

## New Forest Notes – December 1996

### **Burley Old Inclosure**

BURLEY OLD (the final word of the name is usually dropped) is one of the most remarkable plantations of the New Forest and was once famed as the most beautiful. Its name probably dates from 1810 when the adjacent Burley New Inclosure was formed and it became necessary to distinguish between the two woods. However, it was actually made as an inclosure more than one hundred years earlier in 1700. Almost certainly it was on the site of even earlier woodland. Indeed, some of the fine trees remaining are thought to be well over three hundred years old. Inclosures of this period were collectively known in the New Forest as the "King William Plantations" (after William III) and were renowned throughout the 19th Century as comprising the Forest's finest woods. As the present century advanced, they were cut down one by one so that only small fragments now remain. Burley Old is the largest of these.

The Inclosure must be one of the very few places in the New Forest which is less visited now than it was fifty years ago. The A35 skirts its southern boundary and, before the road was fenced, access was easy. There was plenty of parking space and the wood was clearly visible from the highway. After fencing, the verges grew up with scrub concealing what lay beyond and parking was severely restricted. Burley Old slipped from view and the attention of the picnic-eating public into obscurity, while other honey pots thrived.

In October of this year, however, it was visited by a large party of Forestry Commission invitees on the annual tour of felling and thinning proposals. It was then announced that the Commission intends, effectively, to abandon its commercial management of the wood and to convert it by degrees back to a pure broadleaved area managed similarly to the Ancient Ornamental Woods of the Open Forest. This is a small (less than 1% of the Forest's plantations) but significant step in the right direction. The announcement was also made in a very fitting place. Burley Old more than any other Inclosure is a living record of broken promises by Forest management stretching back for more than one hundred years.

After the New Forest Act of 1877 with its strong landscape-protecting provisions, local people believed that the old woods of the Forest were finally safe from further exploitation. However, within five years, and following shortly on the appointment of the new Deputy Surveyor, Gerald Lascelles, it became known that the Office of Woods intended to reinclose the 120 acres of Burley Old. The plantation had been "thrown open" (fences removed) for longer than could be remembered.

The Forest community, by then thoroughly weary of Office of Woods' intentions in silvicultural matters, feared a felling campaign and raised a "strongly signed" petition against the plan. This was sent at once to the Commissioner of Woods, a figure who will be familiar to anyone who has been watching the BBC series "Rhodes." Sir Henry Loch was, immediately before becoming Governor of Cape Colony, responsible for another troublesome part of the British Empire — the New Forest. The

Commissioner was no doubt mindful of the great battles of the 1870s and backed down at once with an assurance that Burley Old would not be treated as an ordinary plantation and that he merely wished to secure natural regeneration. Fortunately, his letter containing this assurance survived.

In 1926, with the Office of Woods replaced by the Forestry Commission, the timber cutters again moved against Burley Old and felling commenced in earnest. Protests filled the national and local press, Sir Henry Loch's letter was widely quoted and the destruction was stopped. However, stock map planting dates suggest that this was not before ten acres had been lost. As a consequence of the furore, the New Forest Association was revived and a short-lived Advisory Committee was established by the Forestry Commission. All seemed well.

Fifty years later the assurances of 1877, 1882 and 1926 were swept aside in an unprecedented orgy of hardwood clearance and conifer planting which affected the entire Forest, but hit Burley Old particularly hard. In the ten years prior to 1970, the Forestry Commission cut down more than twenty-two acres of ancient oak and beech in this wood, clear felling in flagrant violation of the 1877 Act. Uproar quickly spread beyond the Forest and led to a ministerial ban on further cutting and to the eventual issue of the "Minister's Mandate" which governs present-day silviculture. For Burley Old the reprieve was too late: almost the last surviving King William Plantation was no more than a shadow of its former glory. Now, for the first time, the Forestry Commission is making a small movement towards repairing the damage of modern forest management. It is a welcome move, but how to prevent it from becoming one more broken promise will be a challenge for future generations of Forest lovers.

There is a curious and interesting postscript to the story of Burley Old's tribulations and this was recorded by the Burley historian Felicite Hardcastle. About 1930, two women from the village walking in the Inclosure at dusk, encountered the familiar bearded figure of Auberon Herbert — a champion of Forest protection and scourge of the Office of Woods — for whom Burley Old was a favourite resort. Auberon Herbert had died in 1906 (he is buried in the Forest at Old House) and after looking straight at the women the apparition vanished. Neither was in the least afraid as the eccentric old gentleman was well known and loved in the Forest. I hope he was among us, unseen, last month to hear the Forestry Commission's promises.

