

New Forest Notes – August 1995

Wartime secrets of the Forest

ON the morning of 13th March, 1945, less than eight weeks before the end of the war in Europe, the New Forest shuddered under the explosion of the largest bomb ever to have been dropped on England. Moments before, a specially modified Lancaster had crossed the Avon and released its strange new weapon high above Sandy Balls. As the bomb plunged forwards and downwards it passed through the sound barrier before burying itself deep in the ground one hundred yards south west of the Ashleycross gate into Pitts Wood. There followed nine seconds of silence. Then, far underground, the delayed action fuses detonated nearly ten tons of explosive and the edge of Hampton Ridge erupted as a crater, one hundred and thirty feet across and thirty feet deep, was torn in the plateau. This one test of the ultimate earthquake bomb of designer Barnes Wallis had worked. An immediate phone call to the base of 617 squadron set in motion the preparation and loading of "Grand Slam" as it was known. Within twenty four hours of the test explosion, a single Lancaster destroyed the Bielefeld Viaduct in Germany which had, defied innumerable carrier attacks. As the war drew to its close, Grand Slams rained down on the previously impenetrable reinforced targets of Europe, destroying them one by one.

These local details of the test are recorded for the first time in Norman Parkers history of the Ashley Walk Bombing Range which has just been published by the New Forest Research and Publication Trust.

Ashley was a secret place covering about four thousand acres and surrounded by a high wire fence. Within its boundaries were tested almost every type of air delivered weapon used by our forces during the Second World War. For example the author describes how, in 1943 a modified version of the famous bouncing bomb was dropped against a heavily armoured wall near Bramshaw Telegraph from a height of sixty feet. By reversing its original rotation it was intended that the bomb should roll forwards rather than bounce. The idea was that it should be dropped out at sea to roll along the sea floor to emerge on the beach and destroy coastal defences in advance of the invasion. The plan however, failed. The bombs flew across the range in all directions deflected by every undulation of the ground. Thirty years after the war, one of the bombs was salvaged and returned to the squadron which carried out the tests.

Other stories relating to the range include the testing of "Highball" a smaller bouncing bomb, and the dropping in Ashley Hole of the "Tallboy" earthquake bombs. On Coopers Hill above was carried out the fragmentation bombing of two hundred slit trenches containing dummies, while at Ashley Cross were built the famous "submarine pens" costing a quarter of a million pounds.

Mr. Parker tells how, in specially built aircraft pens above Alderhill Bottom, brand new American Airacobra fighters were used as targets for fragmentation bombs. The plane was, apparently, disliked by the RAF. On a visit by high ranking American officers the targets had to be hidden in the trees to prevent an international incident.

Other weapons were tested against different types of target including two massive walls, forty feet high, which dominated Ashley Walk like two tower blocks. They were located at Leaden Hall and Cockley Plain. On Cockley Hill was the ship target, steel plates forty feet long and twenty feet high simulating the hull of a merchant ship and used for rocket attacks. From Alderhill to Leaden Hall, a two thousand yard "line target" comprising a chalk strip ten feet wide, dominated the range and was used for training in attacks on roads and railways.

For local people, perhaps the most useful part of Mr. Parkers history is a record of surviving evidence of the range. Over four hundred craters were visible when the range closed in 1946 and most are still traceable today. Remains of most of the targets can still be found, but only one building in the shape hut near Amberwood. A large scale-map makes it possible to identify almost every hollow and mound and gives an excellent idea of the complexity and extent of the Ashley operations.

The second part of the booklet describes the pastoral history and landscape of Ashley Walk. It includes rare photographs of the vanished Amberwood Cottage and Ashley Lodge, both destroyed by the bombing. There is also a reproduction of the famous "Driver's Map" of Ashley Walk. Copies of "Ashley Walk: its Bombing Range, Landscape and History" are available from the New Forest Research and publication Trust at 4, Clarence Road, Lyndhurst, at £4.65, including postage.

Verderers

Last month I attended a meeting at which one of the subjects for discussion was how best the Verderers might improve their services to the Forest. Among the familiar faces present was one new one . His "outsiders" view was that, in an area where there is a constantly changing urban population, the role of the Verderers need frequent re-explanation. Everyone present agreed that he had made a very good Point. While pundits argue over sub-sections in Forest Acts of Parliament, their discussions are unlikely to mean much to the family which has just moved to Hythe or New Milton with no idea who the Verderers are. In the hope of correcting this omission on the part of the Verderers (and indeed in these notes over the last five years), here is my simple guide to the Verderers of the New Forest.

