

New Forest Notes - December 1999

Centenary Publication of a Forgotten Manuscript

One hundred years ago next week (night of the 10th -11th December), General Methuen's troops sent to relieve Kimberley, including the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, marched out of their Moddar River camp to attack Boer forces holding the Magersfontein Hills. It was a dark and very wet night. The soldiers had had nothing to eat or drink before commencing their advance and conditions were at times so difficult that they could keep in contact only by holding on to knotted ropes. Just before dawn, believing themselves still to be far from the enemy's lines, the leading ranks almost stumbled into the Boer trenches. They were concealed at the foot of the hills, rather than on the summit as had been expected. Terrible carnage ensued and the battle was to develop into one of the three great military disasters of the "Black Week". One of those to be killed in its early stages was the Argyll's colonel, G.L.J.Goff, heir to the great Hale Park Estate which marked the New Forest's northern limits.

Six thousand miles away, in the Colonel's quiet 18th Century mansion looking down on the River Avon, lay a manuscript which he would never now complete. It was a history of the villages of Hale, Woodfalls, and part of Woodgreen - the two thousand five hundred acre property which his family had held since 1836. It had evidently occupied much of the Colonel's time and interest in the intervals of his distinguished military career. The history had developed over the years from a neatly written pocket book to a vast typescript, illustrated with numerous photographs, sketches, plans and paper-cuttings. It was not his first literary endeavour, as he had previously published a well-received history of his regiment.

Gerald Goff's death, the latest in a series of tragedies to strike the family, started the final decline of the estate, sold en bloc to a speculator twenty years later and then immediately re-sold in lots. However, the great house and a substantial amount of land around it remained together. All the estate records appear to have been lost, but somehow or other the Goff manuscript survived, probably because it was preserved in a series of calf-bound volumes - perhaps made by the family as a memorial to the author. The books passed with the Park on each sale and photocopies were eventually deposited by the present owner in the Hampshire Record Office. I remember my absolute astonishment on first being shown the originals by the late Mrs Booth-Jones (former owner of Hale Park) in the Salisbury house now occupied by Edward Heath. It seemed unbelievable that such a record should survive almost completely unknown to local historians. Now, in the centenary week of Colonel Goff's death, much of his uncompleted work is at last to be published.

The Goff volumes range widely over local history, topography, wildlife, the New Forest and field sports. Some of the material (particularly the paper cuttings) has been published elsewhere or today would be regarded as of little interest. On the other hand, the meticulous recording of every cottage, farmhouse and woodland on the estate, the photographs (all probably dating from the 1890s) and his fascinating account of New Forest village life a century ago, are of outstanding local history importance and comprise the material now to be published.

For those who like their history to have a human face, Gerald Goff's writings are particularly attractive. For example, he tells the story of Joshua Dixon, the Hale farmer known as the "man of

three centuries". He was born in the closing years of the 17th Century, lived throughout the 18th (marrying at the age of 80 a girl of twenty two and fathering a son). He outlived his wife and died early in the 19th Century. Then there is an account of the cottage at Hatchet Green which was so small that there was the greatest difficulty in getting the coffin downstairs when the tenant died. He also tells how two vicars of the parish met violent deaths. The village ghost is recorded and also the "water wizard" whose miracles discovering underground springs astonished the local population.

The most important aspect of the history, however, is the detail which it gives of buildings and land, including tenants and their work just before the immense changes which were to sweep the Forest in the present century. The farming practices of the estate are described, together with the contents and date of planting of the woods ranging from the hundred acre plantations to the smallest coppice. There are over forty illustrations, most of them previously unpublished photographs included within the original manuscript and perhaps the work of Gerald Goff himself. There is a small-scale hand drawn copy of the 1789 estate map and useful notes explaining the background to the history and the gaps and peculiarities of the unfinished manuscript. Goff's "History of Hale" is published by the Redlynch Local History Society and can be obtained from the Hon. Secretary, Mrs Pat Millington, "Hawkstone", Lover, Redlynch, Salisbury at the price of £9.70 including postage (cheques payable to the Redlynch Book Fund).

By a strange coincidence, Hale was the second of the great Forest estates to be stricken in the closing days of the last century. In November 1899, the owner of Burley, William Esdaile, also died, leading rather more quickly to the fragmentation of that estate, which was such a crucial part of the Forest community.

New Forest Association Park Meeting

The New Forest Association's special general meeting on the 19th November to consider opposition to the national park has left things just about as confused as ever. Before the meeting, the independent chairman (John Saulet) made it clear that failure of John Broughton's resolution opposing the park should not be taken as implying that the Association approved of the park and would not commit the NFA to supporting the Countryside Agency's plans. In the event, the resolution failed by eighteen votes - 44% opposing the park and 56% presumably covering all other shades of opinion from enthusiastic support to confused uncertainty. Assuming these proportions to represent the membership as a whole, the NFA remains effectively split up the middle. Some of its officers remain determined to see a park administration applied to the Forest and (at the least), just under half the membership is equally determined to oppose that policy.

By the time these notes appear, the New Forest Commoners Defence Association will have held its special general meeting. After that we should have a better idea how easy or difficult will be the Countryside Agency's task of delivering the management of the New Forest to a park committee.

Verderers' Website

At long last the Verderers have succeeded in earmarking the fairly modest sums required for their new website and the nine illustrated pages are now available to the public (address: <http://www.nfverderers.freeserve.co.uk>). The site has been prepared by a local firm with strong links to the Forest area and, to my amateur eye, it looks remarkably good. Its object, it must be said, is to

inform rather than to entertain. For example, it includes the whole of the new Verderers' byelaws, the Court regulations, comprehensive animal accident statistics, the Verderers' policies on a number of matters and guidance on searching the Atlas of Forest Rights. There are details of future court dates, the names and telephone numbers of the agisters and a good leavening of colour photographs - some of them taken specially for the site. At the end, there is a page of useful links to other New Forest sites, the number of which seems to grow by the week.

For the time being the Verderers have decided that the minutes of the Court will not be made available on the website, so those interested in reading them will have to continue to make arrangements to do so with the office. The absence of the usual email link may also be noticed, but has no greater significance than that the Verderers' ageing computer equipment does not allow for it.

Perhaps a minor triumph for the Court is that those "mediaeval Verderers" have their site up and running before the Forestry Commission's New Forest pages which are still in preparation.

Draghunting Review

The Verderers' agreement to give further consideration to the proposals for drag hunting trials in the New Forest (after deciding the matter in October), has inevitably given rise to speculation that the Court is going to give in and reverse its view - despite the fact that the Official Verderer made it clear that this was not necessarily the case. At the November meeting they were given a further very lengthy presentment supporting drag hunting. Contrary (or supporting views) will be heard in January. Despite the welter of political undercurrents which permeate the whole subject, the real and only valid test seems to be that which I outlined in the October notes: will an additional recreational pressure be good or bad for the New Forest ? The supporters of drag hunting clearly believe that it will be good.