

NEW FOREST NOTES APRIL 2011

Changes at the helm of the Forest

This month will see the long expected but deeply regretted departure of Oliver Crosthwaite Eyre as Official Verderer of the New Forest. At the time of writing (late March) his successor has not been announced. I recall that when the present Official Verderer joined the Court, his appointment was not confirmed until the morning of the first court he was expected to chair. Whoever now takes over, there will inevitably be a difficult period ahead for the verderers while the new arrangements bed in.

Meanwhile, in the Verderers' office, there will be a new assistant clerk. Ms Linda Ryan will take the place of the recently retired Sally Cardwell. In the filling of this position at least, the Verderers can be sure that the new team member is thoroughly versed in Forest matters. Ms Ryan worked for the little-lamented New Forest Committee and thereafter for the National Park. Whether her new job is as poacher turned gamekeeper or the other way about depends, I suppose, on from which side of the fence one views the matter. Either way, she can be sure of a warm welcome to the Verderers' staff.

The need to replace both Official Verderer and assistant clerk had been known for some time, but there came a much more surprising announcement on 22nd March when the Deputy Surveyor told the Court that there would be a temporary change in the leadership of the Forestry Commission's New Forest district team. From 4th April, Mr. Seddon will be working in support of the government's independent advisory panel on forestry. He will therefore be absent from the Queen's House until the autumn. In the meantime, the acting Deputy Surveyor of the New Forest will be Mr. Kevin Penfold. Mr. Penfold is well known in the Forest as he worked here prior to his current forestry role in South East England. Whether six months in the Deputy Surveyor's job will entitle him to have his name inscribed in gold letters on the board in the Verderers' Hall will probably be a matter between him and Mike Seddon. A similar inter-regnum took place in 1848-9 when William Lockyer Freeman was put in to the Forest as acting Deputy Surveyor to investigate widespread corruption amongst officials of the Office of Woods and others. I am sure Mr. Penfold will find no such unpleasantness.

Destructive rabbits

The Forestry Commission is endeavouring to devise a means of protecting scheduled ancient monuments from the ravages of rabbits. Scheduled monuments are those which have specific legal protection, although curiously enough, many of them in the New Forest are among the least valuable sites of their type. This is because the process of scheduling draws them to the attention of the public (many are included on published maps) and they thus inevitably become targets for robbers and treasure hunters armed with metal detectors, with or without the assistance of rabbits. The anonymity of unscheduled sites confers far greater protection than that of a law which is never enforced in the Forest. Anyhow, because the law says that they must be conserved, the Commission is seeking to ban rabbits from making homes in them.

The first idea was to cover the barrows (they are mostly barrows – otherwise burial mounds) with pegged-down rabbit netting. It was suggested that vegetation would soon grow through the netting, making it invisible. It seems that this is a technique that works well on military ranges where the rabbits are similarly destructive. In the Forest, of course, such a process is out of the question and the Verderers told the Forestry Commission that they would not permit it. Children and vandals would attack the wire, pulling it about. Cows, who enjoy digging in the soft earth a burial mound or boundary bank, would do the same and treasure hunters would cut through it to get at the supposed booty beneath. All would leave behind loose torn wire which would constitute a danger to livestock and riders.

Alternative plans for burying the wire under a layer of turf have, I am told by the Forestry Commission, now been rejected by English Heritage, so little progress is being made. A covering with hoggin gravel (an archaeologically clean and inert material) above the wire might be the answer, although no doubt rather unattractive for a while after it is laid. About half a dozen sites in the Forest are under consideration for treatment at present.

Pea green signs

Last year the Verderers contributed to the cost of a survey carried out for the New Forest Association of all the signs and furniture within the New Forest's camp sites. The objective was to provide a complete record of such items and thus to prevent Forest Holidays from carrying out stealth development in the hope that nobody would notice small additions to the clutter. It was a very worthy project and is perhaps just about to receive its first test. Over the last couple of months or so, Forest Holidays has been erecting brilliant pea-green sign boards attached to the sober Forestry Commission green ladder signs at the camps. These advertise the Forest Holidays brand and include such peculiar additions as "Thank you for staying at Site X" – presumably designed to fill departing campers with warm feelings and a determination to return to the New Forest next year.