The first thing to be done is to disregard all the guide book nonsense about the "ancient court of the Verderers". The colourful history of the Forest Law is about as relevant to today's Verderers as a longbow to a modern army.

The Verderers are one of the two statutory bodies which manage the New Forest, the other being the Forestry Commission representing the land owner. Their constitution is roughly contemporary with that of the county councils and the greater part of their powers is derived from post war Acts of Parliament. There are ten Verderers, half of whom are appointed by such public bodies as the Hampshire County Council and the Countryside Commission. The remainder are elected by owners and tenants of land in and around the Forest. In the event of a conflict of views between the appointed representatives of public authorities and the elected Verderers, the former would be dominant through the casting vote

of the appointed chairman. In fact such divisions never arise because it is very rare for even the newest of appointed Verderers to vote against the protection of the Forest.

The Verderers do two things. They regulate the farming of the Forests open lands and they control development throughout the so-called, "Crown" lands. In the latter sphere of operations their powers are considerable and the fact that the Forest has survived in its present form is almost entirely due to the judicious exercise of this control. These powers are so comprehensive and effective that they are the envy of those who seek, often unsuccessfully, to protect such areas as Dartmoor. In Post war years the Verderers have prevented major road construction, widening and straightening, they have closed down landfill sites and blocked the establishment of new ones, they have stopped plans for airport construction, military training, pipeline building, and all sorts of unsuitable recreational development. In doing all this and doing it very effectively they have made many enemies among the developers -- notably the local authorities which bitterly resent the Verderers' powers to limit their activities. Of course such resentment is never publicly admitted, but it underlines a good deal of current Forest politics.

The agricultural management of the Forest includes the enforcement of bylaws for the health and welfare of livestock, the employment of officers to carry out this work on the ground and various duties in respect of grazing maintenance and improvement.

Criticism of the Verderers is often, I suspect, as much influenced by the ancient "Court" myth as by the administrative decisions they make. If the Verderers had the prosaic title of "New Forest Board of Agriculture and Development Control, I doubt if we would see half the hysterical raging against "feudal relics" and other colourful epithets. However, I am a traditionalist and prefer to keep the old, and inappropriate name.

Rabbits

The Forest, or at least parts of it, is suffering from a plague of rabbits. The number of these pests has become so great that in places, they are having a really serious effect on farming and I am one of the sufferers. I have two small fields up against the Forest where I normally make hay. In one of them the crop this year was almost halved the other was simply not worth cutting, due to the drought and the activities of rabbits. In cash terms, this probably represents a loss of several hundred pounds, to say nothing of the damage to hedges, banks and the turf. Shooting, gassing or trapping is really a waste of time on my land as the adjoining Forest is a bottomless reservoir of fresh trouble. Myxomatosis still kills the odd rabbit, but no longer makes a significant dent in the problem.

Within the Forest itself the growing number of rabbit holes is making riding increasingly dangerous, especially for those commoners and agisters who have to manage stock and must gallop over open country without regard to the ground conditions. This is particularly worrying with the new drift (round up) season about to start. Whether rabbit damage is yet affecting the plantations, I do not know.

Rabbits have been a recurring problem over the centuries in the New Forest. At the end of the Eighteenth Century, it is fairly certain that they contributed in large measure to the

failure of many of the new Inclosures especially Wilverley. Unfortunately, the very people whose job it was to control them (the keepers), also had a profitable sideline in rabbit farming and very much resented attempts by the Surveyor Generals' department to have the pests exterminated in the Forest. A commission of enquiry in 1789 concluded that the underkeepers of Rhinefield and Wilverley Walks had converted their Inclosures into warrens, obliterating the young trees over almost eight hundred acres.

Apparently in earlier times, before the rabbit was as hardy as it is today, it was actively encouraged in specially constructed warrens now called pillow mounds. It was not until the 1960s that such mounds were first recorded in the new Forest, on Rockford Common. Here mediaeval rabbit farming had evidently been carried out on a large scale, although the most interesting of the mounds were shortly afterwards destroyed by gravel digging. At Hale, a series of very large pillow Mounds can be seen near the aptly named Warren Farm, while further south, in Cunniger Bottom, there is a single mound which no doubt gave its name to the Valley.