

SOCIETY *for* CLAY PIPE RESEARCH



NEWSLETTER

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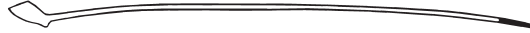


Spring/Summer 2016

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Mary Russell: A New Shropshire Pipemaker?

by David Higgins

When Marcus Thomas was planting a new tree in his garden in Wrexham, he came across a pipe bowl buried about two feet below the modern surface. The area was thought to have been open parkland near the middle of Wrexham before a Methodist Manse was constructed on the site in 1856. The pipe bowl, however, is much earlier than this, being of a distinctive form with a large tailed heel that was characteristic of the Broseley area pipemaking industry in Shropshire from around 1680-1730 (Higgins 1987). The pipe also has a Broseley style full name mark reading MARY/RVS/SELL for Mary Russell stamped onto the base of the heel (Fig. 1). This mark is particularly interesting for two reasons. First, it is rare (but not unknown) for a woman to be named as a pipemaker and, second, this name does not appear in any of the lists of known pipemakers from either Broseley or this part of the Welsh borders. So this raised two questions; who was Mary Russell and where was the pipe made?

Closer examination of the pipe bowl itself gave some clues as to its origin. Although of a good Broseley form and with the low-set milling around the rim that is typical of pipes from there, the surface of the pipe itself is not burnished. While not every pipe from the Broseley area is burnished, the majority are, and so the absence of this finish might point to this being a copy from a neighbouring area. Similarly, the fabric that the pipe is made of has a rather granular fracture and small gritty inclusions in it suggesting that it was obtained 'locally' (rather than being imported from the West Country), but not the more numerous angular inclusions that are typical of the Shropshire Coal Measures clay, which was used in and around Broseley at this date. These characteristics both hinted at this pipe coming from an outlying production centre rather than the 'core area' of the Broseley style industry.

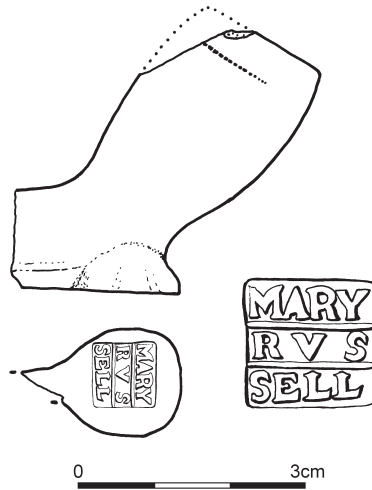


Figure 1: Broseley style pipe bowl of c1680-1730 found at Grove Road, Wrexham. About one third of the rim survives, half of which has a thin band of milling on it. The pipe is not burnished and has a stem bore of 7/64" (drawn by the author).

On the other hand, the bowl form and, in particular, the nearly cut lettering of the maker's stamp, are both comparable with Broseley area products. This same style of bowl form and mark were certainly being used by Thomas Heys of Buckley, some 12 miles to the NNW of Wrexham (Higgins 1983), but his bowl forms were not such good copies of the Broseley area products as this example and the quality of lettering on his marks was much cruder. Buckley is the most north-westerly known production centre for Broseley style products and so, based on the stylistic evidence of the bowl and mark, the Mary Russell pipe would be expected to have come from nearer to Broseley than this.

The answer as to the origin of this piece may well lie in the Wem area of Shropshire, some 20 miles to the SE of Wrexham (but which itself is still some 25 miles to the NW of Broseley). Research by the author has shown that the Wem area was a particular hotbed of pipemaking during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, with an unusually large number of pipemakers having been documented within a few miles of the town. Pipemakers of this date have been recorded from Aston, Burlton, Loppington, Myddle and Tilley, as well as in Wem itself. These places are all within five or six miles of one another and local pipe finds show that Broseley style pipes with tailed heels were being produced, some of which also have Broseley style full name makers' marks on them. These include pipes with large, tailed heels stamped LAWR/WOOD/ALL or LAW/WOOD/HALL, which seem likely to have been made

by the Lawrence Woodall or Woodwall, who is recorded in the Loppington Parish Registers (but no occupation given) between 1684 and 1695 (Loppington is about 3 miles west of Wem).

The original archive sources for the area have not been extensively searched by the author, but already some 17 makers have been identified, the majority of whom were active during the 1680s and 1690s. This is far more than would be expected or needed to supply the immediate area and so it seems that, like at Pipe Aston in north Herefordshire, a rural pipemaking industry developed around Wem that must have traded pipes over a considerable area to find a market.

One of the pipemakers that has been identified at Wem is William Russell, who was recorded as being a pipemaker there on 4 February 1691/2 when he and his wife, Mary, baptised a daughter, also called Mary. Although other parish register entries do not note occupation, it seems likely that this is the same William Russell who had married a Mary Jaxson at Wem on 25 April 1691. Mary could have been the Mary Jackson, daughter of Richard and Dorithy [sic] Jackson (occupations unknown), who was baptised at Wem on 9 May 1672 (Ancestry, accessed 23.5.16). No other references to William have been found in the parish registers after the baptism of his daughter in 1691/2, but it could well be that he died, after which his widow carried on the business under her own name, thus explaining the occurrence of a MARY/RVS/SELL stamp at Wrexham.

This scenario would certainly fit all the available evidence since pipemakers in the Wem area are known to have been making Broseley style pipes and a pipemaker called Russell with a wife named Mary is known to have worked there. Furthermore, the products from this north Shropshire industry must have been traded into the surrounding areas to find a market, and that would include Wrexham, some 20 miles away. It was not uncommon for a widow to continue running a workshop after her husband had died and the style, date and location of the mark would all fit with this having happened to Mary. Unless evidence to the contrary comes to light, it therefore seems reasonable to add Mary Russell to the list of Wem pipemakers that were operating during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

References

Higgins D. A., 1983, 'Clay Tobacco Pipes from Brookhill, Buckley', *Medieval and Later Pottery in Wales*, 6, Bulletin of the Welsh Medieval Pottery Research Group, 50-64.

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