

NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2012

Deceiving the Enemy

On a hill south west of Beaulieu there is an insignificant grassy mound which attracts the interest of neither visitors nor residents. Only the ponies pay it particular attention because of the sweeter grass growing upon it, but close inspection shows that the mound is not natural and that there is more than the grass to single it out from the surrounding heath. It is built over a massive concrete slab, nine metres square. I have known about this mound for thirty years, but I had no idea as to its origins. On a recent visit with some friends, we decided that this was a mystery which ought to be solved.

For queries relating to the south of the Forest, my first recourse is usually to Forest keeper Graham Wilson, but on this occasion even that mine of information failed me. He knew about the mound and the slab and even has a photograph of himself standing on it many years ago during hunting, but beyond that he could not help. Clearly some wartime origin was likely but, as Graham pointed out, most of the generation which could remember the Forest in that period is now dead, while of the few survivors, many were away on military service and would not necessarily know what was going on here.

In the end the solution was reached partly by guesswork and partly through the ever-valuable assistance of Richard Reeves at the Christopher Tower library. The existence of a bombing decoy in the area was known and for that a control bunker and generator house of very solid construction and probably earth mounded was required. It seems that the buried slab is the foundation for such a structure, while some of the remaining rubble has been concealed within the mound. The dimensions of the slab match precisely a contemporary specification for such buildings.

The purpose of bombing decoys was to induce enemy night bombers to attack bogus targets which were illuminated in various ways, thus deflecting them from nearby towns or military installations. This was done by various forms of lighting simulating genuine targets, but in fact located in open country.

The Crown lands of the New Forest contained at least five decoys, but the Beaulieu one was unique in that it was a naval installation, simulating coastal activity and presumably designed to attract attention away from the Solent. Because of its specialized nature, the decoy seemed to have involved shining lights onto water and for this purpose part of a nearby valley was flooded in several sections. I assume that only a few inches depth of water was required, so the works were slight, but the remains of four concrete dams can still be found. I imagine that the residents of the adjoining villages of East Boldre and East End were not consulted. Their houses lay within half a mile of the decoy and would have been very vulnerable in the event of a concerted attack. Whether the decoy was successful or indeed, whether it was ever used, I do not know.

Of the remaining Forest decoys, one on the eastern edge seems to have been a fuel-burning or other fire site designed to mimic burning buildings on Southampton Water. A second was, so far as I know, lighting only, while the remaining two were dummy aerodromes

– one in the north of the Forest and one near Burley. At first I could not understand how an “airfield” could be built in hilly country, but of course all that was visible at night was the landing lights, on poles where necessary, so that the terrain was irrelevant.

In respect of the Beaulieu decoy, Graham Wilson asked how it was that the control bunker was located so far (500 metres) from the actual target, but clearly if the deception worked, both control room and generator needed to be at a supposedly safe distance and very solidly protected. In respect of the dummy airfields there is a story (for which I am indebted to Norman Parker and which I do not think relates to the New Forest sites) of the plight of one team running a decoy. After a long period of uneventful operation, there came a night when bombs rained down. There was a desperate telephone call from the operator: “They’re attacking my aerodrome – please help”. The thoroughly unsympathetic reply was: “What are you worrying about ? That’s what you’re there for !”

Islands Thorns Inclosure

Islands Thorns Inclosure lies in the north corner of the Forest and is one of our most beautiful oak woods, planted in 1852, but its fine trees are also at the root of its undoing. Every couple of years or so the Forestry Commission undertakes a programme of felling there and, because the soil is a heavy clay, the grassy rides are cut to ribbons, its old network of hand-dug drainage ditches is blocked, its culverts are smashed and the whole is left like the set for a WW1 film. Such felling and extraction has been undertaken in this year’s sodden conditions, leaving the southern part of the wood in a dreadful mess. No doubt some of the damage will eventually be patched up, although experience shows that little attention is paid to the ruts not immediately affecting the rides. Any such repairs will take years to consolidate and in any case nothing can be done before the hoped-for dry conditions of next summer. There will then be a gap of a few months before the next assault is launched and because of this “rotation” large parts of the track network are unusable for most of the time. A forester (no longer in the New Forest) told me some years ago that the sale of fine oak timber from Islands Thorns had provided a remarkably large proportion of the New Forest’s income for a year of particularly heavy felling. The wood is thus a continuing juicy target for the Commission.

