

## **NEW FOREST NOTES JANUARY 2018**

### **The Verderers and the Great War – 1918**

Four years ago I started to tell the story of how, in the Great War, the Verderers struggled to manage the New Forest in the face of ever-increasing demands by the military authorities for land and facilities. The final year of the war should properly have seen the end of that story, but the Court's efforts to secure restoration of the Forest continued long after the end of hostilities, if on a rather smaller scale than a similar campaign after 1945. Still, all this lay in the future and in January of 1918, with no end to the fighting in sight, pressure was still very firmly on the Forest.

Beaulieu Aerodrome remained the worst threat and it continued so right up to the end of the war and beyond. In January there were complaints that the military authorities had erected a fence five hundred yards long from Hatchet Pond gravel pit to East Boldre Post Office and only about eight feet from the road. It seems incredible that flying was still taking place with, presumably, grazing stock continuing to access the airfield. At the same Court it was reported that a very large set of brick and other buildings was being erected beside the Hatchet Pond to Norley Wood main road, with a team of five hundred workmen clearing furze (gorse) and heather,

The other large running sore – the Matley trench mortar school and the bomb-throwing school near Boltons Bench – continued to grow, with more earthworks and trenches being established. The Verderers could not then have foreseen that something much worse would come to the site at the end of the year.

Matley and its surroundings was clearly a site much valued by the military and ball firing from King's Passage towards Denny continued to take place, requiring the closure of the Beaulieu Road from time to time. It was reported that two bullets had hit the house of Forest keeper Bessant (at Denny Lodge) and the agister had seen stock grazing under Denny Wood in the direct line of fire. He told the Court that this was extremely dangerous.

The other big encroachment in this south eastern part of the Forest, the timber collection and export works at Lyndhurst Road, continued in full production and the Verderers seem to have given up on all attempts to regulate the use of this site.

The agisters remained hard-pressed, not least because straying of stock outside the Forest was becoming an increasing problem due to the growing volumes of motor traffic disturbing the animals and destroying the gates on the perambulation. Heavy army trucks serving the aerodrome were particular offenders, leading to large-scale straying into Hythe. Similarly, the important gate at Bull Hill (which prevented animals from heading towards Lymington) had been broken and despite pressure from the Court it had still not been replaced by March.

Economic pressures were still being felt by the Verderers' staff and at the January meeting it was agreed that the "war bonus" of £5 should continue to be paid to the agisters.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Verderers met only every other month and with a three months break over the summer, so it was not until March that they received the next report from the clerk, although he seems to have been busy carrying out inspections between meetings. A military lorry had killed a pony belonging to Frank Kitcher and Southern Command had agreed compensation of £7, so bearing in mind the difference in money value from the present day, this must have been an exceptionally good mare – or perhaps Mr. Kitcher was a very good negotiator. At the same time, a fresh rash of new aerodrome buildings had appeared, this time including a hospital.

In March also there was a rare mention of the Millyford sawmill complex which was “still greatly in use”. The site had been much extended, with sheds, camp huts, lorries and tramways. Today the old cookhouse fireplace remains (the “Portuguese Fireplace”), a few engine blocks which were too massive to break up and some overgrown tramway cuttings and trackways. Altogether it seems that development was taking place across the eastern side of the Forest with very little restraint.

The May Court produced a very curious report of three naval officers who had been round Wilverley Plain with a view to arranging for observation posts and “sights”. Since the plain is far from the sea, I suppose one must assume that this had something to do with aviation. The Deputy Surveyor (by then Mr. Leese) told the Court that nothing further had been heard on the subject and, while he agreed that military use of the Forest generally was expanding, it would be unwise to object to what had been done. This month also, the Verderers unanimously agreed to resist any attempt to conscript their clerk into the forces, just as they had earlier done for the agisters. The clerk was their key man in observing and recording the depredations on the Forest.

