Red Smiddy Iron Works

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The Red Smiddy iron works on the River Ewe at Poolewe, Wester Ross (MHG7711) preserve one of the earliest known blast furnaces in Scotland. We tend to think of the industrial revolution as getting underway in the mid 18th century, but documentary evidence combined with archaeology shows that the Red Smiddy works were operating in the 17th century. It was one of several in the Highlands sited because of good access to water (for water power and transport links to import clay ores and export the final products) and timber (to produce the charcoal needed to get hot temperatures for smelting iron). Other examples of blast furnaces in the Highlands are at Letterewe (MHG7940) and Fasaigh (MHG7921) in Wester Ross, Invergarry on the Great Glen (MHG5520) and Coulnakyle in Badenoch & Strathspey (MHG4599).

At the Red Smiddy, the blast was produced by bellows powered by a water wheel. Limited excavations in 1980 found traces of a lade, remains of the furnace stack, and a large amount of slag. The furnace was a square building of stone. The charcoal and ore would have been loaded at the top. At the bottom were two arches, one for blowing the air into the furnace, the other to allow molten iron to flow out into moulds. The full height of the furnace when complete can only be estimated, but probably was no greater than 5 metres. Evidence of vitrification and rebuilding suggest the furnace was in use for considerable time.

Blast furnaces are thought to have been introduced in Scotland just after 1600. The reasons for the adoption of the expense to build and equip these furnaces, as opposed to the more common local bloomeries, was probably related to increased demand for ordnance. The main driver was Sir George Hay, a lowland merchant, who acquired lands in Wester Ross. He was granted royal permission to manufacture iron in 1610. The main output of both Red Smiddy and Letterewe was iron ordnance. Despite plentiful bog iron in the Highlands, clayband ores were imported to the Highland furnaces.

The longevity of the works is unclear, but documentary evidence suggests somewhere between 10 and 50 years. This contrasts with Invergarry and Coulnakyle, operating from the 1720s, which encountered fierce local opposition and were only active for a short time. Only Bonawe in Argyll managed to remain a viable business, continuing into the 19th century.

The site, combined with others in the Loch Maree area, and the later Invergarry and Coulnakyle works, is important evidence of early industrial activity in the Highlands.

Further information:
The Local 17th Century Iron Works. Pamphlet published by Gairloch Heritage Museum.

Lewis 1984

Image: HER