

## **NEW FOREST NOTES JANUARY 2017**

### **The Verderers and the Great War – 1917**

Unlike the previous year, the early part of 1917 was fairly quiet in the New Forest. Before each court, the Verderers' clerk did his rounds of the principal military installations on the Forest and his surviving reports are in a standard form with the wording only varying when some new demand for land was made. Such a demand was already being considered as the year started. The Lyndhurst bomb-throwing school was to be expanded eastwards by the taking of land at Matley for a trench mortar school. This troublesome encroachment continued to damage the Forest and to expand throughout the remainder of the war. It may have been an essential facility for the troops, but its operators showed little regard for the welfare of its pastoral neighbours. As early as March the school had been further expanded and live shells were said to be embedded in the ground. Already the original fences had ceased to be stock proof.

Until this point of the war, demands for Forest land had been confined to military and munitions purposes, but the Deputy Surveyor now produced to the Verderers a report listing twenty sites which had been identified for possible cultivation to help meet wartime food shortages. However, he thought that the enclosures were unlikely to be made because the cost of fencing would result in their being uneconomic. Of the twenty areas, only three were thought to be of suitable size and quality. These were Brook Common (which would have involved the loss of four of the eighteen holes of the golf course and the obliteration of the cricket ground), Butts Lawn at Brockenhurst and Whitefield Moor on both sides of the road. Apart from these areas, it had been suggested that small areas near dwellings might be cultivated if the potential occupiers bore the costs of fencing. The authors of the report, however, considered that there was no demand for such land "from the poorer classes as nearly all had allotments and many were already with the colours". If Forest cultivations were to go ahead, motor ploughs should be sent down with men to work them. Fencing might be done by Crown labour if possible, but otherwise by German prisoner aliens. Manure would have to be brought from the remount camps at Romsey and Swaythling.

Military motor traffic was once again causing trouble by March, with an army lorry destroying the gate at Pilley Green. The officer in charge of the Canadian Corps of Woodcutters had undertaken to replace it, but months later the work had not been done.

Next there came a proposal from the Crown for new drainage work, the costs to be shared with the Verderers. The labour would be provided by conscientious objectors, but this plan was quickly deferred until after the war. The Court was short of money and in any case the Verderers "did not in any way favour the idea of employing conscientious objectors in the work".

The work of the military hospitals at Brockenhurst has attracted much attention in recent times, but the activities of the hospital at Brockenhurst Park were unwelcome to the Verderers. Here the authorities had taken to dumping ash in an important stock drinking pond near Tile Barn Farm and the Court had to require its removal and a general tidying-up of the area.

In the late spring the Board of Agriculture suggested to the Verderers that, because of the high wartime cost of pig food, the restrictions and period of the autumn pannage season might be relaxed. The Court quickly rejected this idea.

The summer brought the construction of new sidings and roads on the Forest at Lyndhurst Road Station, to ease the congestion of timber loading and carrying traffic there. Thereafter, as was usual at the period, the Verderers did not meet again until November.

The first war-related request of the autumn was an unusual one from the Royal Naval Cordite Factory at Holton Heath. It was for the collection of acorns for use in its manufacturing processes. The Verderers judged it to be a poor mast year and it was thought that the pigs would consume all the available acorns on the Open Forest. The Deputy Surveyor was arranging for collection in the Inclosures, where (theoretically), the pigs had no business to be.

As the year drew to a close, the pressure on the Forest began to intensify again and a special meeting was held to consider the latest War Office demands for land. Large areas had been marked off by flags and posts from Matley to Willowford Green and from thence to Beaulieu Road Station, Denny Wood and the Bishop's Ditch. The intention was to use this area for artillery practice and rifle firing from Matley Wood. Trenches had been dug and left open at King's Passage. The War Office was also seeking an additional two acres at Beaulieu Aerodrome where the encroachment now occupied about 215 acres. The combined bombing and mortar schools had absorbed 230 acres. There was also a new proposal for a "landing station for airmen" at Bramshaw Telegraph, but this demand at least seems not to have been pursued.

One final and very small military land-take of 1917 was of an entirely new type and has actually proved one of the most durable relics of Great War activity in the Forest. A site was sought for the construction of a concrete base to support height-finding equipment to assist the anti-aircraft defences of Southampton. It was to be located west of Applemore Hill and this substantial structure may still be seen, although now concealed in the conifer plantation of Marchwood Inclosure.

### **The curious case of the non-operating Special Fires site**

It is not surprising that with the centenary of the First World War, that conflict has been uppermost in many people's minds in the last few years, but in looking up something relating to that period on the national park's website, I came across a curious reference to the bombing decoys which were built in the Forest little more than twenty years later. The purpose of these decoys was to confuse enemy bombers and induce them to attack areas well away from the intended targets. In some instances this was done with electric lighting, as in the case of fake runway lights of airfields. In others (as at East End), lights were shone onto water to create the impression of port facilities, but the site that attracted my attention in the park's records was a "special fires" or "starfish" at Hilltop near Beaulieu.

Special fires sites were intended to give the impression of burning urban areas, inducing the attacking pilots to drop their bombs into the inferno below rather than on the genuine target. The timing of their firing and methods of operation were governed by carefully devised rules to make the deception convincing. In respect of the Hilltop site the park concludes that the lack of bomb craters in the area questions how successful the decoy was. This seems directly at variance with Walter Elsworth's fascinating little book on Beaulieu in World War II, in which he says that to the best of his knowledge the site was never used in earnest. As an eyewitness to the construction and subsequent history of this installation his record must carry considerable weight. The absence of bomb craters is hardly surprising.

He tells us that the RAF personnel manning the site were billeted in local houses and that two of them married local girls and settled in the area. Many years after the war, others still kept in touch with the families with whom they were billeted. I suppose there must have been plenty of worse wartime duties than overseeing a non-operating bombing decoy for the period of hostilities. It would be interesting to know if there is still anyone in Beaulieu who could confirm Mr. Elsworth's record.

It was just as well for the Forest that the decoy was not extensively used as the processes involved could have resulted in appalling contamination. Such sites tended to be fuelled with waste oil, coal, timber, diesel and creosote, burnt in troughs and baskets. Water was occasionally added to the boiling oil to simulate explosions. If you visit Hilltop today, the tanks, pipes and baskets are all gone. Only earthwork enclosures remain and within them are bare patches of contaminated soil and traces of burning, but all of very limited extent. I suppose that test firings must have been undertaken in daylight from time to time.

The thing I find most perplexing about the Forest's bombing decoys is their proximity to houses. For example, the dummy aerodrome at Millersford was within six hundred yards of the large houses around Densome Corner at Woodgreen. Until quite recent times the remains of the airfield lighting was still scattered about in the valley below. At Longdown another special fires site was eight hundred yards from houses and at East End the distance was barely five hundred yards from Norley Farmhouse. Only the Ridley Plain "aerodrome" was really remote from habitation. Whether any of these sites was actually used, I do not know.

At Hilltop the long row of houses (then probably little cottages rather than today's imposing homes) would have been about seven hundred yards from the fires. Perhaps it was thought that the risk to their inhabitants was overshadowed by the intended benefit to Southampton. I doubt if those affected would have agreed.

Anthony Pasmore