

NEW FOREST NOTES JULY 2016

The Open Spaces Society

The Commons Preservation Society, founded in 1865, played a major part in preventing the destruction of common land in the latter part of the 19th century. The society worked closely with local campaigners in the New Forest to oppose silvicultural expansion and the increasing use of the Forest for military training. Lord Eversley, the society's founder and later both chairman and president, was the grandson of Charles Shaw Lefevre who had inherited Burley Manor in 1807. The manor eventually passed out of the family's ownership in 1834, but local connection remained strong and at Hightown Common on the western edge of the Forest there is a stone seat erected as a memorial to Lord Eversley.

Some years ago the society changed its name to the Open Spaces Society and it is a long time since it had much involvement with the Forest. It has become increasingly political in recent times and I think this has put off some people who share my view that party politics should have no place in managing such areas as the New Forest. It always seemed to me particularly fitting that New Forest legislation since WW2 has often involved the local Conservative Member of Parliament working closely with Labour governments.

I do not always agree with the statements of the current society secretary, Ms Kate Ashbrook, but her comments upon the new National Park Partnership, in the latest issue of the journal "Open Space", point out a very real danger. The "partnership" has the aim of enabling businesses to engage with the parks "to enhance the quality and utility of the parks now and for future generations". Of this objective, Ms Ashbrook writes "Some hopes. Businesses will want their profits from the scheme through Disneyfication and crassly inappropriate sponsorships". It is the old story of cloaking development and commercial objectives in a green disguise. Boost the tourist industry under the name of "green tourism" or "sustainable tourism". It is still tourism and whatever you call it, it is numbers which play a major part in damaging the Forest.

Stone piles

The curious and disagreeable habit of erecting stone piles on the Forest seems to be spreading. I don't know what its origin is or what particular pleasure it gives the builders, but it is not something which should be allowed to grow unchallenged. It seems that an individual walker or group of walkers collects large flint nodules during the course of walking the same route day after day. These are then deposited in a heap, usually in the middle of a grassy area. One or two stones are no trouble to anybody, but if say two walkers follow the same route for three hundred days of the year and continue this for ten years, the heap will contain six thousand large stones. One such pile, near Millersford Plantation, has been growing for the past twenty years or so and a second has now been established in a different part of Hale Purlieu. The largest pile I know of is north-west of Hasley and if the problem is bad in this fairly quiet northern part of the Forest, I imagine that other areas will not

have escaped the craze. It is amazing to me that people who presumably enjoy walking in the Forest on a regular basis should have so little regard for its protection.

Raymond Stickland

Raymond's recent death breaks one more link with an older, simpler Forest, before the days of large subsidies, national parks, priority of recreation over landscape and tranquillity and the overpowering domination of Natural England, but they were not always good days. Animal welfare was often low down on the list of priorities and the killing rate on the Forest's roads was appalling (no roads at all were fenced until after 1963). The Verderers never quite knew where next year's money to pay the agisters would come from. On the plus side, the Forest was, by today's standards, well drained and well maintained – with the possible exception of Scots pine control. Through all the ups and downs of this period, as agister and then head agister, Raymond seemed to have a permanent smile on his face – a smile which my late father wrote about in his book on the Forest.

The story was of a colt hunt at Black Gutter and Stonequarry, probably in the 1960s. In those days when there were still few pounds into which to drive the Forest animals, the practice of "tailing" was carried out far more than today. Young animals (in this case a yearling colt) would be pursued on horseback. Once the leading rider caught up with the quarry, he would lean forward in his saddle, catch hold of the pony's tail and hold on. As the pace slowed abruptly, the other riders would jump from their horses and join the melee, so that the wanted pony was quickly overpowered, haltered and secured. The riding horses, of course, all knew what they were about and generally cooperated.

On the day in question, Raymond was in the lead and had managed to grab the pony's tail, but unseen to him a thorn bush loomed up ahead. His horse went to one side of the bush and the target pony to the other, so that Raymond ended up in an unconscious heap within the bush. The remaining riders took over and quickly caught the pony. On returning, they found Raymond just getting up, dripping blood and with the usual, if now rather wintry, smile on his face. Somewhere or other, I still have the faded colour transparency which records the event.

