

NEW FOREST NOTES APRIL 2008

New Forest words and placenames

The Commoners' Defence Association, in collaboration with other groups, is backing a scheme to record words which are special to the New Forest area and placenames which are not recorded on published maps. Details of the project were given at the Association's annual general meeting last month. If the organizers are successful in discovering truly unrecorded New Forest material, the results of their work should be fascinating, but I would not expect their task to be a simple one. For a start, it is easy enough to fill sheets of paper with "country" words unfamiliar to the townsman, but more or less common in rural areas and particularly in places which share characteristics with the New Forest, such as areas where pony breeding is undertaken. There are many words used in the Forest which are also to be found on Dartmoor and which are well enough understood in the farming community at large. Padding out any report with such words would be of little value.

The next problem is that a century or more of universal education has done much to destroy local words and accents. Of course eliminating local dialect would now be regarded as politically incorrect, but the "damage" has already been done. In the 1960s, my father recorded on tape a number of old commoners, and their speech would be almost unrecognisable to Forest people of today. Similarly, I can remember odd words and phrases (perhaps not specifically New Forest even then), which were common when I was a child and which have now entirely disappeared. For example, in those days, just after the Second World War, it was quite common to hear a filly foal called a "mare colt", but I have not heard this archaic description used for perhaps the last thirty or forty years.

One hundred and fifty years ago, John Wise in his history of the New Forest, published a comprehensive glossary of what he called provincialisms. It occupied nine pages of the book but, except when incorporated in placenames, I don't think that more than a handful of words there listed would even be understood in the Forest of 2008. Similarly, all the legends and folklore he describes in the body of the book have also disappeared. The Forest of today is the realm of the mountain-biker and the four wheel drive limousine. The fairy bands of Laurence and Tom Pook have been firmly consigned to the dustbin of history and a sentimental attempt to resurrect them would serve no worthwhile purpose.

In the matter of noting unrecorded placenames, I think that the project managers have a little more scope. Placenames tended to be fixed in the 1860s when the first edition of the Ordnance Survey Six Inch map was published. In this respect, the New Forest is little different from other areas, but one advantage the surveyors did have here was being able to draw on a large-scale government survey of nearly a century earlier for names. This survey, Richardson, King and Driver's map of 1787, thus gives the names of the New Forest an enhanced pedigree. Some of the old Driver's Map names were killed-off when the timber inclosures were made and quite a few of the lesser names failed to be carried forward onto

the OS maps, but this was really just following a long tradition of New Forest names going out of use. I was recently lent a copy of Tavener's survey of New Forest Woods of 1565, transcribed and annotated by Richard Reeves. Of the 150 or so names therein recorded, about thirty are so completely lost that they cannot be identified, even by historical research. Perhaps as many are identifiable, but are now completely redundant. But in contrast to this, there are names which have survived, perhaps for generations, without the aid of the Ordnance Survey. From time to time I have mentioned some of these in "New Forest Notes". Meadows Cross on Beaulieu Heath, for example, could be of quite ancient origin. Some unrecorded names will give the researchers difficulty in deciding on the "correct" spelling. "Parrack" at Furzey Lodge is a case in point. Various different spellings are possible, but I have no idea if this is an ancient or modern name.

In 1974, the New Forest Section of the Hampshire Field Club published a list of about fifty unrecorded New Forest placenames, but probably only a quarter of these now remain in common use. Mainly this is due to the deaths of the old people who used the names, but physical change in the Forest also plays its part. I was brought up in Fritham when the aerodrome was still in use and in those days everyone knew exactly where the Petrol Road was. Eventually the fences came down and the huge mounded tanks which had stored aircraft fuel were dug up and salvaged. The road became less used. Then, about fifteen years ago, the concrete was broken up and topsoil spread over its former alignment. Nothing but a faint green line across the lawn south of The Butt now remains. The population of Fritham has changed from local people to others from outside the area and I doubt if there are many remaining today who will even have heard the name. Thus do New Forest names fade and die.

