

NEW FOREST NOTES JULY 2014

The ancient past of a Forest cemetery

Three villages in the New Forest have their cemeteries (as opposed to church yards) on land granted out of the commons over the last one hundred and fifty years. Public bodies used to regard the Forest as a cheap source of land for their works and the burial authorities were not slow to take advantage of this laxity or generosity by the Crown. The villages concerned are Blackfield, where a strip along the edge of Blackwell Common was taken, Lyndhurst with its imposing hill-top burial ground and Woodgreen. The last of these is a tiny woodland glade on the ridge above the village and invisible from the road. It is probably known to very few people beyond those with relatives or friends buried there, yet the site has a remarkable and important past, completely hidden from even the few cemetery visitors. A clue to this past lies in the topography of the place. The cemetery lies on a sort of woodland platform cut out of the hillside. Above it rises a terrace or cliff about ten to twelve feet in height covered by trees and obscured by leaf litter. The graves are in fact dug into the floor of an abandoned gravel pit, although the masking trees make this difficult to appreciate. It is this gravel pit that makes the site important.

Before the introduction of tarmacadam-surfaced roads, the Forest's highways were maintained by hundreds of gravel pits scattered about the woods and heaths. These pits exploited the sheets of plateau gravels which immense rivers deposited in the distant past across the area now occupied by the New Forest. In many places these pits are no more than a few feet deep, their form being dictated by the thickness of the gravel. On the west side of the Forest, however, depths of up to 25ft are to be found and such areas as Rockford Common were beloved of the commercial gravel companies. They were heavily quarried as late as the 1970s-1980s and still contain valuable reserves which it is to be hoped will never now be exploited.

Post war extraction methods with draglines and face shovels meant that what came out of the pit disappeared unexamined into road schemes and other construction, but it was different in earlier times. The small road pits across the Forest were operated by hand and their production was clearly visible to the man with pick and shovel. From time to time, strange shaped stones were found which today we know as Palaeolithic hand axes. Numbers of these finds were small and as the pits were abandoned with the adoption of modern methods of road building, the trickle of finds dried up altogether. Today there are no working gravel pits on the Crown Land and probably only a handful of pits on private land serving farm needs. A few years ago a single axe was found on an eroding trackway near Wilverley, while the natural gravels of some Forest streams have also yielded examples. Apart from this, implements of the period are seldom found in the New Forest.

It is within this picture that the Woodgreen cemetery gravel pit is so important. Here, instead of one or two isolated finds, the quarrying is said to have revealed the amazing total of over four hundred axes. It was thus the most productive site of such material in the whole Avon Valley. Of course the pit has been overgrown for generations and to the inexperienced eye now looks like any other piece of Forest woodland.

There is now a plan by Bournemouth University to open up a section through the gravel, either in the old pit face or just inside Godshill Inclosure, in an attempt to date the different layers of

gravel and thus the hand axes which they contained. The process, which I do not understand and therefore cannot explain, is called optical stimulated luminescence and allows the scientists to build up a sort of time chart for the sequence of sediments which comprise the gravel. Information obtained here could then be extrapolated to other gravel deposits in the Avon Valley. I understand that the work is likely to be undertaken this summer.

Perhaps the most difficult to understand aspect of the site and its finds is the immense periods of time involved. The gravels were laid down before even the physical landscape of the New Forest existed. Today the most commonly found flint implements in the Forest date from the Bronze Age – perhaps three to four thousand years ago. I find them in my fields and when walking in the Forest. They occur in the topsoil and just below it and the people who made them saw the Forest very much as we see it today, at least in its landform. The Woodgreen axes, on the other hand, may be more than 100 times older than this – up to half a million years. They are deeply sealed in the geology, rather than lying on top of it.

