

NEW FOREST NOTES APRIL 2009

The Forest community on display

This year's Commoners' Defence general meeting held at Lyndhurst last month was rather more lively than usual. The main subject under discussion was the problems which have arisen in managing a scheme to record the memories of senior commoners – rather grandly called an “oral history project”. This project is being commissioned by the New Forest Trust, a registered charity, and it involves a great deal of money, including Lottery funding. There were two applicants to run the scheme. One was Dr. Jo Ivey, who has experience of this type of work and who serves on the CDA committee. The other was Mr. Shaughnessy from Bramshaw who is rather less well-known in the Forest. Mr Shaughnessy was the successful applicant and Dr. Ivey's supporters objected on the grounds that he allegedly lacks the qualifications and status required by the job specification. The CDA committee also expressed its concern, but declined to interfere further in what it regards as the internal affairs of another Forest body. It was no doubt mindful that the Trust is a charity from which the commoners have benefited significantly in the past, but that was not good enough for the membership. They clearly expected the committee to adopt a more robust attitude in its representations to the Trust. The association's acting chairman accordingly agreed that the matter would be considered further by the committee.

I expect that this is the last that those of us who are ordinary members of the CDA will hear of the matter, although no doubt disagreeable discussions will continue behind closed doors. Things are not made any easier by the fact that the current chairman of the New Forest Trust is Mr. Richard Manley and he is a former chairman of the CDA who did much to modernise and raise the profile of the association. The Forest is sometimes an uncomfortably small world.

Whether the oral history project ever gets off the ground must now be an open question because of the bad feeling that the row has caused. There were distinct mutterings about non-cooperation among members at the meeting.

To my mind all this is really just a symptom of a much wider malaise affecting the farming community in the Forest. Increasingly the commoners are being treated like curiosities of, to use the national park jargon, the Forest's cultural heritage. They are photographed, filmed and recorded. They are given grants, subsidies and planning concessions. They figure in displays and conferences and, at least metaphorically, are poked and prodded like exhibits in some sort of freak show. From talking to other commoners, I know that I am not alone in finding all this mildly distasteful, but I suppose that few would deny that the money is welcome. It is all a long way from the Forest of a few years back when the commoners minded their own business and expected others to do the same. Shall we eventually see Saturday afternoon lectures to admiring groups of park visitors, addressed by Commoner Larkin, who is guaranteed to have genuine cow dung on his boots and is paid at a hundred guineas an hour? Perhaps also the more wealthy tourists will be invited to

experience all the thrills of a pony drift from the comfort of a gleaming range rover, manoeuvred by that renowned rough-driver the Commoner Kid – tickets only fifty pounds a head. But I suppose if one is compelled to suffer the crippling disadvantages of farming in a grossly over-used tourist honeypot, it is hardly surprising if there are attempts to make money out of it.

The two hundred year memory

In Burley Outer Rails Inclosure (which is actually Crown freehold property), there is a strange piece of land extending to eight acres where the surface of the ground is moulded into an immense series of ridges and furrows, just as if a giant sheet of corrugated iron had been planted there. It is the sort of feature which would not even be noticed by nine walkers out of ten, but one which immediately raises the interest of anyone used to assessing land and its past use. For two years it has been under active scrutiny by a team of field archaeologists working in the area. Theories as to its date and use have been formed and abandoned and eminent authorities have been brought in to peer at it in the hope that they will come up with some explanation – all without success.

By the beginning of last month it had eventually been worked out, on map evidence, that the furrows were formed some time after 1808 and almost certainly before 1811, because that is the date of the Inclosure and the date of the trees which cover part of the furrows. Beyond that, no progress could be made.

