories have been documented previously⁽¹⁾. The Eardington Forges are known for, amongst other things, being linked by an underground canal⁽²⁾ and this was explored by the club in the 1960's.

Hampton Loade Forge (SO 748864) was built in about 1796 on or close to the site of a mid-Seventeenth Century blast furnace⁽³⁾. It was equipped with both a steam engine and a water wheel. In the 1820's a short-lived tinworks was established on the site. The forge closed in 1866. the industrial archaeology of the site has not been studied in any great detail. Although much of the works was demolished at the end of this century, a group of houses remain and the area forms a small hamlet. In May this year, the Alveley Historical Society visited the forge site. During the course of this visit, the group (of which I was part) was shown the entrance to a tunnel. The tunnel is only known to those who have lived locally, as far as I am aware.

With the permission of the landowners, I was able to return in June to explore it in more detail. The forge at Hampton Loade has two ponds, an upper and a lower pond (fig 1). Both of these are

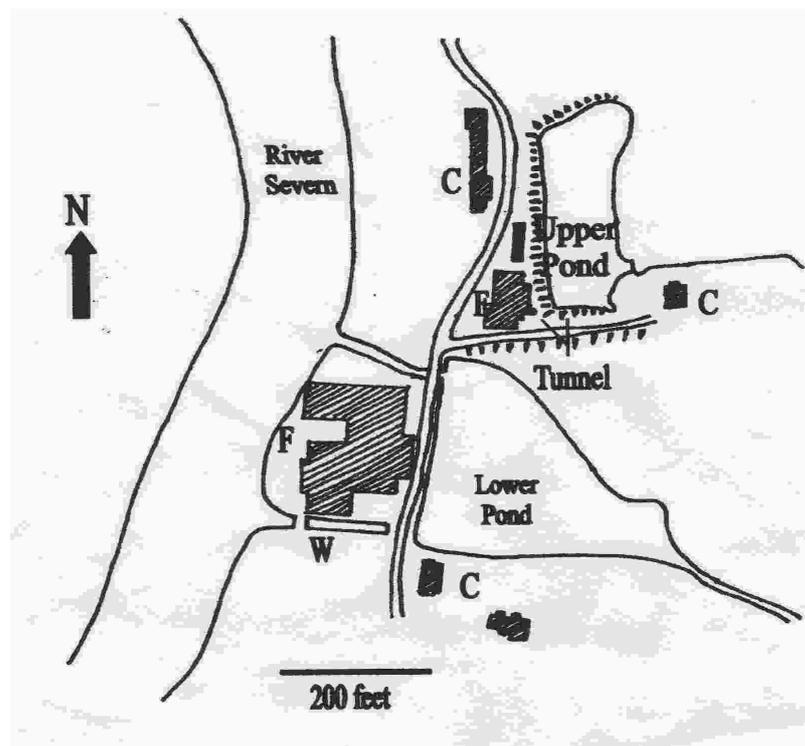
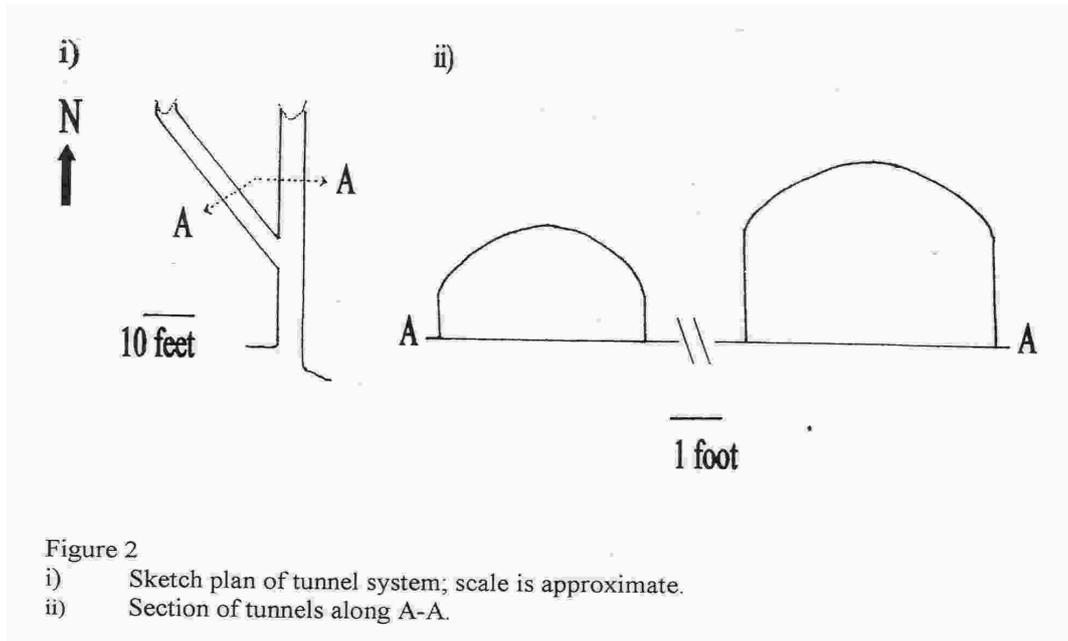


