

NEW FOREST NOTES JANUARY 2016

The Verderers and the Great War – 1916

This was the year when the pressure on the Verderers to grant land for war purposes really began to increase, although the demands were still small compared to those made twenty five years later in World War II. The two big problems, which had first shown themselves towards the end of 1915 were the ever-expanding works on the old Beaulieu aviation school site and the development of the bomb-throwing school just east of Lyndhurst. In the January court, a worried commoner sought assurances from the Verderers that the mushrooming buildings on the aerodrome would not be permanent. He received a perhaps too confident reply from the Official Verderer that they would not. As the year advanced and each meeting of the court brought new demands to further develop the site, the Verderers themselves became increasingly concerned about the War Office's intentions. By May the clerk had "very grave doubts" as to the worth of the assurances the military authorities had given. As early as January the local agister had reported that five aeroplanes had arrived, while an inspection by the Official Verderer showed "several horses and carts hauling gravel and filling up ruts and levelling the ground." It was reported that a new gravel pit to serve the works had been opened up on the Forest just west of Hatchet Pond. A detailed schedule of the new buildings was presented to the Court in March, but unfortunately the accompanying map has not survived.

Within months of the construction starting at Beaulieu, local commoners were becoming seriously concerned as their stock became more and more restricted. One, with a small Forest-run dairy herd and a local milk round, found his business badly affected. Notices were being erected around the airfield warning the public to keep out and the question of fencing the area was under consideration. Claims for loss of grazing and consequent increased feed costs began to come in, giving a foretaste of the large scale compensation arrangements which were necessary in WW II. Equally worrying was the increasing number of accidents involving commoners' animals on the roads. A pony belonging to Lady Arthur Cecil was killed by a Royal Flying Corps officer from Beaulieu and it was suspected that other military personnel were partly responsible for the growing number of killings.

The development of the bombing school is more difficult to follow, but it seems that more and more land was being taken, effectively occupying most of the area between Boltons Bench, Matley Wood and Longwater. Initially 200 troops were billeted in Lyndhurst, no doubt giving a welcome boost to the local economy. By May, however, they were mostly under canvas (eighty tents) and as time went on an increasing number of wooden huts began to appear on the range. The local agister was warned by a soldier that "several bombs which had not exploded were lying around".

In early summer came a threat to the Verderers' very small field staff as agister Albert Evemy was called up for military service. An appeal was launched and the clerk successfully represented Evemy before the relevant tribunal. For the moment the staff was safe.

Apart from the two major wartime encroachments at Beaulieu and Lyndhurst, lesser works began to impinge on the Forest during 1916. At Hawkhill a tramline was laid to the main road to assist in extracting timber in all weathers. By the spring, large quantities of coal (presumably for

traction engines) and timber were stacked on the Open Forest there. Near Lyndhurst Road Station the activities of the London Wood Wool Company (engaged on munitions work) were damaging important grazing areas, while at Fritham wooden huts were being built to accommodate Irish woodcutters in Copse of Linwood. No doubt the indigenous workforce had been called to military service. Near Holmhill "metals" were being laid to extract timber from Inclosures to the sawmill at Millyford. This presumably refers to the light railway whose remains (including a shallow cutting) may still be seen. At Bolderwood a temporary military camp was established, while more generally on the Open Forest heather tops were being gathered for use in packing munitions. To all these emergency works the Court seems to have agreed without complaint.

In the autumn came the dreadful news that Lord Lucas, one of the Forest's leading figures, was missing in action, flying over France. This time there was to be no good news such as had followed Lord Montagu's temporary disappearance in the destruction of the liner "Persia" in 1915. No doubt the loss of Lord Lucas was a tragedy reflected in hundreds of households across the Forest, the only record of which is our village war memorials.

Finally, the Court's attempts to secure special protection for the New Forest in the Defence of the Realm Bill, then before parliament, fell on deaf ears. The Verderers could only hope that the general savings for common land would prove sufficient.

