

New Forest Notes – July 1993

Heywood Sumner

The poorer Forest guide books and tourist displays are dominated by such characters as Brusher Mills the snake catcher and Purkis the mythical charcoal burner who is supposed to have transported the body of William Rufus. They were of no importance to the history of the Forest, but the survival of a few colourful stories has ensured their immortality. Fortunately there is also a growing interest in those who really did help to shape the New Forest of today or record its past. Foremost among the latter is that remarkable figure Heywood Sumner (1853-1940) – artist, designer, field archaeologist, historian and author who came to live at Cuckoo Hill, Gorley in 1903 and remained there until his death. Recent years have seen several of his books republished including his guide to the New Forest, his "Earthworks of Cranborne Chase", his history of Gorley village and much of his New Forest archaeological writing. The public face of the man and his work is fairly well documented, but we are now being given a fascinating glimpse of his private world through the painstaking research of Gordon le Pard who has traced a great deal of original Sumner correspondence and other records. He recently lectured on Sumner at Lyndhurst and two weeks ago gave members of the Hampshire Field Club a rare chance to visit Cuckoo Hill, the house which Sumner designed and built for his family and which is now a private retirement home.

For me, some of the most interesting new information revealed by Gordon le Pard relates to Sumner's literary contacts. Not only was a visit to Cuckoo Hill obligatory for any archaeologist coming to the Forest, but a wide range of other influential people stayed there or were invited to tea. Among these visitors was Thomas Hardy who is reputed to have been taken into the Forest to see the Roman pottery sites which Sumner had recorded and partly excavated at Sloden. Nor was that the only Hardy link with that remote and beautiful part of the Forest. During his London days, before coming to Cuckoo Hill, Sumner had been acquainted with Helen Paterson, later Helen Allingham the famous artist. She had done some illustrating work for Hardy and is said to have rejected a proposal of marriage from him. She later married William Allingham, the poet who had visited Sloden with Tennyson in 1870 in search of the vanished yews. Finally, the photographer Herman Lee who worked with Hardy on the guide book to his novels, came to live at Linwood and shared Sumner's interest, if not his skill, in kiln excavation.

Some of Gordon le Pard's work is shortly to be published by the Hampshire Field Club in its Proceedings and Sumner enthusiasts will also welcome a new series of commemorative mugs to be issued by the New Forest Association. These will depict examples of the artist's work during his New Forest years accompanied by an explanatory leaflet. The first showing Sloden Hill and New Forest ponies will be available at the New Forest Show later this month.

Change at English Nature

In not much more than a year, the local head of the Forestry Commission (the Deputy Surveyor) and the chairman of the Verderers (the Official Verderers) have changed. Now Colin Tubbs, the long-serving head of the third department of Forest management, English Nature, is to retire so that all three top jobs in the Forest will have relatively new incumbents. For most of us it is difficult to remember a time when Colin was not in charge of the local conservation authority which had an irritating habit of changing its name every few years, finally ending up as English Nature. He must have seen the coming and going of at least five Deputy Surveyors and almost as many Official Verderers. It has to be said, of course, that Colin Tubbs has not always been the Commoners' favourite person in the New Forest because of his skilful and effective defence of conservation interests against the grazing maintenance and improvement ambitions of those who farm the Forest. However, that has not prevented widespread admiration of a job well done among all sections of the Forest community. Perhaps most appreciated has been the leading role he took in opposition to major development proposals which would have damaged the Forest, such as Shell's oil drilling plans and two or three major road schemes which failed. As a lasting record of his period in office, Colin leaves innumerable scientific and historical papers on the Forest as well as the most up-to-date and complete text book on the area in the Collins New Naturalist series. Fortunately, both he and his wife Jenny (who is also retiring from English Nature) hope to continue their association with the Forest.

Writing unwritten regulations

The Verderers have this month corrected a curious anomaly which appears to have existed for one hundred and sixteen years. The proceedings of the Court have always been governed by a series of regulations which have never been written down, but which have been passed from one generation of Verderers to the next by word of mouth with amendments when necessary. The New Forest Act of 1877 which established the Court, required the Verderers to make such regulations from time to time and in June Norman Rudd of Bramshaw suggested that the Court should really have its working procedures recorded in writing. The regulations have accordingly been committed to paper and should be available to the Forest societies and other interested people in the near future. Of course regular attendants at the Court will be well aware of how the open meetings of the Verderers work, but for those new to making "presentments" (public requests, complaints or comments on aspects of the Forest's management) the regulations may well be useful. For example, they lay down that public meetings of the Court are held on odd numbered months and are advertised on the notice board outside the Queen's House in Lyndhurst. In practice, most public Courts are fixed long in advance and are widely advertised in the Forest. Presentments have to be relevant, brief and inoffensive in tone and it is helpful to the Verderers and the press if written copies are handed in. In the case of certain important requests from public authorities and others, the Verderers will not make a decision until after the next public meeting of the Court in order that others may express support or opposition to the original request.

The Verderers have always tried to keep their public proceedings as informal as possible to encourage public participation and interest. The success of this policy is regularly demonstrated by

the packed courtroom. The meeting on 19th July is likely to be particularly busy with much public comment expected on a proposal for land exchange at Bramshaw.