I don't think we should imagine teams of Palaeolithic craftsmen sitting beside a great river at Woodgreen, fabricating piles of hand axes. I have not seen any of the old finds or the original reports, but I presume these implements were washed downstream and deposited over perhaps thousands of years in different layers of the gravel. They were made by some of our earliest ancestors. The scientists like to call them "hominins" - a term which I have to confess I had to look up. I presume that the researchers scarcely hope to recover actual implements from their limited excavations. Their trench will be 4m across and four meters deep and thus perhaps 64 cu m at the most will be removed. The pit that revealed the implements had a total working face of 450 metres and probably produced 60,000 cubic metres of gravel, but the new excavations may still throw valuable light on this very ancient past.

Oil shale report

By a remarkable coincidence, another study has recently covered the Woodgreen area, but one which had the potential to be far more damaging. It dealt with geology four hundred times older than the gravels and at great depth.

I am not sure if we should start worrying yet in the Forest - or perhaps rejoicing if we have an interest in shale oil production – but it seems that the search for hydrocarbons in southern Britain shows no sign of letting up. It is curious that the latest report produced for the government by the British Geological Survey seems to have attracted no interest here, despite the fact that it covered a sizeable piece of the New Forest. The "Jurassic shales of the Weald Basin" report describes a study area including everything north of a line from Totton to a near Fordingbridge and extending into Cranborne Chase. It is a rather technical document and seems to be one of a series being prepared for the government. So far as I can see, it showed little of immediate interest in our area, the nearest "producing" sites being at Stockbridge and Goodworth. However, I do not think we are yet in the clear. Ominous splashes of colour appear on the margins of some of the maps, outside the study area and bordering on the Dorset oilfields – uncomfortably close to the Forest. We may have more to fear from later reports in the series, while the still unexplored prospects at Denny and Pilley sleep quietly beneath the Forest like unexploded bombs.

For anyone interested in reading the report (and it is fairly heavy going), details can be found at:
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/313701/BGS_DECC_JurassicWealdShale_study_2014_MAIN_REPORT.pdf

Return of the Tuley tubes

Twenty five years ago, after the great storms of 1987 and 1990, the use of Tuley tubes became very popular in the Inclosures. These plastic tubes about five feet long and eight inches diameter are supported by a pointed stake driven into the ground, to which they are strapped, and are used to provide protection for young trees (usually oak) in the New Forest. They are supposed to provide a micro-climate in which the young sapling can thrive, they give protection from browsing animals and they allow the application of herbicide to the surroundings without damage to the plant. In theory therefore they must be regarded as a good thing. Unfortunately, forestry seems to go through phases of adopting and then rejecting new fashions. I remember about ten years ago being told by a very senior Forestry Commission official that she regarded them as horrible things which she would not want to see used again in the Forest. She said that they drew the young trees up into spindly and unsatisfactory saplings. Her views obviously did not take root and she has long since left the New Forest. Tuley tubes are in fashion once more with a great forest of them or similar tree shelters having appeared in Frame Heath Inclosure near Brockenhurst over the last year. It may be, of course, that there are special factors requiring their use in that area, such as the very large population of sika deer.

My concern about Tuley tubes is not so much their ability or otherwise to produce satisfactory trees, but the fact that the Forestry Commission has a tendency to forget all about them. Go into many of the Inclosures in the centre of the Forest and you can find blocks or individual trees originally planted in these tubes which are then forgotten about. The trees grow, split the tubes, and are strangled by the plastic ties which secure them. The plantings are not managed properly, so a proportion of the trees dies and the tubes fall about and become part of the background litter of the Forest. Even where an attempt is made to remove tubes (as at Pitts Wood), many are left lying around to be pulled about by children and dogs (for some reason they seem to have a fascination for the latter and it is common to find them full of tooth holes). If they are going to be used, they should be managed properly and then cleared up when they are no further use.

Some years ago I had a piece of woodland where a previous owner had used Tuley tubes and then neglected them. I set about their removal one spring, but very quickly had to stop. They seem to be favourite places for robins to nest in and for every dozen or so tubes I removed, I had to leave one until after the resident family had left.

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