Finally, the researchers will need a keen eye for fraud, mistake and mischief-making. The Forest writer C.R. Acton, in 1936, disclosed how he had inadvertently coined a placename near Burley New – "the Grunting Pigs". It arose as a result of interference by these animals with the buckhounds. He referred to the place in question by that name on a number of occasions and then found that his hunting colleagues, less familiar with the Forest, took up the name, presumably assuming it to be genuine.

The early camper

Anyone who sought to be in at the start of this year's camping season in the New Forest must have been very hardy or rather unwise, but that did not prevent a storm of protest at the improperly-early opening of the camps. Nothing is simple in the Forest and, instead of say 1st April, the beginning of the camping season is the Thursday of the week before Good Friday (i.e., eight days before Good Friday). This year, Forest Holidays Ltd, a company which runs these parts of the Open Forest for commercial profit, opened two weeks before Good Friday, or in other words, a week too early. Following innumerable other problems like the unauthorized stationing of caravans in the camps over the winter, the failure to remove large plastic litter receptacles at the end of the camping season and the application for new washhouse facilities on the Open Forest at Round Hill, the Forest community was not best

pleased to discover the early opening. The Verderers accordingly took up the matter with the Deputy Surveyor and were told that the fault did not lie with Forest Holidays, but was due to a miscalculation of dates by their landlords (the Forestry Commission) in the course of last year. The Verderers were given an assurance that the problem would not occur again.

Park Plan – the final event

In March the national park held the last of its consultation events on its "Park Plan". We are told that from the information accumulated over the winter's meetings, a draft plan will be prepared by the authority and will be put out for public consultation later in the year. At that stage, presumably, it will still not be cast in stone. We are in somewhat uncharted waters here, but at some stage I imagine there will be an opportunity for formal objection, followed by a public enquiry. It would be helpful if the park could put out a statement as to exactly how the process will work.

I have read through the bundle of papers (over fifty pages) which was provided for participants at the concluding event and most of the suggestions are of a fairly milk-and-water nature. There are some good ideas for survey and monitoring work, some wholly impracticable schemes, and a few downright damaging proposals for development of more facilities on the commonable lands. However, all this is at the moment no more than suggestions and need not lead inevitably to a fight. The Verderers have made it clear that some of the development plans would conflict with their policies for the protection of the Forest, so that if wise heads prevail, open warfare should be avoidable.

The final event of the series was again held at the Beaulieu Road Hotel and was fairly meaningless to all but park employees and members, as it was concerned exclusively with targets and timetables relating to policies which have yet to be decided upon.

Presumably in order to break up the tedium of the day, the organizers had arranged for a short play by a Forest youth group, dealing with the subject of New Forest animal accidents. It was cleverly done, if irrelevant to the business of the day, but it did keep some of us from dozing off. The highlight of the play came when a very respectable councillor and member of the New Forest Association committee was invited to stroke the ears of a young lady dressed as a donkey. From my back-row position at the opposite end of the room, I did not see if he availed himself of this attractive offer.

Faster verge driving

At the beginning of April, the County Council will be commencing an experiment in levelling and hardening the verges of a single track road near Woodgreen, on common land owned by the National Trust. Perhaps they concluded that the Trust would be a softer touch than the Verderers on the Crown land. Anyhow, at the moment the verge of this road is deeply rutted so that anyone running over it at more than about fifteen miles per hour is likely to damage his car. The hardening and smoothing, if successful, should allow drivers to hit the verge at forty or fifty miles per hour, enabling two cars to pass without slowing down on this dead straight length and greatly increasing the chance of livestock killing. It is yet another submission to the dominance of the motorist in the Forest and his insatiable desire for speed.

How much more sensible it would have been to impose physical limitations keeping the cars to the tarmac and providing infrequent passing places. In the West Country, one takes it as a matter of course that backing up a long country lane may be necessary in the face of oncoming traffic. By contrast, the New Forest national park must, it seems, remain a speeding driver's paradise.

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