Notices of any sort detract from the natural beauty of the Forest, but some serve worthwhile purposes or are legal requirements. Boards advertising a company, of brilliant colours and containing pointless remarks addressed to those leaving the site are absolutely unacceptable.

The vanished bunker

One of my regular correspondents, Mr. Brian Marchant whose family has a long association with Burley, may have been inspired by the proposed survey of wartime sites within the New Forest. He contacted me about his father who, with five other Burley men belonged to the Home Guard's special "auxiliary units" – units which have been the subject of a number of television documentaries recently. They were designed to act as an underground force, harrying the German advance in the event of an invasion. They must have been very brave men because it was generally acknowledged that their life expectancy if called to action was going to be very short. Mr. Marchant tells me that the Burley contingent had all fought in World War I. Fortunately for those concerned, this special division of the Home Guard was

never called-on to face the ultimate challenge and those at Burley were stood-down in November 1944. Mr Marchant (junior) was then about fourteen years old.

Records of this unit might have depended solely upon the memories of people like my informant, but at Burley some rather more tangible evidence survived for a time. After the war was over, Mr.Marchant was taken by his father to see an underground bunker in the woods near to the village. This bunker would have been occupied as a base by the auxiliary unit in the event of an invasion. His father raised a hidden cover disclosing steps leading down into a "fair sized room" equipped with timber bunks and a table, but nothing more. Mr.Marchant thinks it likely that it was built by a small unit of the Wiltshire Regiment which was based in Burley early in the war to dig defensive trenches.

Such memories give us a fascinating glimpse of life at the time and the terrible fate which ordinary local people might have had to face. The bunker might have vanished without trace, but a few years ago I had a conversation with Mr.Ken Harding, a retired digger driver for the Forestry Commission. He told me that after the war he was sent to a wood near Burley to destroy just such a bunker. He described its location in a fair amount of detail, but I will not repeat that part of the conversation lest it sends out an army of souvenir hunters into the Forest, equipped with spades. It is sufficient to say that I could find no trace of it, but that is probably just a testament to Mr.Harding's skill in levelling and restoring the site. He told me that it was constructed of steel sheets (probably an Anderson shelter type structure) and that it was so strong that his machine was nearly wrecked breaking up and burying the remains. It now rests forgotten under the woodland floor.

Penny Moor and the Bishop's Dyke

As Higher Level Stewardship money is poured into the Forest at an increasing rate, the next big push for stream filling and bog "restoration" is about to hit the south east part of the Forest – an area which has so far seen relatively little of such work. The target this time is within an area south of Beaulieu Road Station known as the Bishop's Dyke or Bishop of Winchester's Purlieu. This peculiarly shaped piece of land (400 acres) was granted out of the Forest in 1284 to the Bishop of Winchester and remained outside Forest control until re-purchased by the state in 1942. In the interim, the Drummond family acquired various rights over it, including the right to shoot. They are also said to have done much to maintain bridges and passages there. At first sight Bishop's Dyke seems an unlikely place for anyone to have sought a grant of land. Much of it is now exceptionally uninviting bog. Colin Tubbs who wrote a very informative article on the site many years ago speculated on this conundrum. In fact it is now fairly clear why the land was chosen. It is simply that much of it was probably not bog in the 13th century – it was excellent pasture, just as a surviving fragment at Penny Moor remains to this day. When the drainage was partially restored in the 1970s, traces of human occupation were found throughout what were then the most inhospitable sites in the centre of the swamp. In recent times, more research has shown that parts of the Dyke were laid down on top of much earlier field systems which were presumably chosen to cultivate rich soils

which made valuable occupation sites. No doubt there were always some “naturally” boggy areas, confirmed by traces of ancient peat-digging, but not on the scale we see today.

The plans are now to block several portions of 1970s stream and to divert the water into earlier channels. This puts at risk the few remaining areas of excellent grazing, such as Penny Moor, where already neglected watercourses threaten to overwhelm the lawn. One big area of lawn below Rowbarrow, perhaps five acres, has been almost totally destroyed by neglected drainage since the 1970s. Here the watercourse is choked by bushes and two large debris dams have flooded water across the entire width of the old lawn. I think the commoners may take some convincing that further inundation is really a very good idea.

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