Figure 1

now drained. The mouth of the tunnel is beside what was the lower pond and it heads in the direction of the upper pond. It is set into a steep bank. At present, the entrance to the tunnel is underneath a tree root, there is a stone retaining wall on the east side which is about 6 feet long. The tree root makes it difficult to say what was the original arrangement at the tunnel mouth. Once in the bank itself, the tunnel is in good condition. It is made of sandstone blocks and is shaped like an inverted U, 5ft wide and 4 ft high (fig 2). It stretches for about 50 ft approximately, due north until it is blocked by a fall. About 18 feet from the entrance there is a branch tunnel, heading NNW. This is of the same profile but is made of brick and is 4ft wide and 2ft 6ins high. After about 40 ft this is also blocked by a fall, although just before this point it seems to be swinging round to go in a more



northerly direction. The floor of both tunnels is covered with several inches of silt but it is possible to see that at least in the smaller tunnel there are tiles or plates about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick which actually form the true floor. At several places in the smaller of the tunnels, bricks are missing from the bottom course to create openings that look like drains; in the middle of the small tunnel these are either side of a slot in the floor where there is a gap about 6" wide between the plates. Close to this there is an iron nail and towards the end of the small tunnel, are several large pieces of clinker and slag. Both tunnels are approximately driven on the horizontal.

The functions of the tunnels are mysterious. It is not clear whether they were built together. The small brick tunnel must date from the time of the forge and it is reasonable to assume the larger tunnel was also built for the forge rather than the blast furnace 150 years earlier. Given the alignment of the large tunnel, it seems reasonable to think that it might have carried water from the upper to the lower pool, presumably connecting with a short shaft that is now not visible. Quite why this would be preferred to a more conventional overflow channel is unclear. If the large tunnel carried water, so must the smaller tunnel. Presumably the "drainage" holes must have been blocked up, the slot in the floor might have held a balk of timber. The small tunnel seems to be heading in the direction of the forge complex itself. Perhaps it was built for water conservation? It is possible that water from the upper pond was sent to the forge for some purpose and then redirected to the lower pool. It seems likely that it was the outlet from the lower pond that drove the water wheel that is known to have existed at the site. It would have been important to ensure that the lower pond always had enough water to drive the wheel.

There are many unanswered questions about the Hampton Loade tunnels. A careful survey would be very useful to establish their exact alignments and gradients (ie which way would water flow in the small tunnel!). A good set of accounts for Hampton Loade survives (or did in the 1960's) covering the 1820's onwards, and this might also give clues as to their function.

I would like to thank Joyce and Bing Cooper of the Alveley Historical Society for showing me the site and drawing my attention to the tunnels and Mr and Mrs Ibberson for allowing me to explore these.

References:

(1) Mutton, N. The Forges at Hampton Loade and Eardington, *Trans Shrops Arch Soc*, 58, 1965-8, 84-88.

(2) Mutton, N. Eardington Forges and Canal Tunnel, *Industrial Archaeology*, 7, 1970, 53-9.

(3) Herefordshire Record Office, Foley Collection, E12/VI.KAc/161, 162.

I am grateful to Peter King for drawing my attention to the existence of a charcoal blast furnace at Hampton Loade and to the above references. (See also "Images of Alveley" 1999, pages 134 and 135.)