

NEW FOREST NOTES FEBRUARY 2014

The Forest's forgotten black gold

It is just over thirty years since Shell's appeal to drill for oil in Denny Inclosure was rejected by a planning inspector, although perhaps even now the lure of unexploited riches under the Forest has not been overlooked by the oil companies. The Forest, on the other hand, has completely forgotten that we once produced another sticky black fuel and from a site less than a mile from the proposed Denny drilling site. On the southern edge of Denny Wood, in a boggy area surrounded by a bank known as the Bishop's Dyke, peat was once dug on quite a large scale and nothing is known about the people who operated the quarry or when it was in use.

That peat had been dug from some of the Forest's bogs was first recognized by the late Colin Tubbs, but his discovery was never followed up so far as I can see. This peat digging (at Bishop's Dyke, Cranes Moor and one or two other sites) had nothing to do with the common right of turbary which was widely exercised until the early 20th century. That right involved the stripping of matted heather roots from the surface of the heaths. The turves thus cut with a heart-shaped spade were then allowed to dry before being carried home by pony and cart to fuel the hearths of hundreds of Forest cottages. At the Bishop's Dyke, by contrast, the operation was more akin to the peat harvesting practised today in, for example, the Orkney Islands. The material was cut from wide trenches running out at right angles into the bog and separated by undisturbed baulks where, presumably, the peat blocks were left to dry out. Sometimes the trenches were amalgamated into irregular shaped pits. At intervals, at least near Denny Wood, wide causeways were retained, no doubt for access purposes, and it is these causeways which have given researchers the first clue as to the date of the diggings. Where they reach dry ground on the edge of the bog, they turn into sunken trackways eroded into the sandy hillside by constant traffic. Directly across these alignments, the great earthwork of the Dyke was constructed, cutting them off from further use and implying that the diggings are of earlier date. Since the dyke was formed in 1284 AD, this particular quarry is presumably older and it is reasonable to assume that others in the Forest may be of the same antiquity. As always in such dating processes, an element of caution is needed. It is just possible that the earthwork may have been repaired or re-constructed at some stage in its life, and that could falsify the dating. Similarly, the relationship of the Dyke to one trackway is uncertain. Only archaeological excavation is likely to remove all doubt.

Peat digging is also evident at nearby Shatterford and to the east of the railway below Lovely Hill. At Cranes Moor (near Burley) the surviving physical traces are much more limited in extent and work seems to have been concentrated in an area on the south side of the bog. No doubt other bogs were dug on a lesser scale, but evidence from field research is so far lacking.

The standard theory about the origin of the Forest's bogs is that many developed after clearance of natural forest in the Bronze Age, although scientific dating methods show that some are much older. Colin Tubbs (in his book "The New Forest") records particularly Cranes Moor where the peat accumulations began about ten or eleven thousand years ago, Church Moor (near Bolderwood) – 13,000 years, and Warwickslade north of the A 35 – 9,000 years. However, recent archaeological

research suggests that many bogs are very much more recent in origin or at least in development to their present extent. We now know of quite a number of places where little systems of fields and occupation sites have been swallowed by the expanding bogs – perhaps as drainage was abandoned or as climate changed. In some cases the destruction brought about by bog expansion is so great that the old field boundaries have been almost completely removed, with only small fragments surviving on adjoining drier ground. Examples occur across the Forest from Pilley to Ashley Walk, suggesting that in late prehistoric times, or even after that, the Forest was much more productive and intensively farmed than at present and that the drainage systems, natural or man-made were much more effective..

