

## **NEW FOREST NOTES - APRIL 1999**

### **BURLEY DEVELOPMENTS PAST AND PRESENT**

At the March Verderers' Court there was a presentment from a Burley resident speaking for himself and a number of his neighbours in opposition to plans for a trackway over Burley Lawn to the back of the old chapel. It appears that the new owner of the redundant chapel has applied for permission to convert the building to residential use, to establish a "craft studio" and to build a short private access road across the lawn to the rear of his premises. The logical route for a vehicular access (direct onto the highway) is apparently impracticable because it would involve disturbing the final resting places of many former Burley people who are sleeping peacefully under what will become the front garden. The fact that this state of affairs should have been abundantly clear to the purchaser before he took on the property seems not to have troubled the Forestry Commission. They have indicated that permission for the access will be forthcoming as soon as planning permission is obtained. The suppliants at the Court were, understandably, somewhat upset about the proposals for the access and must have approached the Verderers confident of a sympathetic hearing and a prompt rejection of the plans by the Court. They received only the former. By a strange twist of history, the Court of Verderers can block the building of a multi-lane motor road through the Forest, but it has no powers whatsoever to prevent the Forestry Commission from granting permission for private access tracks. It is almost the only sort of development on the Forest which the Verderers cannot stop. The origins of this strange state of affairs lies in part within the same village (Burley), exactly a century ago.

Towards the end of the last century the Verderers and the Crown were struggling for supremacy in the management of the New Forest. It was a time of large-scale development, with many imposing country houses being built, as outside money flooded into the area. All these houses needed carriage drives across the Forest to the nearest road. Then, as now, the effect of individual permissions to take little bits of Forest land were insignificant: collectively they represented a major threat and the Verderers resisted them. However, by 1899 the Verderers were so financially weakened that they were no longer able to challenge the Crown in the courts. The Commissioner of Woods in charge of the Forest accordingly developed the policy of withdrawing Crown permissions from any licensee who dared apply to the Verderers or pay them an acknowledgement for such a right of way. It proved an extremely effective tactic to which the Court had no answer.

The legality of the Crown's stand was probably dubious and the inequity of its actions beyond question. However, the custom quickly became established that the Verderers may not interfere in the granting of private access ways such as that proposed for the Burley chapel. In 1949 the custom became enshrined in Section 18 of the New Forest Act of that year which confirmed that the Forestry Commission may make such grants without the approval of the Court.

The Forestry Commission is reticent about the charges it makes for its permissions (the relevant sections are always deleted from those documents which the Verderers are

allowed to see), but from some that I have examined beyond the confines of the Court, they are evidently a very worthwhile source of income. If you hold the power of life or death over a prized vehicular access, it would be poor estate management not to take advantage of the situation. That is not to say, of course, that good estate management is necessarily good for the Forest. The Burley chapel is probably about to demonstrate that.

The resident who made last month's presentment had evidently done his historical homework. He drew to the Verderers' attention the fact that Burley Lawn is one of those exceptional patches of Open Forest grazing which was tile drained, probably in part with tiles, following the construction of the Southampton and Dorchester Railway under an Act of 1845. The railway company paid the (then) huge sum of 12,000 pounds compensation for its line through the Forest and that money was, by statute, to be expended for the mutual benefit of the Crown and the commoners in draining the Open Forest. A brick and tile works (the Victoria Tillery) was built at Pignal Hill (adjoining Balmer Lawn) and an engineer named Josiah Parkes was employed to undertake drainage projects. Burley Lawn was dealt with in the second phase (1849-50). The following year the supposed mutuality of interest in the grazing came to an end with the passing of the Deer Removal Act. Apart from occasional maintenance, the Crown blocked any further expenditure from the Railway Fund for the next quarter of a century. Although unconnected with the Burley Lawn works, the accounts of the Tillery in its early years (published in 1868) contain some curious examples of the changing relative values of labour and goods. In 1847-8 a Mr. J. Waterman built a cottage at the Tillery for the price of £40. I suppose today even the most humble cottage would be unlikely to cost less than twenty to thirty thousand pounds. By contrast, the following year the keep of the pug-mill horse cost 43-8-10 pounds!

