

# NEW FOREST NOTES APRIL 2016

## History inscribed on the Forest

The rate at which the slight traces of the Forest's past are being destroyed has often been alarming over the last half century. Although the highway authorities and other developers have occasionally contributed to the problem, the chief culprit has always been the Forestry Commission, even if its motives have varied over time. In the 1960s it wrecked prehistoric field systems, burial mounds and occupation sites in ploughing to make or improve plantations and reseeded areas. Its forestry road construction works cut blindly through Roman settlements, doing uncalculated damage, but from the 1980s until about ten years ago the rate of destruction slowed. Commercial forestry was in decline and a generally more responsible attitude to so-called "cultural heritage" prevailed, but for a few years only. One might reasonably have hoped that the period since the creation of the national park would have seen the rate of damage reduced still further, but the reverse has actually been the case. In the past I have written about the blind eye which the park has turned to such cases as the destruction of part of the Bolderwood "palace" ha-ha earthworks and the wrecking of 4000 year old water heating sites at Godshill, but far more serious than these isolated consequences of carelessness is the supposed "archaeological planning" which the Commission undertakes in advance of engineering works. The reports that they obtain are almost always highly inaccurate and incomplete. Often 80% to 90% of the archaeological features threatened by engineering are overlooked altogether or wrongly plotted or interpreted. This really is most distressing in an area such as the New Forest where landscape and history should be a key part of what managers are there to protect. Such failures may be attributed largely to ignorance, but a recent (if minor) case suggests an even more disturbing trend.

At the time when England's landscape was being transformed by the agrarian and industrial revolutions, the New Forest too was changing. Great plantations of trees were being formed between 1700 and 1870. Some of these were hardly landscape improvements, any more than were the railways or canals when first built, but others soon became key elements of the Forest and are now among the most beautiful and loved of our broadleaved woods. Even these were not by any means the earliest plantations. Small coppice type enclosures had been made since the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and today their outlines can be traced on the ground by surviving banks and ditches. They add greatly to the interest of a walk in the Forest for those who know where to look. Good examples are to be found in Wilverley, Ridley, Sloden and South Bentley. Often these woods still contain very ancient and picturesque trees.

As time went on and new laws were passed, larger plantations were created to supply navy timber. Woods like Ravens Nest, Amberwood and Beech Bed fall into this category, but plantations of all periods after 1700 shared a complicated and well-planned infrastructure of carefully laid-out rides, hand dug bank and ditch boundaries surmounted by timber fences, brick culverts (later piped) and shallow drainage cuttings. These durable features, especially the boundaries, survive long after the Forestry Commission loses interest in a particular wood and the trees disappear, so that we have

inscribed on the surface of the Forest a detailed history of past management. This is the case whether the wood is a coppice recorded under James I or the last great Deer Removal Act inclosures of one hundred and fifty years ago. It is one of the latter which is the subject of this story.

On 7<sup>th</sup> June 1855, the New Forest Inclosure Commissioners approved the making of a 350 acre plantation at Milkham Bottom near Linwood. The works were completed by 1861 and by that stage the area had been increased to 393 acres, with the usual bank and ditch boundary. It must have involved immense labour to build. Whether this was done by local people or by professional navy gangs, I do not know. Certainly the (then) large cost of such work is recorded for 1848 and amounted to one shilling and sixpence per rod (5.5 yards). Milkham never became a beautiful wood and when, about ten years ago, the Forestry Commission decided to cut down and abandon part of it, there were few mourners. The Commission also set about filling-in the brook through Milkham Bottom, causing a good deal of damage to historical sites in the process, but the unobtrusive heather-covered bank survived as a permanent record in the landscape of this transitory but important period of Forest history. Now the fanatical desire to fill in and destroy every feature of the Forest's landscape and history which could possibly be claimed to affect "natural" drainage, has led the Forestry Commission to embark on the destruction of part of the Milkham boundary bank. I am told that the national park supports the work on the grounds that only a small part of the boundary is to be flattened, but that seems to be a particularly fatuous argument. One might equally well destroy "a little bit" of a burial mound or field system because most of it would be left for future generations. Now of course the boundary bank of Milkham is not the ruins of Palmyra and the Forestry Commission is certainly not in the least like Islamic State, but a single-minded determination to destroy anything that does not fit into a rigid (ecological) dogma does have faint echoes of greatly saddening events elsewhere in the world.