Reckless flying

From the Court's troubles with military flying a century ago, I turn to one Verderer's concerns with the same problem in 2015. I have often written in these notes about the unfortunate people and animals who suffer from stupid behaviour by some Forest users, from speeding motorists to fly-tippers and those who hold rave parties, but I hardly expected to be joining this victim's club myself.

On one of the few calm sunny mornings of December (the 4th at about 9.15 am) my horse was drinking quietly from a pool on Hale Purlieu. There was a sudden roar and a huge military transport plane rose over the slight slope immediately in front of us travelling closer to the ground than I have ever seen a fixed-wing aeroplane in the New Forest. I am told that accurate estimation of a plane's height is very difficult, but I am used to working with 30 and 50 metre tapes and this monster must have been within reach of the latter. For half a second the horse seemed to freeze and then as the plane passed over us he exploded in terror and I don't remember much more until the ambulance men were trying to sort me out. I doubt if even a London police horse would have stood its ground against such an attack.

I assume that the aeroplane was practising crossing the ridge between the Test valley and the Avon Valley at its narrowest point, keeping as close to the ground as possible. It was no surprise that a formal complaint produced the usual stock responses, following "an investigation". The aeroplane was in a low flying zone and the commander assured the investigator that at no time was his machine below the specified minimum height of 250feet. One can hardly imagine he would have said otherwise, any more than a motorist observed driving recklessly through a housing estate is likely to admit that he was doing more than 30mph. There was also the standard suggestion that when

riding in the Forest I ought to wear high visibility clothing. In the three seconds available, and taking into account the landform, if I had been dressed as Father Christmas with a flashing light on my hat it would have made no difference. To the south was the pylon line and to the north trees on rising ground, into either of which the plane could have crashed if any significant deviation had been attempted, but I was in any case hidden by the slope of the ground. It is, of course, rather different with helicopters – and they are bad enough. Their relatively low speed and great engine noise gives at least a minimal warning for a rider to prepare for the onslaught. The argument of the military people seems to be that they can do more or less as they please in the north of the Forest, irrespective of the consequences.

I have always understood the definition of negligence to be an act or omission causing damage to a person who ought to have been in the perpetrator's contemplation when engaged in the action which is called in question. On this basis the pilot (or those ordering him to carry out such a reckless piece of flying) was grossly negligent. The New Forest is filled with horses and ponies, ridden or otherwise. The military authorities know this perfectly well. It is only a matter of time before they cause a death or really serious injury, as has happened in other parts of the country. Low flying regulations may give permission for this sort of use, but it must be qualified by ordinary common sense. I may be permitted to drive at 30 mph in a residential area, but to do so on approaching a school as infants are coming out would be an inexcusable action. It is just the same for low flying aircraft. The risk is also completely avoidable. Within a few minutes flying time to the north is Salisbury Plain with its thousands of acres of military training areas from which the public is excluded and where ultra-low flying could be undertaken. The argument that they must learn to operate over different terrains does not hold water here. The geomorphology of the area east of Warminster is not at all dissimilar to the New Forest, with low rounded hills and intervening valleys. Only the ground vegetation is different (grass not heather). These blocks of country more than 13km across have all public access excluded. This is more than double the width of the northern part of the Forest. I do not for one moment dispute that the forces need to train, but they must do it sensibly and without this arrogant disregard for people responsibly using the New Forest. If "national park status" for the New Forest means anything, it ought at least to protect those exercising a legal right to ride on the common lands.

If this story has a silver lining, it is the response of local people who saw the plane and who sorted out consequences, calling the ambulance, catching my fleeing horse and generally assisting over the subsequent days. Some I have still to identify, but I am immensely grateful to all of them.

Correction

Last month my typing and calculations based on it were equally faulty in the matter of the length of service on the Verderers' Court of Briscoe Eyre. He died in at the beginning of 1922, which I wrongly typed as 1925. Dionis Macnair will need to be re-elected in 2018 in order to achieve the record of longest serving Verderer ever.

Anthony Pasmore