New Forest Notes on the internet

It is over twenty six years since I started writing New Forest Notes and in the late 1990s, with the internet still in its relative infancy, the Geodata Institute of Southampton University asked if they could put the Notes online after they had appeared in the Advertiser and Times. That continued for a few years, but updating was irregular and eventually local Forest enthusiast, Graham Cooper took over, adding them as an appendix to his own invaluable website "The New Forest - its History and Scenery". That site is, like many public service websites, hosted by the county council's Hantsweb. Hantsweb is to close down at the end of July, so the Notes have had to find a new home. They are now to be accommodated on the New Forest History and Archaeology Group's website (<http://www.newforesthistorvandarchaeology.org.uk/>). Graham Cooper and the Group's site manager Brian Tovey are working on the transfer and so far the years 2011 to 2016 are available. The Notes normally appear on the website two or three weeks after they have appeared in the Advertiser and

Times. In due course, all the notes from the beginning in May 1990 will be added, including those which pre-dated Geodata's involvement. These early texts involve a considerable amount of work because they are from a pre-computer era.

Also transferred from Graham Cooper's site to the NFHAG pages is Richardson King and Driver's large scale map of the New Forest dating from the end of the 18th century and an invaluable source for local historians. Fortunately, Graham's association with the Forest will continue (despite the fact that he now lives in the north of England) because even after the closure of Hantsweb he will continue to manage the website of the Verderers' Court.

Another Forest website which will die with Hantsweb is that of the New Forest Research and Publications Trust. The registered charity which comprised the Trust has merged with the New Forest History and Archaeology Group and all its funds and remaining stocks of books have been transferred to the Group. The Trust's work is being continued, with the first new publication for some time – "The Archaeology of Beaulieu Heath West" – appearing some months ago and already sold out.

A bridge too many

A couple of years ago the Forestry Commission constructed a bridge over the Lymington River at Queen Meadow, which is so out of keeping with its surroundings that it has since been given the name "The Motorway Bridge" by local people. I think it was widely agreed that this sort of mistake ought never again to be made in the Forest. However, last year the Commission obtained a large sum of money from the National Park's Sustainable Transport Fund to build a new cycle bridge at Fletchers Water (near Rhinefield). The sustainable Transport fund had been opposed by the Verderers' Court from its inception in January 2012, because they could foresee the problems the fund was likely to cause in the Forest. The Verderers' opposition failed.

In September last year the Commission brought to the Court plans for its new structure, but made it clear that because (it was claimed) the bridge was not on Open Forest, the Court's consent was not required and that this was merely a consultation. The Verderers, not unreasonably, took the Commission's word as to the status of the land. They then considered the plan and concluded that the structure would be out of keeping with the traditional character of the Forest and would have a significant adverse effect on the landscape. They resolved to inform the planning authority of their concerns, taking at face value the Commission's assertion that they could not do more. The planning authority, which is of course the National Park and ultimate source of finance for the project, dismissed the Verderers' concerns out of hand and over the last few weeks the bridge has been under construction. However, it now turns out that bridge is in fact in one of the 1949 Act plantations (called Fletchers Hill), which is held under a relatively short lease, in forestry terms, from the Verderers, rather than being in the earlier so-called Statutory Inclosures as, I believe, the Forestry Commission had intimated. The area is a complicated one with the two phases of plantation interlocking like pieces of a jig saw puzzle and I can well believe that even the Commission, as land managers, were confused.

I had a look at the bridge last week, although only the foundations and approach ramps are so far built. From the plans I am sure it would be a very suitable structure for a municipal park in Slough or Milton Keynes, but it certainly is unlikely to enhance the appearance of the New Forest. It must have cost tens of thousands of pounds to build – probably enough to repair most of the defective passages on which the day to day management of livestock and the life of the Forest generally depends.

Anthony Pasmore