

NEW FOREST NOTES JANUARY 2015

The Verderers and the Great War – 1915

In April last year I started to tell the story of the New Forest and the Verderers during the Great War. As we enter 2015, it is time to look at the second year of that conflict.

After the busy autumn months of 1914 there was something of a lull in the Forest before the demands of war really started to build up. The pannage season brought an unexpected conflict in that the religious sensibilities of the wounded Indian troops at Brockenhurst were disturbed by the arrival of the commoners' pigs. The fencing at the Balmer Lawn hospital had proved inadequate. A man was accordingly employed on the Verderers' behalf to keep the pigs and the soldiers apart and contented. Next, as the winter wore on and the weather deteriorated, hundreds of bundles of heather were cut around Fernycroft and Denny and were transported to Winchester for use in the saturated military camps there.

Within the court itself there was, for the first time, frequent use of Section 21 of the New Forest Act 1877. This provides that when a Verderer fails to attend court for six months in succession he automatically forfeits his seat unless the Verderers resolve that it is "expedient that such Verderer should not vacate his office". As several members of the court were now on military service or employed on other government business, such resolutions became almost a matter of course for the duration of the War. Economics also started to press on the Court as rising prices prompted regular applications from the agisters for increased salaries. These applications were usually met by the payment of a "war bonus" from the Court's increasingly depleted funds.

Towards the end of 1914, the Court's attention was focussed more on domestic matters than those across the Channel in Belgium and France. Grave concern was being expressed about the deterioration of the grazing on the Open Forest due to the neglect of drainage. The Clerk was in communication with the Board of Agriculture on the subject. High on the list of problems was the state of Latchmore Brook. An inspection was carried out here in December and the valley was found to be "very badly waterlogged, the open cutting there having become completely choked up in many places and for some distance". Thickets had overgrown the watercourse, beds of rushes had "accumulated and were rapidly increasing". The pasture there "is being much damaged and is rapidly depreciating". The meeting concluded "that unless the cutting is cleared out and freed, the whole of the pasture throughout the entire bottom will become absolutely impoverished and leave no feeding ground at all."

The remarkable contrast of these century-old concerns about drainage with the policies of the present day will be obvious, as hugely expensive plans to impede the brook's drainage once more are under consideration. As it turned out, the disastrous state of Latchmore had to await the end of the War before the funds for its correction were made available.

As 1915 advanced, troop movements in the Forest once more began to increase with one unit after another encamped around Lyndhurst in the area which had earlier been occupied by the Seventh Division. Problems with these encampments were not so much from the troops themselves,

but from the tins, bottles, open trenches and latrine pits that were left behind on their departure. Indian troops encamped there in November 1914 left the site tidy, but 400 men of the Wessex Ammunition Supply Column occupied an area behind the (old) police station in July 1915 and left it in a very bad state.

By May of 1915, huge numbers of troops were again camping and manoeuvring in the Forest. On the 30th of that month, 20,000 men were accommodated at Boltons Bench. The agisters were instructed to assist with training and especially by marking dangerous bogs with red flags. At Brockenhurst a new camp was approved at Five Thorns Hill, presumably in connection with the intensified use of the rifle range there.

A direct and unexpected consequence of the War was the revival of a more or less moribund charcoal-making industry in the New Forest. In Victorian times, charcoal from the Forest had been supplied to the great country houses of the area, while in earlier centuries it had been exported to the West Country for use in metal smelting. By the outbreak of war, pit burning in the traditional way had almost died out, but one or two families, such as that of Maurice Cull of Minstead still remembered the secrets of the craft. Cull had purchased "rinded" cord wood (timber from which the bark had been stripped for tanning) from the Warrens Estate at Bramshaw and was thus well known to the owner, Briscoe Eyre, (great-great grandfather of the recently retired Official Verderer). Mr Eyre knew of the growing shortage of charcoal and set the Cull family to work once more. At the July Court of 1915, he addressed his colleagues on the subject, with particular reference to timber being cut at Ashurst, Minstead and Knightwood (later at Ramnor Wood also) for the production of charcoal to be sent to the troops in France. This was a clear infringement of the 1877 Act provisions requiring the protection of the Ancient Ornamental Woods. Under normal circumstances it would have received a very sharp response indeed from the Verderers, but then it seems to have been tolerated for the duration of the war at least. It is commonly said that New Forest charcoal was required for making gas masks, but there is actually no recorded evidence of such use. Foreign charcoal was used for the purpose. The production here was more probably for water filtration or fuel.

