

## **NEW FOREST NOTES AUGUST 2010**

### **Stewardship money and the threat to Forest's historical sites**

To judge from the number of historical and archaeological programmes on television, I suppose that not many people would now subscribe to Henry Ford's 1916 view that "history is more or less bunk". There can be few places more steeped in history than the New Forest and few that comprise such a treasure-house of archaeological sites. We have no crowd-pulling Roman villas, no stone circles and no massive hill forts along the lines of Danebury, but what we do have is equally precious and in some respects much rarer. Low earthworks, sometimes difficult for the untrained eye to recognize, tell of former land use, industry, hunting, burial and so on. They are the sort of features which often survive best, and sometimes survive only, in an uncultivated area such as the Forest. There is not much uncultivated land left in southern England.

For me, a walk in the Forest is made immeasurably more interesting by the knowledge that a pile of cracked stones beside the Blackwater marks the place where a Bronze Age family practiced a strange water-heating technology at the same time as the pyramids in Egypt were relatively new. When I wander through a little square enclosure near Ashurst, I know that Mediaeval kings of England lodged here during hunting trips. At the other end of the social scale, the strange black circles found throughout the old woods recall the industry of generations of charcoal burners. We already know of two thousand three hundred such varied treasures and the total rises every year.

With such a wealth of historical sites, it is very depressing to record that they are threatened with damage and destruction as at no time since the 1960s and by an agency which is nominally responsible for their protection. Back in the 1960s, the Forestry Commission had a swift and brutal policy towards any historical feature which impeded its engineering projects. Archaeologists were given a few weeks to record the annoying intrusion and then the machines moved in obliterating everything. In 1967 two superb Roman pottery kilns, perhaps the best examples ever found in the New Forest, were bulldozed a few days after a rushed, and ultimately unpublished, excavation. Following that, pressure on the Commission over succeeding decades forced modifications in its policies, so that by the late 1990s deliberate destruction was a thing of the past and accidental damage was reduced to negligible levels. This more enlightened attitude did not last. Over the last few years - ironically since the Forest was classified as a national park - there has been a marked change for the worse. This has been due in part to a general slackening in standards of traditional forestry operations, but more recently to the unleashing of huge engineering projects on the Open Forest. That was a sector of the Forest where archaeological features were formerly threatened only by robbers and vandals.

The New Forest Association has, very rightly, made vigorous complaints over such damage on several occasions, but the high profile cases they have taken up are not the full story. Over the last twelve months alone, there have been three or four unpublicised instances of damage or destruction. The excuses are various, including failures to co-

ordinate maps, rogue contractors out of control (a favourite), inadequate records and even human error. Quiet attempts to resolve matters behind closed doors have failed. I don't think it is an offence for a landowner to destroy archaeological sites unless they are scheduled ancient monuments, but for a government agency to permit this sort of thing, when it is perfectly avoidable, seems to me to be very wrong.

Matters came to a head last month when one of the biggest Open Forest engineering operations so far, commenced at Longwater Lawn. The scheme had been planned for well over a year and throughout that period the local archaeological society (the New Forest History & Archaeology Group) had been impressing upon the Forestry Commission the necessity for adequate checking of the archaeological information around which the earth-moving would be planned. Of course it is entirely understandable that the Commission should wish to save money in these difficult times, but cost was never a factor in obtaining proper checks. The Group had undertaken to carry out the work entirely free of charge and required nothing more than prompt provision of plans and specifications and enough time for fieldwork during the bracken-free period of the year. Survey work at other periods is impossible. The offer was effectively ignored for months and only after desperate phone calls in mid-July was a plan eventually (and with great reluctance) forthcoming – a mere two days before the excavating machines moved in. The plan showed a chaotic state of affairs. Within the 25 metre working corridors, there was a total of 16 sites immediately threatened by the operations. Of these the Forestry Commission overlooked altogether eleven sites. A further two sites were inaccurately recorded – apparently based on fifty year old sketches not checked on the ground. Three sites only were sufficiently recorded resulting in an overall failure rate of more than 80%. That is a serious indictment of a government agency which has a moral, if not legal, duty towards the archaeology of the Forest. Even after these deficiencies had been pointed out, the Commission continued to dispute the existence of several sites until compelled to acknowledge them. Not the smallest expression of regret for these shortcomings has been made. I am sure the Commission would hotly deny that there is a “history is bunk” attitude within the organization, but it is difficult to discern much respect for the Forest's historic environment at Longwater. Supposed ecological enhancement is to be achieved at all costs.