Towards the end of the month I was coming back through the Outer Rails when I encountered Mr. Ken Harding standing on the bridge over the Blackwater and looking out across the furrows. Mr. Harding is a well-known retired forest worker and he farms part of the Burley Lodge grounds nearby. It was clearly a long shot, but I stopped and asked him if he knew what the furrows were. Instead of the hesitation or speculation I expected, he answered immediately that the furrows were hand-dug so that oak trees could be planted on top of the ridges. Since the trees date from 1811, his information fixed the date of construction exactly. The next obvious question was how had he come by this information? He had apparently been told by his father-in-law, Bill Samber, who had lived at Brintons Toll Bar Cottage. Assuming that this gentleman was born at about the end of the 19th Century, at least two more generations must have intervened between him and those who would have seen the furrows formed. In other words, the memory of the work had been handed down over and over again for almost exactly two hundred years. This is a remarkable degree of continuity and the sort of thing which will be lost in the New Forest as the old families of forest workers with their roots in the soil are increasingly dispersed by economic and social pressures.

As to the furrows themselves, they are so far as I know, unique in inclosures of the Napoleonic period in the New Forest. That suggests that they were formed as part of some sort of forestry experiment. Public works involving vast amounts of hand labour at that period are an immediate invitation to speculate on the use of French prisoners of war, but there is absolutely no evidence for this. Ken Harding suggested that the site was chosen because parts of it are very wet, but of course so is much of the area of the inclosures. If it was an

experiment, it looks as though it was abandoned fairly quickly, because a more conventional drainage pattern was later laid out across the furrows.

Perhaps by coincidence (or the farsightedness of those early foresters), the Burley furrows were mirrored almost exactly one hundred and fifty years later in the huge deep ploughing operations of the 1960s when the Verderers' inclosures were formed. Then it was conifers being planted on the sides of the furrows, while the corrugations themselves are an unmitigated nuisance now that the Verderers inclosures are being restored to Open Forest. The Forestry Commission is having to spend a lot of money having them filled-in. The small area of furrows in Burley Outer Rails is, by contrast, a fascinating record of past forestry practice and well worth preserving.

A terrible death

I suppose by now I ought to be used to the endless abuses which visitors manage to inflict on the New Forest, but I recently came across a new one which was quite sickening in its consequences. A short distance off the A 35 road from Lyndhurst to Christchurch is a popular tourist site with a large lavatory block and barbecue facilities. Presumably because of the latter, the site attracts some of the worst elements of those who use the Forest. While the Forestry Commission no doubt clears up the surroundings of the lavatories, their cleaners never penetrate into the surrounding woods and here the disgusting detritus emanating from the honeypot builds up steadily. Before Christmas, for example, there was a drug-takers' camp with tarpaulins, bottles, tubes, cans and other refuse strewn over a large area.

To the north west of the site, the land slopes away to dense conifer woodland on the western edge of Anderwood. While walking through this I saw a long trail of something white, snaking away through the undergrowth. It turned out to be a thin nylon rope, perhaps two hundred metres long. As I followed it, something else white appeared at its end – the decaying carcass of a fallow buck, identifiable only from his antlers. The buck's head had evidently become entangled in the rope and the more he tried to free himself, the more tightly it became wound round his antlers. Eventually he ran until he encountered a spruce sapling in which the rope also jammed. By now no doubt in a state of utter panic, he ran round and round the fir tree, tying himself ever closer to it until there was no rope left. There he lay until, presumably, strangulation or starvation brought an end to his sufferings.

Foals with their feet lacerated by tin cans jammed upon them, cattle choking on abandoned polythene and riding horses with their hoofs pouring blood from treading on broken bottles are fairly standard in the New Forest, but this lonely death of a buck seemed to me to be particularly sad.

A chance to make amends

Lyndhurst parochial church council is consulting on alterations to the church and its surroundings. I make no comment on whether or not the proposed works are appropriate to a building of this character and quality, but one subsidiary item did catch my eye. A new path is intended from the central car park to the church. That would, presumably, replace the existing steps, whose construction many years ago represented one of the worst pieces of

cultural vandalism the New Forest has seen. The gravestones in the lower churchyard were torn up (many of them being broken in the process) and then thrown down to make steps. These stones were quite fascinating – many going back to the 18th Century and including some very notable people like Thomas White, the last Lord Warden's Steward, who dominated the village in the years running up to the Deer Removal Act. Instead of doing what many other councils had done before – arranging the stones neatly around the churchyard walls – Lyndhurst chose to vandalise them. Now, if the steps are to be replaced, there is at last a chance of making good some of the damage and the loss to local history. Many of the stones could be salvaged and returned to view.

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