In December of 1915 came the first intimation of two projects which were to cause the Forest immense problems throughout the remainder of the war and beyond. Firstly, the military authorities sought land for "the purposes of the formation of a grenade school and for troops being trained in bomb-throwing". This later became the so-called "Bombing-school" to the north east of Boltons Bench, with the area and intensity of use growing steadily over the coming years. Then, on 8th December, the War Office expressed its intention of taking over the Beaulieu Heath flying school. It assured the Verderers that "it is not anticipated that any material damage to the surface (of the Forest) will be done." A more blatant deception can hardly be imagined. Even well into the 1920s, the Court was still fighting for the proper restoration of the site, where buildings and engineering works had spread over a vast area.

Finally, at the very end of 1915 it looked as though hostilities had claimed a leading member of the Court in the person of Lord Montagu. On 30th December, the liner "Persia" on which he was travelling and which was incidentally carrying a great deal of Indian gold, was torpedoed and sunk in

the Mediterranean, one of two civilian vessels destroyed by the same submarine within hours. Fortunately Lord Montagu was among the 176 survivors of a disaster that claimed 343 lives. The Court must have faced 1916 with growing trepidation.

Closure of the Christopher Tower Library

The New Year is beginning on a very sad note for the Forest. The Christopher Tower Reference Library in the New Forest Centre at Lyndhurst is closing down with its librarian, Richard Reeves and his colleague Jude James being made redundant. The community is thus being deprived of an invaluable research facility, but equally important, it will lose ready access to two of the leading authorities on the Forest and its history. A library alone is just a collection of books, however valuable and rare they may be, but a library staffed by experts is irreplaceable. The fact that there may, in due course, be a partial re-opening (by appointment only), with the library under the control of “trained volunteers”, is hardly reassuring. We live in a district awash with public money in the form of subsidies, grants, lottery funding, and tourism promotion funds, yet the one facility of the New Forest Centre designed to benefit local people more than visitors is to be axed. The Centre (apart from being a good looking building) is fairly mediocre when compared with, for example, the Dartmoor visitor centre in Princetown. Its displays seem largely aimed at an audience of eight year old children and as often as not I have found it completely empty when passing through on my way to the library. The adjoining gift shop and tourist information room, on the other hand, are usually heaving with people. The one really outstanding feature of the Centre was its library. Numerous collections of rare books and papers have been donated over the years in the belief that it would be a secure repository for such items and on the basis that they would be available to the public (both local and visitors) on a reasonable basis – until now with opening four days a week and under expert supervision. Among these collections are those of the late David Stagg and Felicite Hardcastle, both renowned local historians. I imagine they would have been quite horrified at what is being done. No doubt the “trained volunteers”, if and when found, will do their best, but they will never replace the experience and skill of the professional staff being lost. Whether they can ensure adequate security and proper handling for the valuable materials they will control is another and very worrying question. It would be all too easy for small and costly items to “disappear” or for fragile records to be mishandled.

Of course the centre’s trustees cannot produce money out of the air and they may not be personally responsible for this disaster. It is just intensely irritating that the public money being spent on just one of numerous stream-filling projects, or one of the national park’s schemes (such as the study of WW2 relics), would be sufficient to keep the library running smoothly for years. Just half the money being spent on promoting cycling this year alone would set up the library for all time. There does sometimes seem to be a very distorted set of values operating in the running of the New Forest.

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