

NEW FOREST NOTES JULY 2011

Damage to the Forest's historic sites

Towards the end of June, the Forestry Commission caused severe damage to yet another of the Forest's historic sites while working on its stream filling and diversion programme. It dug a wide trench across archaeological remains which had lain undisturbed for perhaps three thousand five hundred years. Such carelessness is becoming a distressing norm, with at least three incidents of the type within the last year. Perhaps the worst of it is that such damage is almost entirely avoidable and should never have been allowed to occur. This is not one of those instances where a rogue contractor armed with a mighty digger goes out of control. Such things happen even in the best regulated organizations, but my impression of the contractors actually doing the digging is that they are remarkably competent and precise in their work. Rather it is a straightforward case of failure to plan properly, to conduct adequate field research in advance and to provide clear marking of historic features before engineering starts.

The victim this time is a Bronze Age site near Cockley Hill, a few miles east of Fordingbridge and it has been wrecked as part of the latest phase of stream filling, part of a programme which is spreading across the entire Forest. In 2010, similar features were damaged or destroyed at Claypits Bottom and at Fletchers Thorns. I am told that there are about one hundred more projects to be undertaken. If damage continues to occur even at the rate of only one site per scheme, we will lose the equivalent of one third of all the archaeology of this type at present known in the New Forest.

Like many people, I find the immense spans of time involved with archaeology extremely difficult to envisage. What was the New Forest like three and a half thousand years ago and how did its occupation then fit into a wider world picture? I suppose one can think of it in terms of events in the ancient Middle East. A thousand years before Rome was founded and four hundred years before Troy was burnt, our pastoral ancestors (early prototype commoners) were living and working in the stream valleys of the New Forest and (although there is no direct evidence for this), perhaps they were also responsible for the great burial mounds which form skyline features on the hilltops above. Below Cockley Hill there was probably an encampment or settlement operating a cluster of several water-heating troughs. Such trough operation leaves behind waste products which can be found by careful searching even after so long a period. Whether the water heating was for domestic or small industrial use remains uncertain. Now, after three and a half millennia and in the supposedly protected environment of a national park, we are setting about threatening and destroying such sites in a systematic manner.

In the case of this particular stream filling and diversion job, as with others in the current programme, the Forestry Commission failed to ensure proper survey and recording in advance of the work. On such plans as they produced, none of the historic sites in the area of the works was properly recorded and/or identified. Indeed, many were overlooked

altogether. Even when the shortcomings of their planning were pointed out to the Forestry Commission before work started, they pushed ahead anyway without making the necessary amendments. The result was inevitable. Elsewhere in the same scheme, vast quantities of gravel have been stockpiled partly on top of a Romano-British site of which the Forestry Commission has been aware for more than forty years, and again despite pleas for them to amend their faulty planning.

I am afraid that this is likely to be a continuing saga, because planning for the next two schemes – filling and diversion of parts of Latchmore Brook and similar work in Roe and Milkham – is just as bad. Of course the Forestry Commission denies all of this. It believes that it is paying sufficient regard to the Forest's history based on thorough and expert assessment, but such belief flies in the face of the facts. I am sure Commission officers don't really set out to destroy our history, but to them it must seem just an irritating and inconsequential impediment to their great programme of bog enhancement and what they call stream restoration.

Finally one needs to consider how this sorry state of affairs has come about. All these great engineering schemes are financed from public funds with the stated objective of conserving the Forest. They are absorbing millions of pounds. The agreement under which the money is supplied contains stringent provisions for the protection of the "historic environment". So far as I can see, the Forestry Commission is in material breach of some of its obligations for such protection. It is time they understood that the New Forest is more than simply a reserve for rare plants and animals (important as those are) and a platform for ever more intense recreation. Its historic landscape and monuments, its livestock and its people are also key elements of the place. They should not be brushed aside simply because they interfere with the demands of extreme scientific conservation.

