

New Forest Notes – July 1994

East Boldre - the Story of an Illegal Village

It is surprising how often even the smallest settlements have histories which go back for a very long time, perhaps as far as the Domesday Book, but there are exceptions. The New Forest, being itself a somewhat peculiar place, possesses an entire class of exceptions to the general rule. This comprises the squatter settlements which developed mainly on the Crown lands of the Forest probably in the period from about 1650 to 1800.

"Woodgreen, Village without Title". But the largest and most unusual of the squatter villages, East Boldre, has had to wait until now for its own contribution to the library of the New Forest local history. "East Boldre - A New Forest Squatters Settlement 1700-1900" is the first production of the newly formed New Forest Research and Publication Trust and is the work of one of the Forest's leading local historians Jude James.

At first sight it may be difficult to believe that East Boldre is not a very ancient village indeed. There can be few parts of the Forest which, until recently, still contained a wealth of old cob buildings, many now disguised by rendering or other coverings. However, cob is an indication of poverty in building materials and not necessarily of great antiquity. I remember some years ago meeting a builder who had put up a cob house from scratch in the Norley Wood area during the 1930s, using salvaged materials from several cob cottages at Pylewell.

Jude James traces the history of the village from its origins as, in effect, a dormitory for labour employed on the Beaulieu Estate and he points out the considerable advantages to a landowner in being able to accommodate his poor labourers close at hand but outside his own parish. By doing so he was able to minimise his liability to poor rate. However, in this case the "host" parish of parish of Boldre, to say nothing of the Crown from which the land was stolen, did not take kindly to the imposition and there followed a series of disputes, including some costly litigation.

The trigger for East Boldre's establishment may well have been the demand for labour in the shipbuilding industry on the Beaulieu River, but by the time that industry expired, the village was a well-established and stable community which shortly afterwards began to develop its own schools and places of worship. Home grown employment included the mill, a rope factory, furze cutting and all the little money making schemes of the traditional New Forest commoner - not all of them on the right side of the law. Indeed, the whole basis of the settlement depended upon the cost of evicting encroachers exceeding the value of the land they had stolen, at least when a cottage could be erected and occupied before a challenge from the authorities. In such circumstances eviction required a relatively expensive legal process. It was said that cottages sometimes appeared overnight with the occupier in residence and a fire lit before.

Jude James describes in detail the great enquiry into encroachments made throughout the Forest in 1801 in which some ancient encroachments were "discharged", others leased to their occupiers and some ordered to be thrown down. There is in fact, little evidence that the destruction of encroachments actually occurred though a detailed analysis of the 1801 records has yet to be attempted and Mr. James does not deal with the even more informative Crown land survey of fourteen years earlier. This gives a picture of the entire village its occupiers and the status of their holdings. Similarly, the great mystery of the phase or phases of abandoned encroachment lying immediately west of East Boldre along the margins of Beaulieu Heath has yet to be solved, although a detailed survey of these intriguing relics was published by the Hampshire Field Club in 1980. There is clearly much research still to be done, but in the meantime this delightful portrait of a Forest village adds greatly to our knowledge and will be an essential possession for every East Boldre householder with a felling for the history of his community. The booklet is well illustrated with line drawings and photographs, two maps and a full. Colour reproduction of Walter Tyndales charming water-colour of cottages at East Boldre which first appeared in Hutchinsons "New Forest" of 1904. "East Boulder" is to be published later this month and can be obtained from the Hon. Secretary of the New Forest Research and Publication Trust, 4 Clarence road, Lyndhurst at £2.50 (£3.00) including postage.

Living with the Enemy?

The District Council has just issued a consultation document on tourism, with the clever and eye-catching title "Living with the Enemy?" purports to set out a series of options and to ask a number of questions, on the management of tourism which the public is invited to answer. It is heavily laced throughout with good green sentiments and scattered with ecologically correct phraseology in which co-operation, co-ordination, balancing needs and demands, providing information and interpretation and so on are well to the fore. So dense is this sugar coating that some less jaundiced readers than me may miss the underlying truth, that the report seeks to justify the unjustifiable and to reconcile the irreconcilable. Simply by claiming that good tourist management and responsible and "effective marketing programmes" need not increase pressure on the Forest, cannot disguise the fact that any marketing programme and information provision, such as that undertaken by the District Council, does increase pressure.

Several years ago I was planning a holiday, with the choice of destination finely balanced between three popular tourist areas, but slightly favouring the Brecon Beacons. I telephoned three tourist offices for information and accommodation lists. Two were very helpful and supplied copious literature and accommodation lists, while Brecon seemed rather off-hand, sent the wrong list and no worthwhile information. That year public pressure on one national park failed to increase by two people, while another benefited (suffered?) from. the quality of

its marketing. It is a clear and unanswerable fact that information sells and that selling increases pressure. The New Forest cannot take more pressure and is crying out for less.

Connoisseurs of jargon will find some delights in this report. For example: "There will be a need for co-operation between all parties in accepting the positive role of tourism and using it responsibly for long term ecological and cultural care". I have visions of twenty thousand new eco-tourists and intellectuals clearing bracken and organising concerts of obscure chamber music.

I would like to think that the Councils "Tourism and Publicity Officer, Leisure Services" will receive a good response to his consultation document from those who are thoroughly sick of the over-use of almost every corner of the Forest. Of course there is a place for tourism in the New Forest with the small private operator advertising his own establishment and welcoming his own guests. It is the large scale public authority selling that must stop.

Voting for the Forest

The triennial Verderers election is once again almost upon us and as usual a large number of commoners are about to lose their rights to vote through a failure to register. Those on the existing register will automatically receive a reply paid form which they need only return to secure their voting rights. Any one not on the existing register will have to do a little more. If one acre with rights of common Forest, you are entitled to vote. In order to discover whether or not your farm, paddock or garden has those rights, (most land in and around the Forest does) it is usually necessary to go to the Queens House at Lyndhurst to examine the huge atlas kept there. However, at the New Forest Show this month, the Commoners Defence Association will have a copy of the atlas together with the necessary electoral registration forms. There will be expert (and free) assistance in identifying properties and completing the paperwork, so that those who lose their right to vote this year will really have only themselves to blame.