Another extraordinary proposal emerged in the early summer with a scheme to construct a new railway line between Beaulieu Road Station and the aerodrome at East Boldre. Lord Montagu had pointed out that such a line would serve no purpose after the war and in the meantime the need for such a facility had really passed as the movement of heavy materials to the airfield was largely complete. Fortunately this most damaging of proposals was abandoned. On the other hand, a proposal to construct (on Cadland Estate land) a reservoir to serve the Royal Naval Air Station at Calshot was to go ahead. The contractors, endeavouring to set a trend of using “cheap” Forest land which many of their successors have followed, sought to establish a works camp at Hardley. This the Official Verderer had refused and the Court confirmed his decision.

Over the summer months there is no record of how matters progressed in the Forest and the Verderers met for their November Court on the 11<sup>th</sup> of that month. The momentous nature of that day received no recognition in the records of the Court, but the minutes are uncharacteristically untidy, with deletions and alterations never officially confirmed. Still, there had evidently already been some hopeful signs during the preceding weeks. It was reported that two hangers at Beaulieu aerodrome were about to be removed. The use of live ammunition at Matley had ceased, with only blanks and smokescreens now being used in connection with a new and entirely unexpected horror – the establishment of a “war dog training school”. This was designed to train dogs in the carrying

messages under battle conditions – hence the need for firing and smoke. Two hundred dogs had been moved in and about the same number of kennels constructed. The dogs were taken to various parts of the Forest and released with messages attached to their collars to be returned to headquarters. In later months these dogs were to set about the commoners stock with enthusiasm and, while the number of dogs was minute compared to today's thousands running loose in the Forest, it was a new threat for which the community was entirely unprepared.

Finally, the minutes contain a note that a prisoner of war camp for one hundred and fifty Germans employed with the Canadian Forestry Corps had been opened at Jack's Wood. This is then crossed out with a note that the camp had been closed. The war was over, but the long fight for restoration was about to begin and may be worth recording next year.

### **Foulford and the Zeigler memorial passage**

There are some parts of the Forest which even local people do not visit very often and one of these is Foulford Bottom west of Picket Post. A recent Forestry Commission site visit was held there, attended by all the elected Verderers and, with the exception of Dionis Macnair who lives just down the road in Burley, I don't think that any of us was very familiar with the area. I had certainly not walked there for a couple of years.

Foulford is a deep valley with boggy uneven sides, dense ground vegetation, steep slopes and few pathways. Its name gives a good picture of its character. Moreover, the shattering noise from the A 31 road above the valley makes this about the last place to which anyone in search of a quiet walk would go. In its favour it may be said that from the hills around the valley there are fine views across Dorset to the Purbeck Hills.

There are two tracks which cross Foulford, one near the western boundary of the Forest and the other about the centre of the valley which may once have been the "foul ford". This track was upgraded in the spring of 1980 and a new bridge was installed in memory of Major Colin Zeigler who was one of the great 20<sup>th</sup> century figures of the New Forest community. He had lived just above the passage on the edge of Hightown Common. I do not know when he first became chairman of the New Forest Commoners Defence Association, but he certainly held that post in 1952 and continued to do so until he retired in 1970, then becoming president until his death in 1977 at the age of 93. He had been a member of the New Forest Protection Committee established to fight the Forestry Commission's promotion of legislation for the Forest in 1948 and for many years he was also a leader of the New Forest Association. There is a good picture of the passage in Peter Roberts's history of the Association published last year.

It is a good tradition in the Forest that bridges and passages are created or improved in memory of great Forest men and women, since seats, benches, walks and other structures can be a menace, collectively disfiguring what should be protected as a wild and beautiful landscape. The Verderers have certainly set their faces against intrusive monuments. Cynics might complain that the Forestry Commission uses memorial passages as a way of unloading some of its statutory

responsibility for maintenance onto others, but I don't think that is really fair. They have certainly borne most or much of the cost of such works in recent times.

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