

NEW FOREST NOTES JANUARY 2014

I had not expected to be writing New Forest Notes again, but the circumstances which forced me to give up early last year have changed and I now have time once again to get about the Forest and to see what is going on. That of itself would certainly not have induced me to try again, but so many kind people have said how much they miss reading about the Forest that I thought it would be worth making another attempt, if on a less regular basis than once a month and from a very different perspective. For forty years I was at the heart of the New Forest “establishment” through membership of the Verderers’ Court and (for a lesser time) on the committees of two of the most influential agricultural and preservation bodies. Now all that is gone and I have no part in, or influence upon, the way in which management decisions are taken. I, like the majority of Forest residents, am now a passive consumer of what the authorities hand down to us, and a rather frustrating business that can sometimes be. So much is done which seems inexplicable or even downright irrational. I know from the past that behind most management decisions there actually is some sort of reasoning, even if it is not very sound and is invariably influenced too much by local politics rather than the ultimate good of the Forest. Still, these are now problems for other people and the “new” Notes will concentrate more upon the topography of the Forest itself and upon its history than on whether one section or another of the community is trying to exploit the place for its own narrow or greedy purposes.

Undoing seventy years of good work at Hampton Ridge

One of the things which used to surprise me, even when I had access to the supposed reasoning behind decisions, was the extraordinary lack of interest in the landscape of the Forest shown by all branches of management. The ecologists see the Forest only as a scientific resource to be enhanced at the expense of landscape whenever necessary, for the commoners it is a source of feed for livestock and the national park uses it as a giant playground to be developed for outsiders. For the Forestry Commission it is a place to make money or at least to try to limit the amount which is spent. Obviously these are sweeping generalizations and ignore occasional good work, but they are an accurate reflection of what drives the various branches of management.

Nobody in authority cares enough or thinks enough about what the Forest looks like. There has been an outstanding example of this in the last few months at Hampton Ridge near Fordingbridge. There, close to Pitts Wood, a wartime experiment was carried out to test the durability of reinforced concrete in the building of public air raid shelters. A huge structure, then known as the Ministry of Home Security Target was built and subjected to all the aerial bombs and ground-detonated explosives the testers could throw at it. The structure subsequently acquired the name “Submarine Pens” because of its likeness to those buildings on the French coast, but we now know through the invaluable research of Henry Cole that the origin of this ugly block was much more mundane. Anyhow, the bombardment proved largely ineffective and the excrescence continued to dominate the skyline long after hostilities ceased. Eventually minds turned to clearing up the appalling

mess left right across the Forest by the military. Water towers, roads, gun sites, targets and finally even aerodromes were restored to a greater or lesser extent, but the Home Security Target was a more serious problem because of its immense size and strength. Enlightened thinkers of the time decided upon the only practicable course – they buried it. The surface of the heath for more than 50 metres around the target was bulldozed up into a large mound, completely concealing the concrete, but even then a hard angular profile remained and at this point nature took a hand. Over the decades the natural Forest vegetation colonized the mound so that it melted back into the landscape. Gorse blurred its outline and small trees – holly, roan, whitethorn etc. – established themselves. By last year I doubt if the average person unfamiliar with the Forest had any idea that the mound was other than natural. In lecturing on the Forest's landscape I used to illustrate one of the great success stories of modern management with slides of the target mound and its transformation over the years. The work was a great credit to the forethought of our predecessors.

Now, in a remarkable piece of vandalism, every last vestige of ameliorating vegetation has been stripped from the mound leaving it as bare and stark as it was in the early 1950s. It will take years to repair the damage, even if somebody in the meantime does not see fit to drench the site in herbicide to prevent the vegetation from re-establishing itself. Perhaps the intention is ultimately to tear down the mound itself, exposing the underlying concrete as a "tourist attraction"!