Now Islands Thorns is threatened with a new and wide ranging assault which has the potential to cause even more damage. Most of the streams are to be filled with clay and gravel to within a few inches of the surface as part of a plan to “conserve” the New Forest. There are, of course, a few deep and eroding channels which would benefit from remedial work, but the wholesale disruption now planned has the potential to alter the entire character of the wood. A sort of ecological fanaticism requires supposed absolute purity of form in every watercourse – except in the matter of imported filling material which will leave few streams in the Forest without an entirely alien bed of clay and stones. What the late John Lavender described as the quality of the woodland scene “a more intimate enjoyment (than landscape) experienced within the wood itself “ is irrelevant to the proponents of this faith. Little waterfalls (they call them “nick points”) must be destroyed, deep pools must be filled,

miniature canyons of the type in which many Forest children, me included, have played over the generations must be levelled, picturesque and leaning trees above the streams must be cut down because they would impede the operation of heavy machinery and because the filling process will in any case kill them as their root systems are drowned. All these features which I, and I am sure many others, find so delightful in the Forest, must be sacrificed on the altar of "favourable unit condition". Ecologists see the Forest not as others do, but as units to be ticked off once they have been manipulated to their satisfaction. If units are not made favourable, grants will be withheld, the skies will fall and, perhaps not entirely incidentally, there will be a lot less employment for the army of ecologists promoting such operations.

The election that never was

The Forest electorate was either largely happy with the performance of the Verderers's Court, or else potential candidates decided that their chances against the two sitting members were not particularly good. Anyhow, there was no contest and the verderers' election scheduled for this week was cancelled. Dionis Macnair and Dave Readhead will now serve for a further six years. In the case of Dionis, once she completes this term, she will become the longest serving elected verderer of post-war years and probably the second or third longest since the Court was reconstituted in 1877. That is a remarkable record and it is little wonder that potential challengers were not confident of success.

The Browning Version

Last month, Dr. Julian Lewis kindly sent me copies of his recent correspondence with a Southampton resident, and on starting to read through them I did not immediately recognize the name of the writer – Browning. Then, amongst the papers, I found a copy of the Journal of the Ministry of Agriculture for August 1951 and all became clear. In that journal, David R. Browning, assistant county agricultural officer for Hampshire, published a classic account of the New Forest Pastoral Development Scheme, or in other words, the scheme under which the re-seeded areas of the Forest originated. It is, in fact almost the only readily available record of this massive scheme which altered the face of the Forest for the next two generations and which has outlived all the damage done by military installations of the period. The MP's correspondent was the author's son. My well used copy of the paper and all others I have seen contains no photographs, but the one provided by Mr. Browning junior has a fascinating set of pictures. One shows the area now occupied by the reseeded areas at the Rising Sun, before the cultivations were made. Another shows a thriving corn crop at Wilverley where families now pay football and ponies graze. A group of figures in this photo is unidentifiable, except for the well-known profile of Sir Berkeley Pigott. I imagine the party comprised commoners and verderers. In another picture a huge herd of scrawny cattle is seen grazing the newly cultivated Longslade Bottom.

Reseeded areas have suddenly become topical again in the Forest. When they were first proposed the commoners hated the idea. Then, when they were laid down to grass and opened up, the pendulum swung the other way and the agricultural community could not get enough ploughing-up of the Forest. In the 1960s, the commoners changed their minds again.

As public pressure against the poor condition of many animals increased, the commoners decided that the reseeded areas were attracting stock away from its natural feeding areas and food sources and making it dissatisfied with anything but grass. They were also said to be a primary source of worm infestation in the stock. Today, as heather is finally beginning to reclaim these former heathland sites there are calls for them to be rejuvenated. That probably means the taboo subject of liming and perhaps given the present status of the Forest, such work is a bit unlikely to be approved.

Anthony Pasmore.