### **THE PRICE OF PROPAGANDA**

Over the last few weeks there has been (to use the best trendy jargon) a perceptible heightening of the New Forest Committee's profile, with a string of statements and public appearance by its new chairman, Ted Johnson. I assume that this is intended to boost the chances of the tailor-made national park demanded by his Committee, at a time when the Environment Minister is deciding between that and the "real 1949 type national park". Anyone who still remains bemused as to the difference between the two park types need not worry too much. In practice they are likely to prove very similar. The tailor-made park would allow the New Forest Committee to continue in business and to target its coveted powers more precisely at specific areas of the Forest's management. The "real" park (likely to be favoured by the minister and rumoured to be the subject of an announcement this month) would be a more heavy-weight institution, swallowing up some of the planning duties of the local authorities. Both would damage the Forest by encouraging excess tourism, more recreational facilities and by easing public development. Both would hotly deny any such outcome of their establishment.

This increased visibility of the New Forest Committee follows the now infamous one day "Stakeholder Seminar" held last autumn and which I am now told cost the amazing sum

of 20,000 pounds of tax and council-tax payers' money. It was a very expensive piece of propaganda. Not content with this investment, it seems that the Committee is now planning a further spend of 20,000 pounds or thereabouts on another seminar. This time participants will examine the powers which should be awarded to the Committee under the tailor-made option. Taken together, this is really rather a lot of public money and one can only assume that the funding councils are looking for a good return on their investment, if and when park type management is secured. Moreover, I doubt if that will be the last of this spending spree, unless the minister's announcement aborts the second seminar and consigns the Committee to a footnote in Forest history.

The Committee itself is somewhat coy about the amount of money it is throwing into the battle and about the work of its "Way Ahead" sub-committee, but I suppose this is hardly surprising. The last time that the local councils invested so heavily in a non-tourism New Forest project was the promotion of the Lyndhurst Bypass Bill, the failure of which could, I suppose, prove that money cannot buy everything.

### **RESTORING A FORGOTTEN LANDSCAPE**

In recent months I have expressed some reservations about the expenditure of "Life Project" money in the New Forest. Now the commoners, with justification, are seriously questioning aspects of the mire restoration work and some Waterside residents are worried about felling in Fawley Inclosure. It is therefore good to be able to record one aspect of the expenditure which has received almost universal approval in the Forest.

Following last year's relatively small rhododendron clearance projects, the Forestry Commission is now undertaking a massive programme designed to eliminate the weed completely from the two adjoining woods of Turf Hill and Millersford Plantation. This is probably the most heavily infested area in the entire Forest and the task is immense. For many weeks past, a contractor's team using 360 degree tracked excavators has been transforming Millersford from a dark jungle, accessible only on narrow muddy paths, to delightful open woodland. The bushes, many the size of substantial trees, are being torn out by the roots and heaped into massive fires which burn for days on end. Where forestry or storm damage has felled conifers, these stumps also are uprooted and the underlying ridge and furrow ploughing is levelled. The work is remarkably neat and the inevitable ground damage is largely superficial.

The landscape which is emerging, or something like it, has not been seen for a century past. Unlike many other Forest woods, we have a detailed picture of what Millersford looked like in the 1890s. This was written by the landowner of the time. He records the layout of a great drive through the plantation and attempts to introduce evergreen oak and rhododendron made about 1870 "but with scant success"! Some of the oaks survive to this day. His description of Millersford Copse (a sub-division of the plantation) accords well with the character woodland now emerging in the wake of the diggers and which promises to become one of the most attractive spots in the north of the Forest.

Millersford Plantation has a curious history. Its exact origin is not known but it was almost certainly enclosed out of Hale Purlieu between 1826 and 1830 and is thus contemporary with many of the Forest's Inclosures. However, it has never been part of the Crown Forest. Just after the last war it was given to the National Trust who promptly leased it to the Forestry Commission to plant with conifers. Now there are plans to restore much of it to its pre-1830 condition.

Some much earlier history has come to light during the course of the rhododendron digging. Two previously unknown Bronze Age water heating sites have been revealed as the huge root plates of the bushes were pulled out. The discoveries were made by an observant excavator driver who reported them to the Forestry Commission. They compliment the archaeological record of an area which was already known to contain a greater density of such sites than probably any other part of Southern England.

The survival of such names is wholly dependent upon a close-knit farming community with an intimate knowledge of the physical details of the Forest and a strong sense of tradition and continuity. As this community breaks down the chances of further research diminish and the Forest will be the poorer for the loss of such curious names as Burnt Fuzzen (Bramshaw Golf Course) and Devils Claw in Crows Nest Bottom.