Forest maps and an unexplained anomaly

Britain is fortunate in having very high quality mapping which, at least at the smaller scales, can be purchased extremely cheaply. No group of schoolchildren sent out into the Forest is without its 1/50000 Landranger map. This ensures that they get thoroughly confused (because it shows only the major tracks and fences) as I pointed out in these notes ten years ago. More discriminating map users, and those who don't like getting lost, buy the 1/25000 Explorer Ordnance Survey maps, while for the very wealthy there are the 1/10000 and larger scale sheets. One thing that is new in the last decade is the now almost universal use of hand-held GPS machines which, even in the Forest's woodlands are surprisingly accurate. The Explorer maps and the GPS are brought together in an extremely useful and inexpensive piece of software called "Memory Map" which I have also heard described as the poor man's or idiot's GIS system. A special New Forest version is produced, although national park enthusiasts will be annoyed to find that it concentrates on the Forest proper and omits the suburban fringe in places. The great beauty of Memory Map is that GPS points can be downloaded directly to a computer screen. It also allows other files to be linked to icons placed on the map, so that, for example, a wartime air photo or an 18th century map of a particular district can be brought up on the screen with a click of the mouse. Printing limited areas is permitted within the licence.

For the average user, all this makes for a near perfect package, but if a high level of accuracy is required, a real problem has been identified and it is not confined to the software, but seems to be derived from the published Ordnance Survey Explorer maps which it reproduces. Across large parts of the New Forest, GPS points plotted on either the screen or paper map can appear too far north by about 13 metres or 50 feet, (although they are correct in relation to the grid lines) even allowing an element of inaccuracy in some hand-held machines. That may not seem much, but in plotting for example, a probably unexploded bomb found by walkers (as happened recently) it can be crucial. At first this discrepancy was assumed to be caused by some error in the GPS machines being used, but when applied to the Higher Level Stewardship lidar images the points were accurate in respect of both the grid lines and the underlying topography.

The error, if error it is, seems to be at a maximum in the south of the Forest and has been causing a lot of difficulty to various survey operations on Beaulieu Heath. By the time the Forest's northern boundary is reached, the map, lidar and GPS points are all in agreement.

There is no doubt a straightforward explanation for all of this, although probably of too technical a nature for me to understand.

Legacy of the Christmas storms

The ancient woodlands of the Forest are a sad sight after the bad weather at Christmas with, once again, many fine old oaks and beeches torn up at their roots through a combination of high winds and saturated ground conditions. In accordance with the present policies of management, nearly all will be left to rot on the ground, harming the woodland scene and depriving those residents of the Forest of a much prized source of firewood to buy.

In the Inclosures, however, it is the conifers which have suffered at least as badly. I have not seen whole blocks flattened as they were in the great storm of 1990, but many middle-aged Douglas firs have been felled by the roots. Even many of those still standing display curious evidence of the extreme forces to which they have been subjected and of the hidden damage they have sustained.

My observations have been made chiefly in Churchplace Inclosure near Ashurst, where large areas were planted with Douglas fir in 1969 and 1970. The trees are well grown and a significant number has been blown down. As the remaining trees were buffeted by the gales, their wide flat root plates began to move in the saturated ground, pitching backwards and forwards with the wind and producing a sort of liquid clay soup about nine inches below. Eventually this yellow liquid is forced out of vents, perhaps many feet from the stem of the tree, creating great fans of liquid clay which eventually solidifies. Although still standing, I imagine that these trees are doomed. Either they will fall victim to the next storm or they will be cleared away by the Forestry Commission as too damaged to be safe or profitable. Their removal will, in turn, make the remaining robust trees more vulnerable to future gales.

Good news for the memorial yews of Sloden

Twenty one years ago a small grove of yew trees was planted in Sloden Inclosure to commemorate the centenary of a visit to the Inclosure by Tennyson. He was searching for the famous landmark trees which had recently been felled by the Office of Woods. In 2013, yew tree expert Peter Norton was carrying out a survey of the surviving ancient yews in Old Sloden Wood nearby. He recently visited the grove and found it in a sorry state with wire strangling some trees and with uncontrolled Douglas fir regeneration threatening the whole memorial. I am told by local tree enthusiast Chris Read (whose idea the memorial was) that he has been in touch with the Forestry Commission and they have agreed to carry out the necessary maintenance work. It is to be hoped that a proper record will now be made in their planning maps to prevent a recurrence of the problem.

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