

## **NEW FOREST NOTES FEBRUARY 2009**

### **The agister and the enemy bombs**

Last month, while sorting through a collection of New Forest papers, I came across an old quarto duplicate book comprising a copy of agister Gerald Forward's diary dating from 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1941 to 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1943. Since 1893 it has been one of the duties of each New Forest agister to keep a diary recording his daily work in the Forest. These diaries are supposed to be deposited with the Verderers, but the records have been so badly looked-after that only for recent years is there a reasonably complete set. A few pages survive from 1924 and a part of Gerald Forward's diary is also amongst the Verderers' papers. The privately-held copy (now in the Christopher Tower library) was evidently retained by Gerald for his own use.

Agisters, by the nature of their work, tend to be men of action rather than literary achievement and Gerald Forward's diary is far from being very informative. It covers a period when the Verderers were very short of money and only two agisters (Gerald and his brother Hubert) covered the whole Forest, doing the work which is today undertaken by five men and doing it under wartime conditions and without all the equipment available to today's staff.

Leaving aside the rather scanty nature of the diary entries, Gerald does give the only record I have come across of enemy bombing of the northern Forest. I am told that official records were kept by the ROC and fire brigade, but I do not know how accessible these are: certainly I have never seen the former. The woods and heaths are pock-marked with hundreds of craters and virtually all local record of their origin seems to have been lost, except in the case of one or two north of Lyndhurst which I believe are well remembered. Anyhow, to start with at least, enemy bombing seems to have concerned Gerald. It was not his first encounter with the Germans. He had fought in France and the Middle East throughout the First World War.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> February 1941 he went to Stoney Cross "to see the effects of the bombs exploding on the ponies and cattle". This was presumably the detonation of unexploded bombs and no trace would survive today as the aerodrome was later built across the whole area. Those ponies under the Bentleys he says, galloped away, but at Ocknell Firs they took hardly any notice.

One month later, on the night of the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> March, the Germans attacked (or simply dumped surplus bombs on) his area once again. He records that four large bombs fell on the Holly Hatch to Sloden area which he accordingly searched for injured livestock – fortunately finding none. What the explosions did to the nerves of the occupants of Holly Hatch Cottage (probably the most remote dwelling in the Forest and thus presumed the safest) is not recorded. Today, two of the craters are still clearly visible, both graced by the Ordnance Survey with pond symbols. One lies on the edge of Sloden Wood north west of Ragged Boys Hill and the other, with very attractive grass-covered margins, is near Splash Bridge.

On July 9<sup>th</sup> he was attacked again, this time having to search Broomy, Milkham and Sluffers after several enemy bombs were dropped there. The location is not very precise, but craters south of Seven Holms are probably the surviving evidence.

After July 1941, the Germans seem to have left Gerald alone – or else he simply got tired of recording their assaults and turned his attention to more pressing matters like felled yew trees left lying about for the ponies to eat as contractors started to build Stoney Cross Aerodrome. There was also the important business of distributing compensation to commoners deprived of grazing by various military encroachments throughout his area.

In later years Gerald Forward progressed from poacher to gamekeeper in that he became an elected Verderer and I don't think any agister who tried to hoodwink him ever made much progress. Today's staff would seem to have a much easier task, although it must be remembered that in the 1940s a lower standard of animal welfare prevailed in the Forest. The modern agister may have to contend with the fury of members of the public from time to time, but at least he does not have bombs dropped on him.

### **The decline of the Inclosures**

The woodland of the New Forest is of two main types. Firstly there are the ancient uninclosed woods like Mark Ash and Hollands Wood which are no longer subject to exploitation for commercial timber production. Then there are the Inclosures, amounting to about twenty thousand acres of plantation, some of which is modern planting, but much beautiful old oak and beech still survives. Here a certain amount of timber production is still carried out, including the large-scale growing of conifers, although the area of conifer may not be expanded at the expense of hardwoods.

When I first remember the Inclosures, they were very different from today. The drains were cleared and the bridges and culverts were maintained. Firewood was valuable and, in great contrast to today, there was never any waste left lying about. Many of the grass rides were mown annually and the Forest had a generally well-managed appearance, even though it took a while to restore things after the wartime fellings.