### **Road litter and fly-posting**

One afternoon last month I drove along the A337 from Lyndhurst to Cadnam and was immediately aware of a change in the road since I had travelled out during the morning. Its margins had been thoroughly cleaned – whether by coincidence or in preparation for "Clean for the Queen". The usual filthy tide mark was gone, for a few days at least, and over the next few weeks several other roads in the Forest received the same treatment. Still, clean as the verges of the A337 were, they remained disfigured by the clutter of advertising signs. The authorities (Hampshire County Council, planners and Forestry Commission) seem helpless in the face of this constant and illegal fly-posting. The County Council deserves high praise for its March verge cleaning operations, but the authorities as a whole are letting down the Forest by their inaction on illegal adverts. If being a national park has any purpose at all, that should surely be to clamp down on this sort of abuse, but after ten years of supposed special protection, things are only getting worse.

### **New Forest Inclosures Design Plans**

Every few years the Forestry Commission revises its management plans for the Forest's plantations (called "inclosures") and such a revision is underway at present. A big all-day meeting held last week at the Balmer Lawn hotel, was attended by numerous parish council representatives and others interested in the Forest. We were told that the huge array of brightly coloured maps produced by the Commission will shortly be available online, allowing everyone to discover the plans for their own favourite piece of woodland. There will then be a period during which members of the public may send in their comments. At the meeting, however, some of the more honest delegates admitted to being thoroughly confused by the mass of complex documents with which we were presented. The plans in particular were a problem for those not used to working with maps of large scale. They showed how each block of inclosures will look in twenty, one hundred years and two hundred years. I find it difficult to see much value in the last of these, although I accept that when planting trees which take two centuries to reach commercial maturity, such a long-term view is theoretically necessary. If we have not been destroyed in a nuclear war before then, the woodlands of the Forest may long since have ceased to exist because of global warming, tree diseases and pests or simply to provide living space for an exploding population. Those who planted the great oak woods we see today could not possibly have foreseen that the ultimate results of their work would be anything other than to build a bigger and better navy for some future conflict with the French.

The twenty and one hundred year visions are much more realistic and in general are quite encouraging. They foresee widespread re-conversion of conifer areas back to the natural broadleaved woodland which was lost in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Parts of the Inclosures will be cleared and will return to heathland. Other parts will cease to be cropped and will revert to the status of open forest pasture woods. Such a transformation is likely, in the long term, to produce a less economically viable Forest (it already runs at a substantial loss), but over the next twenty years it is not expected that the timber income will fall significantly – presumably because the accumulated value of maturing conifer crops will be steadily exploited through felling and sales. Inclosure fence lines will be little altered in this phase, no doubt to the relief of those whose business it is to catch ponies and whose lives have been made more difficult by the abandonment of inclosures over the last twenty years.

Perhaps the most depressing part of the meeting related to climate change and plant diseases. Growing conditions for all our major hardwood trees are likely to become more difficult, with beech, oak and ash facing various threats. The last of these trees may be wiped out altogether in twenty years, while beech is under constant threat from squirrels, droughts and more recently from ponies. Oak saplings may have to be imported from Mediterranean countries where the trees are better adapted to drought. Since part of the Commission's plans depend on natural regeneration, the future for deciduous woodland may prove quite bleak. Certainly the Natural England representative

seemed to have a very poor understanding of past and present grazing and browsing pressures on the Forest.

As a veteran of the last two design plan processes, I was disappointed that there has still been no progress towards maintaining the ride network of the Inclosures, despite this subject figuring prominently in past discussions. The Commission continues to block rides, remove gates and to neglect ride drainage maintenance on a massive scale, although assurances were given last time that this would be corrected in future. Even fallen trees are not removed from many of the tracks. There seems to be a quite deliberate attempt to destroy large parts of the network and no doubt there is a financial motive behind this.

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