I suppose one could say that this is a story with a happy ending in that a potential orgy of destruction was prevented in the nick of time, but such a near miss must never be repeated. The national park's archaeologist (to whom I am grateful) has pointed out to me the Higher Level Stewardship provisions which require consultation on works which may affect the historic environment. This looks like a good starting point, because in future much of the engineering on the Forest will be financed by stewardship money. There will be a heavy responsibility on the Stewardship Board to ensure that the New Forest's history is not again threatened in this manner.

### **Money for old concrete**

A much more encouraging potential use of Stewardship money was demonstrated to me at Stockley last month by officers of the national park and by the newly appointed stewardship manager, Mr. Chris Caswell. Incidentally there is considerable room for confusion over titles because the Forest now has two stewardship managers. Mr. Caswell oversees and coordinates all the various streams of expenditure, while Mr. Colin Draper remains the Verderers' stewardship manager responsible for the greatly enhanced funds now available to the Court. Anyhow, my visit to Stockley was quite outside the area of Verderers' expenditure and concerned the wreckage left by the clearance of Beaulieu Aerodrome.

When the wartime airfields and their virtual small towns of buildings were cleared away and the land returned to the Forest, the standard of work was very variable. At Stoney Cross the clearance was reasonably well done – perhaps because at the time there were no less than four of the ten Verderers farming in the parish of Bramshaw. The buildings went first, shortly after the war, and then the concrete was broken in two phases – the first in 1966 and the second in 1990. It was a very different story at Beaulieu Aerodrome. Here the military authorities wriggled and procrastinated over the return of the land to the Forest, with all sorts of disagreeable alternative uses being proposed. Eventually, in 1960, the land was relinquished and over the succeeding years most of the concrete was broken and the buildings more or less removed. The latter work seemed to have comprised the bulldozing of the structures and a partial shovelling up of materials. Broken brickwork and concrete was scattered over the heath, where it remains to this day. When the runways and perimeter track were broken, great piles and drifts of tarmac and a liberal scattering of concrete lumps were left lying around. Worse still, and quite unlike Stoney Cross, dozens of manholes and other concrete chambers (probably cable-related) remained, sometimes with their covers partially broken in and often with steel or concrete frames protruding from the ground where the surrounding concrete was taken. Nearly fifty years after the clearance, conditions remain almost as bad as on the day when the machines left, although vegetation is colonizing the bare clay of the runway sites.

There is now a proposal that the site should be cleared up once and for all, with waste concrete and brickwork hand picked into skips or trailers and with the larger lumps of debris loaded by machine and any resulting holes carefully levelled off. Manholes relating to drainage will clearly have to remain, but need careful surrounding with soil to eliminate danger. Other chambers need breaking up and removal. There is absolutely no question of destroying features of historical interest. The surviving bomb store, for example, will remain intact and great care will be taken to protect the Bronze Age burial mounds which somehow survived amongst the buildings, despite the best destructive efforts of the military. Moreover, since the exercise would yield significant quantities of clean hardcore, there are opportunities for recycling – at least if it is not prohibited by over-zealous health and safety officials. It would be a great shame to see materials being wasted which could be useful to local farmers.

Altogether this is a unique opportunity to restore the worst contaminated and most dangerous area of land on the Open Forest. The advantages to grazing stock and to commoners and others riding the area would be considerable. If the proposal receives the support of the Stewardship Board, it will ensure a lasting legacy to the New Forest.

#### **Health and safety debris**

Forest users will have seen the margins of many roads through the Forest disfigured by piles of forestry waste during the last few months. The Forestry Commission has been having one of its periodic assaults on "dangerous" trees. I am told that the big timber and saleable firewood will be removed. The remaining tops will be broken down and pushed into the surrounding woods to rot. That seems to me an untidy and disagreeable manner in which to complete a job, but inevitably I am told that it is good for the beetles, whereas (although not acknowledged) a thorough and tidy job would be bad for the Commission's pocket.

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