

NEW FOREST NOTES JANUARY 2012

A wet walking tour and a classic Forest book

One hundred and fifty years ago this spring, two men set out from Hythe on a walking tour in the New Forest, often covering twenty miles in a day and staying overnight in inns and cottages. As an occupation such tours were no doubt unremarkable, but in this case the participants were John Richard de Capel Wise and the then sixteen year old illustrator Walter Crane. Crane later complained that it rained for most of the tour. The collaboration of the two companions over the following months resulted in what quickly became the most famous book on the Forest of its day – a status which remains unchallenged even into the 21st century. Its title was “The New Forest: its History and Scenery”, with the first of many editions appearing in 1863.

It is not difficult to understand why it should have captured the imagination of the book-buying public as it did. The New Forest was in grave danger at the time, with the old deciduous woods being destroyed and with conifer plantations taking their place and spreading across the heaths. Nationally the movement to protect the country's remaining common land was reaching its peak and all branches of amateur natural science (beloved of J.Wise), were gaining in popularity. Appreciation of landscape was an essential part of a good Victorian education. Wise tapped into all these varied streams of interest. There have been many fine New Forest books written since his day, but perhaps only those of Heywood Sumner have come anywhere near to achieving the same degree of respect and affection.

John Wise seems to have been a remarkable man, but not a great deal is remembered of him locally. A very useful article by C.F.Carr published fifty years ago and Walter Crane's “An Artist's Reminiscences”, 1907, seem to comprise most of what is known. Wise was born in 1831, son of the British Consul-General in Sweden - a landowner in the north of England. After an Oxford education he embarked on a literary and journalistic career, publishing poetry, a two volume novel and, in 1860, “Shakespeare: his Birthplace and its Neighbourhood”. He numbered amongst his friends such prominent literary figures as George Eliot, and after the Shakespeare volume, the New Forest history followed in a couple of years. At various times he planned similar works for the Peak District and Sherwood Forest, but they seem to have come to nothing.

Little seems to be recorded about his later life, although he is said to have worked for a time as a war correspondent during the Franco-Prussian war. No photographs of him are known, although there is a tiny sketch of him made by Walter Crane.

During Wise's visits to the New Forest, which seem to have continued throughout his life, he stayed in a house in Gosport Lane in Lyndhurst called “South View”. I wrote about this in “New Forest Notes” some years ago when the demolition of the house was proposed and by coincidence the building was finally destroyed last month. It seems likely that he was there at the time of his death in 1890. He is buried in the (then) “new” cemetery behind Bolton's Bench overlooking the Forest and his red granite tombstone, if less appropriate to the area than the more traditional limestone, has at least proved resistant to the periodic attacks which vandals delight in launching on the cemetery.

As to Wise's Forest book itself, quotations from it are so widely thrown about these days that they have become quite hackneyed, but it remains a delightful book to read. Innumerable editions followed that first printing of 1863. I described some of these volumes in my earlier Notes, but I have only recently had drawn to my attention a curious fact about the first edition. For this information I am indebted to Richard Reeves of the Christopher Tower Library. It seems that there were two separate printings of this first edition and in order to discover which is the genuine first printing, it is necessary to look at page 51, with its illustration of the entrance to Fawley church. In the very first issue, the door of the church is shown open, while in all subsequent editions it is closed! Why it was considered important to replace an entire illustration is unknown.

When I first bought a copy of Wise's book for the then immense sum of £4, it was quite difficult to find. Now paper-back reprints are available on the internet for as little as £17, although the quality of one I have seen is not outstanding. In any case secondhand copies of the original, often in fine gold-tooled bindings are readily obtainable on the web for between £40 and £80, making an ideal late Christmas present or a fitting recognition of the anniversary of a great book.

The great burial ground

I suppose few holidaymakers in the New Forest think of themselves as visiting a burial ground on a vast scale, but that is actually what they are doing. The enigmatic term "tumulus" appears dotted about all over the Ordnance Survey's leisure maps, accompanied by little star symbols. Sometimes on earlier maps they are recorded with quaint local names, such as the "Cold Pixey's Cave" on Beaulieu Heath, or "Tom Pook's Hill" near Fritham. The local population evidently regarded their origin as being in magic and probably black magic at that. In fact these are graves ("barrows" is the more usual description) dating from the Bronze Age or perhaps 4,000 years ago. Most of them were found and put on maps in the 19th century and were then "excavated" or more accurately vandalised by antiquarians of the period who had no understanding of the damage they were doing. Those barrows that survived have since become the targets for metal detector operators and other modern treasure thieves. Thus the publication of a site's location on the Ordnance maps more or less guarantees its destruction in an area such as the Forest which is open to the public. Such damage is of course, against the law, but it is a law which nobody seems inclined to enforce – least of all the Forestry Commission which owns most of the barrows. In this way almost an entire class of New Forest archaeological sites has been ruined. I say "almost", because from time to time new discoveries are still being made, even after two centuries of curiosity as to the nature and origin of these strange mounds. Usually such finds are of small or insignificant features which have escaped earlier notice. Because the new finds tend to be small sites, they are mostly intact and the burials they contain probably survive undamaged, but just before Christmas a survey team working in the south of the Forest came across an exceptionally large example of an unrecorded barrow. It appears to be quite undamaged, if a little eroded by natural agencies. There is probably no more than a handful of such undamaged barrows surviving in the New Forest and they represent a small but invaluable resource which will be available for proper excavation and recording in years to come.

The classic rounded mound on the skyline which comprises a New Forest barrow is one of a class of only about 250 graves or grave groups dotted about the heaths from Fordingbridge to Blackfield, but research over the last two or three years suggests that barrows of this type are very much in a minority when it comes to Forest graves. Much smaller features which have been variously described as “fairy rings” or “pit and mound sites” are coming to light right across the district. Already the records show more than 700 of these prehistoric “graves”, although excavation has so far failed to prove beyond doubt that burial was their original purpose. The acid soil of the New Forest destroys bone, so that burials without grave goods of any sort appear on excavation as empty pits. In 19th century excavations, charcoal was found in some of these graves, but while research at three sites near Fritham in recent years has established the great age of the features, all the graves examined proved empty.

The same team that discovered the new barrow has made other important discoveries in the vicinity of Brockenhurst, including two sites which are likely to be Mediaeval or later rabbit warrens (called “pillow mounds”) and a prehistoric water heating site with a large mound of waste burnt flint which is apparently completely undamaged. All of this goes to prove how invaluable a historical resource the New Forest remains, despite the ravages of forestry, engineering works and the threats from public access.

Stallions in 2012

This is the time of year when the Verderers decide on the number of stallions which will be permitted on the Forest during the coming spring. For some years the numbers have been severely restricted in the hope of controlling breeding rates and thus reducing the glut of near unsaleable foals being offered at Beaulieu Road in the autumn. The limitations have not proved so effective as many might have hoped. Verderers' figures show that there were 770 foals born on the Forest in 2011 and all but about 100 of these were sired on the common land the previous year. In 2011, there were 27 stallions turned out and we shall, of course, not know how many foals they produced until next summer. Still, because foal prices were so poor at the Beaulieu Road sales last autumn, the Commoners Defence Association has produced a helpful paper analysing the options for managing stallions this spring. The association recommends that the stallion numbers should be further cut to 10 and that they should be allowed out for one month only. Similar numbers are, they say, likely to be advisable for 2013 and 2014 as well. Measures should be taken to rotate breeding areas and protect bloodlines, with the whole scheme being rather complicated, technical and inevitably controversial.

The Verderers will now take advice from a specialist committee before deciding upon the stallion rules for 2012.

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