Vacuum cleaner in a bog

In one of the quieter valleys of the New Forest (which must remain anonymous for reasons which appear below) there is a machine which looks like a very large grey cylinder vacuum cleaner attached to a dying holly tree and fenced round to exclude stock. A tube leads from the cylinder into the adjoining stream.

Regular and observant walkers in the Forest will be quite used to all sorts of bizarre experiments being conducted in odd corners. Few of these are damaging, all are no doubt a source of fascination to their instigators and just occasionally one might succeed in providing useful information. This cylinder I think is likely to be at the more esoteric end of the scale. It is part of a project by the University of Reading, sampling water from a supposedly uncontaminated environment, for use in comparison with similar tests on agricultural land. The equipment has been at the site for a year or so now, but in the recent half term week it received the almost inevitable visit from the vandals. The battery compartment was kicked in, the tube pulled off and the fencing broken down. In the face of all this, the student in charge was remarkably composed. Perhaps he studies the ugly side of human nature as well as water quality. Anyhow, when I visited the site last week a team was busy carrying out repairs.

The University now wants to expand its operations in the valley to include fifteen sampling locations within a bog, where small cups will be buried beneath concrete slabs. The Verderers' main concern was to ensure the safety of livestock and riders – hence my presence. Actually nobody in his right mind would ride a horse into such a place, while the smooth concrete slabs will be harmless to grazing animals. The Court accordingly granted permission for the extension.

As with all such works, the crucial thing is that an end date is set and an assurance given that all equipment will be removed by that time. The vacuum cleaner and its associated cups and slabs is due to disappear by April 2013 at the latest.

Travellers

In the case of the recent travellers' occupation at Stoney Cross, the Forestry Commission's land agent department did a very creditable job of removing the unwanted visitors with a minimum of delay, at least once the original small invasion had doubled in size. Commission, police and Forest workers were duly congratulated at the Verderers' Court on 15th June.

Such invasions are happening more and more in the New Forest and I find it impossible to understand why society continues to tolerate a law which blocks the immediate ejection and punishment of such offenders. If you find someone stealing from and vandalizing your home, you naturally expect the police to deal with them immediately, but it seems that travellers have a sort of universal licence to spoil. They foul the grazing, throw litter about (14 tons we are told at Stoney Cross), light fires, chase livestock and generally behave in an appalling manner, but their magic human rights protect them from eviction except with ponderous legal processes. It is a sad reflection on our society that law-abiding citizens – in this case commoners and visitors – must suffer unaided, while the law shields those who cause harm and distress.

I am told the miscreants went back to Ringwood, broke into a recreation ground and were further evicted the following day. I expect they will be back in the Forest shortly.

Headquarters buildings arriving too late

It must be somewhat galling for those officers of the national park charged with finding a suitable headquarters building that as soon as they were committed to a portion of Lymington Town Hall, two eminently suitable buildings seem to have become available at the same moment. A fruitless search for several years had forced on them what I have heard described as a less than satisfactory compromise. Then, like the buses of fable, two came along at once.

The first of these is the magistrates' court in Lyndhurst – a superior modern building if hardly appropriate to its setting. No doubt it would have needed extension, but it would have given the Park a coveted location and prestige structure at the heart of the Forest's capital, rather than an unexceptional share of an uninspiring building on the Forest's margin.

The next "bus" in the queue is New Park Hotel, a fine historic building in an outstanding setting and fit to rival even the grandeur of the Forestry Commission's Queen's

House. Any site at New Park had long been a target of the Park authority and the little matter of a change of use should have presented no problem for its planners. With such a headquarters, the New Forest National Park Authority could have held up its head in company with the occupants of "Parke" (the Dartmoor authority's fine National Trust county house) or the Exmoor authority's imposing Victorian structure in Dulverton with its impressive wooded backdrop and with the roar of the River Barle outside its front door. Still, a side-street conversion in an urban setting is no doubt more in keeping with the current climate of austerity in public finances and certainly a greener alternative.

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