The supposed justification for this stupidity is, I suppose, the need to "protect" ancient monuments from the effects of roots. That may sometimes be a valid objective in the case of, for example, a Bronze Age burial mound containing delicate layers of sand and gravel which can be damaged by such penetration, but it is preposterous nonsense in this case. This massive pile of concrete is likely to out-live the human race and is already more than adequately documented.

Cycle routes

I have followed with interest the debates on cycling and the constant attempts to intensify its grip on both the Forest's roads and the recreational cycle routes. In the case of the latter there can be not the slightest doubt that the use of these routes for organized events, including time trials, is a flagrant abuse of the permission originally given by the Verderers' Court. I distinctly remember that when the routes were first proposed, the Deputy Surveyor of the time (I forget which one) told the Court that the purpose of the routes was simply to provide for quiet family parties. The Forest was, he said, far too tame a landscape to appeal to fast competitive cyclists and mountain bikers. It was in the light of these comments that the permission was granted – most inadvisably as events have since shown. It is a classic example of giving an inch and finding that a mile has been taken.

The man who made duck ponds

Few men of the 20th century commanded the affection of the New Forest community more than the late Arthur Cadman, Deputy Surveyor of the Forest from 1959 to 1968. It was not so much

the management policies he pursued that endeared him to the local community (even then they were dictated by government), but his easy-going manner, his love of nature and the impression he gave of being pro-Forest rather than being obsessed with money and the need to bring in more visitors. He left a well-written Forest book "Dusk Dawn and Deer", although this is primarily concerned with shooting.

A more solid record of his time here survives in the form of duck ponds which the Deputy Surveyor built to benefit his beloved wildfowl and not just one or two ponds, but a scattering of them all across the Forest. They range from shallow scrapes in the heads of some valleys which have now all but disappeared, to quite major engineering works like the dam east of Kings Garden near Linwood. It is surprising how quickly all memory of their origins has faded, even to the extent that some have found their way into lists of supposed "ancient sites" in the last few years. I have been trying to compile a definitive list of all the Cadnam Duck Ponds, but additional ones keep coming to light. At the last count I had seventeen spanning the Forest from Two Bridges Bottom and the Bishop's Dyke near Beaulieu to Deadman Bottom and Redshoot Plain in the north. A feature of many ponds in the series is that one or more islands was constructed on which the birds received a measure of protection from foxes and dogs. The Bishop's Dyke pond is one of these with three separate islands. Sometimes the ponds were made in pairs, as at Scrape Bottom near Burley. Almost all were on the Open Forest, although that in Alderhill Inclosure seems to have been an exception. In a few cases the attribution to Cadman is a little uncertain, but no contrary evidence has emerged so far.

Strangely, the so-called "Cadman's Pond" at Anses Wood was probably not one of those built by Cadman himself. In his time it was a working gravel pit and the present pond was formed sometime after 1967 as a tourist honey pot - and very popular it has proved to be.

Progress for the Friends of Latchmore

The group of local people set up to protect Latchmore Brook from a major engineering (conservation) project has recently achieved a noteworthy victory. The subject has been becoming increasingly complex, but in simple terms the Friends had asked for a detailed assessment of the proposed work to determine its potential consequences for the stream and its surroundings. Such an assessment would then be available to the planning authority when an application is made for the works. The authorities had resisted this consistently over many months, but have now agreed that it should be provided, but there remains much dispute about the mechanism for doing so. I must say that I find it rather difficult to understand how the Forestry Commission is supposed to produce an impartial report on its own proposals, even given that it employs outside consultants, but that seems to be the process required by law.

This is not the first such victory in relation to the stream. For a long time the Forestry Commission denied the necessity for a planning application and eventually that too was established

by the Latchmore group. Planning applications and environmental assessments for development on this scale are expensive and time consuming, but that is only part of the reason why they have been so vigorously resisted. It is perfectly clear that if they are necessary at Latchmore, they will also be necessary for every other major development project on the common lands so that what the Friends of Latchmore have achieved has implications for all other parts of the Forest as well.

Anthony Pasmore