The Crown silver mines in Devon: capital, labour and landscape in the late medieval period

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ABSTRACT: In the late 13th century the English Crown introduced direct management of silver mining in Devon and maintained it for over 50 years. At Bere Ferrers in the Tamar Valley the Crown, and later its lessees, used capital-intensive methods and innovative technology. Large numbers of miners, many of them immigrants, were employed but not housed by the Crown. The impact of silver mining and its infrastructure on the landscape is examined, including the establishment of the borough settlement of Bere Alston as a response to the demand for housing and food supply. The documentary and archaeological evidence for this unique sector of the early mining industry is variable but taken together as part of an integrated study they provide us with a valuable insight into the organisation and methods used at that period.

Introduction

The deployment of large numbers of men in the prosecution of the King’s works was not without precedent but the permanence associated with the working of the King’s silver mines in Devon has no parallel in the late medieval economy. For over 50 years, from 1292 to 1349, the mines were worked by the English Crown under direct management. They provided work for up to 400 miners, many of whom were immigrants, some pressed into service. Although the mines were subsequently leased to entrepreneurial interests, the capital intensive methods of working instituted by Crown officers continued, culminating in the application of innovative pumping technology in an attempt to sustain deep working.

Whilst the Crown appears to have been doing no more than engage with the common practice amongst large estates in the 13th century, that brought demesne resources in hand rather than letting them to outside interests to maximise on profits in an inflationary economy, it also initiated change which would have a long term impact. By introducing a prerogative on precious metals, along with copper, and maintaining direct management of the silver mines over a long period, and by breaking with the custom which regulated other forms of mineral exploitation, it was to open up the mining industry for large scale expansion. Despite its close control of silver mining there were aspects of the industry in which the Crown played no role. The settlement pattern which might be associated with the mines has, until now, been an unrecorded aspect in the landscape of mining.

Over a period of nearly two years, May 2006 to March 2008, an exercise in interdisciplinary co-operation was carried out in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Exeter to examine the mining of silver in Devon in the latter part of the medieval period. In the project, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, two archaeologists (Stephen Rippon, who directed the project, and Chris Smart) worked with an economic historian (Peter Claughton) to assess the impact of mining on the historic landscape, focusing particularly on the parish of Bere Ferrers and its environs in the Tamar Valley to the north of Plymouth. For this work the project had the benefit of a range of resources including a large body of documentary evidence for the operation of the mines, held in the National Archives at Kew, primarily amongst the Exchequer Accounts (TNA: PRO E101).