

New Forest Notes – December 1993

NEW FOREST EXPLOSIVES

IN 1859, a London businessman acquired the lease of Eyeworth Lodge then one of the most beautiful and remote of the Forest Lodge sites. His purpose however, was not to secure an idyllic rural retreat, but to establish a manufactory for gunpowder and this he proceeded to do. Over the next ten years the business struggled on with various abortive schemes including one for the production of military explosives. Then, in 1869 one of the directors absconded leaving behind losses which crippled the company and forced its sale.

The purchaser was the Schultze Gunpowder Company and in the succeeding decades the company prospered as it pioneered the development of smokeless powder at Eyeworth. By the end of the century it had become by far the largest industrial employer in the area with a staff of over one hundred and a fleet of forty draught horses. The factory had grown to occupy the whole of the Eyeworth site and its sixty buildings contained much of the "latest machinery" and included the, new electric light. Roads, magazines, and a reservoir had been constructed and the old lodge house had been rebuilt. In 1896 at the height of its prosperity, the Schultze Gunpowder Company published a lavishly illustrated trade brochure containing eighteen photographs of the works, their surroundings, the machinery and the staff. After the passage of almost a century, one or two copies of this brochure still survive as treasured possessions in local households. Now the entire brochure, together with a brief history of the early years of gunpowder manufacture at Eyeworth, has been republished in a booklet entitled "New Forest Explosives".

The second half of the booklet contains the history of another much less well known explosives installation in the New Forest -- the Armaments Research Department, Millersford. This secret site occupied 650 acres of remote Forest heathland throughout the last war and was, like Eyeworth, a major employer of local labour. Shortly after the war it was closed down and its site obliterated so that few Forest people today have even heard of its existence.

The Armaments Research Department at Millersford was concerned principally with testing the power of bombs and the penetration abilities of bomb fragments. The explosions were filmed and measured by scientists and by assistants of little more than school age, shielded in half buried laboratories, the closest of which was only one hundred yards from the firing point. One thousand pound bombs which were tested at first caused too much damage in surrounding villages and the maximum size of explosives was then confined to 500lbs. In addition, armour piercing shells and guns were tested at Millersford.

This record of the site, illustrated with fifteen contemporary magazine and other photographs and a large scale plan, has been prepared from the memories of three people who worked there -- memories which remain remarkably vivid after more than fifty years. They include not only the work of the range but an eyewitness account of the crashing of a Lancaster bomber engaged on secret training at Ashley Walk and rescuing of the crew by range staff.

"New Forest Explosives" is published by the New Forest Section of the Hampshire Field Club and can be obtained from the Hon. Secretary at 4, Clarence Road, Lyndhurst at £2.75 including postage.

Sports Clubs' Demands

"Those wicked Verderers are denying the local lads a little piece of extra land for their sports field in the Forest". This seems to be a fairly general view amongst those who do not understand the Forest, whenever the Court receives an application for sports facilities. It is rather a pity because it gives the Verderers no credit for performing the difficult and often unpopular task of preventing piecemeal erosion of the Forest. Over the years the Court has been besieged by people who "only want a quarter of an acre" for this or that worthy purpose. Taken in isolation, of course, the quarter of an acre is quite insignificant when considered against the total area of the Forest, but cumulatively the quarter acres become acres and they in turn become tens or hundreds of acres. Sports clubs, camp sites, car parks, picnic sites all press their demands in isolation so that this is an evil which has to be resisted in the very early stages, often with the appearance of unreasonableness.

Years ago it was common for the Verderers and the Crown to agree to the temporary enclosure of rough Forest sports fields for cricket or football played by local men and boys. These Forest people took the land as they found it, more or less cheerfully cleared up the dung piles, ignored the molehills and the odd sleeping pig, changed and ate their tea in modest one roomed pavilions and threw open their outfields to the Forest animals out of season. Sadly, all this has changed. The clubs now strive for smarter, better maintained and larger grounds. Relative luxury is required in the pavilions. Showers, separate changing facilities for visiting teams and of course a bar are now regarded as essentials for many clubs. The stringent standards of different leagues and the incentives of Sports Council grants push the clubs towards more and more improvements. But, rather than re-locate to a private site, the clubs are constantly pressing the Forestry Commission and the Verderers to allow more and more works at the expense of the commoners grazing and the character of the Forest. Pressure to do away with out of season opening of the outfields to commoners stock is always present. Seldom does a meeting of the Court pass with out some request for upgrading of sports facilities on the forest.

Many commoners and those who value the traditional character of the forest argue that the Verderers have been too soft in dealing with these petitions. Dreadful eyesores like the Ellingham rugby ground at Picket Post have been the result, while the activities of Lyndhurst Golf Club in allegedly exceeding the terms of its licence have been a source of constant complaint by presentment before the Verderers. Recently, however, the Forest has been digging in its heels with the Commoners Defence Association opposing a request for temporary enclosure of greens at Bramshaw Golf Club and an application to do away with the open period for the outfield at Bartley cricket ground. Commoners who have roots in the Forest many of whom played village cricket in the old days, complain that some of today's so called village clubs are made up in large part of people from outside the district. If, they claim, these people want to maintain and play on immaculate turf and then sip whisky in the bar afterwards, they should buy land elsewhere and not try to mould the Forest to their requirements. It is an argument which I find difficult to fault, despite having a great-great-grandfather who played rather indifferent cricket for Lyndhurst.

Slipped Foals and Battered Agisters

One of the saddest sights I have seen recently was a Forest mare standing beside her aborted foal and this seems to have been very far from an isolated case. Agister Raymond Bennett tells me that there have been a number of recorded losses in his area and the problem seems to have nothing to do with the condition of the mares. Indeed the victim I encountered was a young mare in first class order. The commoners have long believed that a primary cause of abortion in ponies is sudden violent changes of weather and temperature, usually when frost follows immediately upon rain with no opportunity for the animals coats to dry in between. The problem in October, however, seems to have been the sudden onset of exceptionally heavy rain alone. It will be interesting to see if there is any significant overall reduction in foaling rates next year as a consequence.

In recent years the commoners have been provided through the Verderers with free wormers to be administered to their ponies during the drifts (round -ups). Often the provision has financed through generous donations from such bodies as the International League for the Protection of Horses. Much of the dosing has been done by the agisters, but after a season in which they have received more than usually brutal treatment from their patients, the Verderers have decreed that in future the pony owners will be expected to dose their own stock although the materials for use on the drifts will still be made available with out charge.