### **Forest Society's Loss**

The tragic death last month of Michael Nicholson has deprived the New Forest Association of a valued council member. It was particularly sad that Michael should die in a road accident involving a cow depastured on the Forest, as his family has been deeply involved with livestock over many years on their Minstead holding. Michael served on a number of sub-committees and was exactly the sort of enthusiastic and cheerful member which any amenity society can ill-afford to lose.

By a tragic coincidence, it is almost exactly twenty-nine years since the Association lost its president, Lord Congleton who, like Michael Nicholson, was a Minstead resident, a comparatively young man and lost his life in a road accident.

Michael will be missed by all who served with him and he will be hard to replace.

### **Forestry Commission behind closed doors**

In recent years, Forestry Commission officers have secured a reputation for unfailing courtesy in their dealings with the local population. This is very comfortable for those of us who are in regular debate with them on management issues, but it also means that it is not always easy to know what they are really thinking. The old flashes of illuminating temper in public meetings or the whispered leaks in Queen's House corridors are far less common than they once were. The Commission's paper "Delivering the People's Mandate" has therefore come as something of a breath of fresh air in this over-perfumed atmosphere — despite its irritatingly trendy title. From its tone and remarkably frank observations, I think it is fairly certain that it was never intended for public consumption. However, I am certainly not guilty of revealing state secrets as copies of the paper in discreet brown envelopes have been doing the rounds of the Forest societies for some weeks now.

The "People's Mandate" was written jointly by the Commission's operations and recreation managers with an introductory letter from the Deputy Surveyor. It appears to have been intended as a discussion document for a regional managers' meeting in June of this year and concentrates upon the Commission's image and the manipulation of public opinion in order to achieve management objectives in the New Forest. Much of it is in the form of questions which direct attention to what the authors describe as key issues.

In the first section the writers emphasise the "enormous potential of the New Forest to deliver green benefits including access". This is likely to cause consternation in the minds of most Forest people who believe that the area is already grossly over-used and that there is no potential whatsoever for increasing access. They go on to consider the Commission's legal ownership of the Forest and how that ownership is "devalued relative to other perceived rights". For example, the Commoners are said to "believe they own the Forest through exercising common rights," while the taxpayers and local community are also said to claim a form of ownership. These are good old fashioned 19th Century Office of Woods complaints which flowed as readily from the pen of 'the notorious Commissioner Kenneth Howard (he tried unsuccessfully to destroy the New Forest) as from present-day management. However, such statements today seem no more than an expression of frustration at the constraints on management and the paper goes on to ask how the Commission is to involve and seek the co-operation of others with interests in the Forest in management decisions

In a section headed "Communications" the authors write that there is "intense local interest in the Forest, expressed through the local press. The language of this debate is frequently extreme and can suggest to outsiders that issues are more serious than in reality." NGOs are said to "have used New Forest disputes to discredit the Forestry Commission with opinion formers who do not understand the local politics". The Paper goes on to consider how this is to be overcome by presentation of a corporate image and public relations and then suggests the need for an information manager.

On the subject of consultations, the irritation of the Commission at the influence of local non-statutory bodies becomes evident. "A number of voluntary consultees have developed historic political credibility which they are keen to use to promote their own agendas rather than representing the general views of the man on the street". I am inclined to think that this is in fact an expression of resentment at the efficiency of certain amenity and conservation bodies, in curbing silviculture and recreational excesses over the years. Certainly if the views of the man on the street had prevailed, we might be left with little more than a vast camp site, car park and recreation ground peppered with lavatory blocks, ice-cream sales and motor roads and sports facilities. However, undeterred, the paper goes on to ask "How do we strengthen the position of the statutory consultees. to offset the political strength of the voluntary bodies?".

There are further sections on Biodiversity and "Paying for non-market benefits". The latter is always a touchy subject in the New Forest and the authors ask: "Is it possible to generate revenue from these users (visitors and residents) and would this influence their recognition of how the New Forest delivers the people's mandate? How do we tackle the charging issue, especially in relation to local users who perceive they have automatic 'rights' of access"?

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