Today it is hardly too strong a criticism to say that large parts of the Inclosures have been allowed to degenerate into a rather horrid mess. My work over the last two years has taken me into every corner of those Inclosures which lie between Bolderwood and Burley. They comprise Oakley (the largest Inclosure in the Forest) which dates from 1853, Beech Bed (1829) and Burley Outer Rails (Crown freehold) and Anderwood which were both planted in 1811. Within this block, the tourist paths which fan out from Bolderwood honeypot are maintained in good order, but the remainder of the ride network is in a wretched condition. Choked culverts and side ditches overflow across once smooth grassy rides, reducing them to swamps. The carefully formed network of open drains (all originally hand-dug) receives virtually no maintenance. Deep extraction ruts gouge through the woodland, and the clay rides used for extraction under unsuitable conditions are left rutted and unusable. Forestry litter is everywhere – abandoned notice boards, chain oil and chemical drums, broken hawsers, tractor and lorry tyres, masses of dumped rusting fencing wire and so on. Trees rot

where they fall, blocking drains and obstructing access, while oaks carefully planted in tubes are scored and strangled by those tubes because no-one can be bothered to remove them. It is altogether a state of affairs of which many a private estate owner would be thoroughly ashamed if it prevailed on his property, yet this is a state forest, nominally managed for the benefit of the public. I am sure that individual foresters are not to blame. It is a question of forestry policy (or lack of it) and availability of funds. How different things were a century ago when the woods were properly maintained. There is the oft-quoted story of Deputy Surveyor Gerald Lascelles who, if he hit his head on a branch overhanging a ride while out hunting on a Monday, had a man out to cut off the branch before Wednesday !

I am well aware that the Forestry Commission is short of money (or claims to be), but there is evidently no shortage of funds for building and maintaining tourist paths and facilities or indeed for pouring clay into streams. It is just the basic maintenance of the Forest that is so badly neglected. Some years ago the New Forest Association would regularly challenge such neglect under the firm direction of solicitor Tim Dixon who dealt with woodland matters for the association. The NFA did not always win, but much was achieved. What they are doing today (if anything) I do not know. If the state of things on the ground is anything to go by, perhaps not very much.

This is not a question of asking for the moon. Only a fool would expect to walk in the New Forest without a good pair of Wellington boots. Mud is part of the "New Forest experience", but when rides are so badly churned up and neglected that the swamp over-tops anything short of waders and when there is great danger of injury to any ridden horse, things have really got out of control. Even a single good man with a spade employed full time in the Inclosures could achieve much. Two men and a mini-digger could transform the New Forest's Inclosures in a few years. I fear that one searches the "National Park Plan" in vain for any reference to this problem. How many park members, I wonder, even know what an inclosure is, let alone have tried to wallow through part of its neglected ride network.

### **Disappearance of the Forest's perambulation**

At January's Court, the Verderers were told by their clerk that the Ordnance Survey has ceased to show the perambulation or legal boundary of the New Forest on its 1/25000 maps and instead is marking the national park's boundary. That is by any standards a retrograde step and the Verderers decided to write to the Ordnance Survey explaining how damaging the change is.

The national park boundary really serves only one significant purpose. It tells you whether your planning applications should be made to the park or to one of the surrounding planning authorities like the New Forest District Council. For all other practical purposes it is virtually meaningless. It is a line not dictated either by history, land use or natural features over its greater part. Often it does no more than divide one line of bungalows and fields from another line of bungalows and fields. For the visitors it must be worse than useless and comprise a positive source of confusion, because the lands outside the Forest which it encompasses are not open to the public. There are certainly a few highly technical matters,

largely related to finance, for which the boundary may have some relevance, but planning aside, it has none for the average visitor or bungalow-occupier.

The perambulation is entirely different. It is a line, amended from time to time, created by the Norman forest law, although the earliest surviving perambulations are of 13<sup>th</sup> Century date. That law finally disappeared in 1971, but today's perambulation is still of immense importance to local people. It defines the area within which ponies and cattle may graze and thus the liabilities of property owners and stock keepers to each other. It defines the area within which the Verderers' byelaws are enforceable (on common land) and its line is marked on the ground at every entrance to the Forest by a cattle grid or gate. It is also a line which, by and large, shows the limits of access land (fields and gardens excluded) and that is important to the visitor because to him it is the boundary of the "real" New Forest.

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