

New Forest Notes – July 1998

MEMOIRS OF A VICTORIAN DEPUTY SURVEYOR

Many out-of-print books on the New Forest are now so rare and expensive that they fall into one of two categories: those which one lends only to really trusted friends and those which one does not lend at all. Prominent in the latter group is that classic of New Forest literature "Thirty-five Years in the New Forest" by Gerald Lascelles, which was published in 1915 at a few shillings and which now changes hands for between £50 and £75. Its re-issue at the end of this month should fill conspicuous gaps in a good many local collections.

Gerald Lascelles held the position of Deputy Surveyor of the New Forest (the head man in the Forest despite his subordinate sounding title) from 1880 to 1914 and was a dominant figure throughout that period. When I was a child, there were still quite a few ancient foresters who could recall his reign. I remember one old man from Bramshaw, lamenting the state of the Open Forest rides at the time (late 1950s). "If Mr.Lascelles was out hunting on Monday and found a branch obstructing a track, he would have a man out to cut it off by Wednesday." In those days Deputy Surveyors evidently had their priorities right.

On his retirement in 1914, he set about writing "Thirty-five Years" which is still probably the most readable book on the New Forest ever published - chiefly because of its easy style and because it paints a portrait of a long lost Victorian/Edwardian Forest which must have been a paradise compared to today's over-used public park. That is not to say that it is an uncontroversial book. There are few of Lascelles's views on silviculture that would find favour in conservation circles today. His passionate devotion to "country sports" of all types is now distinctly unfashionable and his contempt for the Court of Verderers and all it stood for is openly expressed. But as a historical record, the book is of immense importance because it gives an intimate behind the scenes view of management at a time when the Crown and the Verderers were in a state of almost constant conflict. In 1877 the Forest had been saved from destruction, to the Crown's disgust, and the Verderers were struggling to prevent a rebirth of ambitions in the Office of Woods. Lascelles records this conflict from his own point of view and it is his valuable testimony which is being re-published by the New Forest Research and Publication Trust. The new edition has a useful introduction by David Perry who himself held the position of Deputy Surveyor from 1985 to 1992.

In addition to the sporting, historical and silvicultural sections of the book, Lascelles gives a fascinating account of his life at the Queen's House in Lyndhurst (the King's House during his latter years since, by tradition, its name changes to reflect the sex of the monarch). From this combined home and office he virtually ruled over the Forest, under the direction of the Commissioners of Woods. He recounts the history of the building and the renovations and alterations which were carried out there in his time. He also tells of the many famous visitors. Anyone of importance coming to the New Forest called at the King's House as a matter of course. For example, visitors in 1902 included the German Crown Prince and his party which the Deputy Surveyor had to equip with horses - a difficult task in August he complains. Lascelles provided the Prince "with a nice horse of my own, because, at that date, I thought it was important that he should not break his neck." For two days they wandered about the Forest and Lascelles wondered "who was the most bored person amongst us -

probably Metternich (the German ambassador)". Later, in 1907, Kaiser William II himself visited the King's House, but at a time when the Deputy Surveyor was not at home.

The book is an echo of a time when society was well ordered and everyone (not least in the Forest) knew his place. It is a record of the Forest when cars were a rare curiosity, visitors occasional and well-behaved and when the Deputy Surveyor could say with conviction that "the only fit way for a gentleman (to see the Forest) is from the back of a pleasant well-mannered horse". There may be a very few antique people left who will still agree with him on that.

"Thirty-five Years in the New Forest", with full colour cover and all the original illustrations can be obtained from the New Forest Research and Publication Trust (a registered charity) at 4, Clarence Road, Lyndhurst, price £9.95 (post free). Copies should also be available at the New Forest Show in the Forest Corner.

OWNING THE COMMON

Common land belongs to everyone and we all have a right to do what we please on it. These two statements represent fundamental errors of understanding of the New Forest as enduring as the myth of William I burning villages and churches wholesale as he made the Forest. The truth is that most common land is private land in the sense that it is privately owned like anyone's house and garden. With some exceptions, one has no more right to enter it than I have to picnic in a private garden of a house in Southampton. In fact most landowners tolerate public access, but that is another matter. The government's "right to roam" policy may alter things, although that is for the future.

Most of the New Forest's common land is owned by the Minister of Agriculture or the National Trust and both actively encourage public access, but there are also great tracts of private common land - much of it owned or formerly owned by Lord Normanton's estate. Over the years the estate has sold off bits and pieces, principally to adjoining owners and to gravel companies. On Rockford Common, for example, there are now at least seven different owners, but nothing on the ground to indicate their existence. Most of these longstanding owners have a good knowledge of their rights and obligations. They prevent abuse of the land, exercise sporting rights, cut timber, tolerate public access and so on. They do not try to enclose because they are not allowed to do so. That would infringe the commoners' rights.

From time to time, newcomers to the district buying common land fail to appreciate their responsibilities. An important case of this type has just occurred on one of Lord Normanton's commons near Ringwood. Here there is a delightfully situated property comprising an enclosed garden and house, surrounded by the common and overlooking the Avon Valley. Many years ago, the then owner bought the freehold of several acres of the common adjoining his house. The whole lot - house, garden and portion of common has recently been sold. The new owner, apparently in ignorance of the existence of common rights over most of his land, employed a contractor and set about fencing in the entire property, to the amazement of local commoners. Perhaps he assumed that he could convert the common into horse paddocks, immeasurably increasing the value of his holding. The encroachment was immediately challenged by local people, the Verderers and the Commoners Defence and has not progressed beyond a few posts, but it does emphasise the depth of misunderstanding among newcomers to the Forest.

SELLING FORMER FOREST LAND

Residents in the area of the Old Romsey Road at Cadnam have been surprised (and some of them alarmed) to learn of letters from the Valuation Office in Reading inviting offers for small portions of former New Forest land lying outside their homes. Last month I received one of these letters, which had been forwarded from an address I left twenty years ago. The intended land deal which it outlined has a long and tangled background.

Back in 1963, before the Heritage Area and its trappings had been heard of, ponies and cattle grazed the greens of the New Forest outside the Sir John Barlycorn at Cadnam and right up Old Romsey Road to the White Hart. Most of the greens were owned by the Forestry Commission and were an integral part of the New Forest. There was also an attractive fragment of Ancient Ornamental Woodland adjoining Wingfield Farm. Then came the fencing of the A 31 road and this portion of Forest was severed from the remainder. At almost the same time, the boundary of the Forest was amended so that the greens fell outside the perambulation and thus beyond the control of the Verderers. In 1965, the Commons Registration Act was passed and it became clear that unless common rights were registered over them (the land then being outside the Forest), the greens could probably be enclosed and sold off by the Forestry Commission and one or two other landowners. I accordingly registered rights of pasture in favour of some land I was then renting and the greens seemed secure.

What happened in the intervening years is not entirely clear. It looks as though the Forestry Commission sold (as it is quite entitled to do) some or all of its land to the Highways Agency. The Agency, in turn, decided that the land was surplus to its requirements and instructed the Valuation Office to sell it off. The Forestry Commission (if in fact it did sell) did not need to obtain the consent of the Verderers. The land was outside the Forest and the sale was in any case subject to common rights.

All this is rather curious, although in no way improper. The letter I received invited me to outline on the plan anything I wanted to buy and to state the price I was prepared to pay. I assume others had similar letters and the invitation did not, to my mind, make it sufficiently clear to potential buyers that they would not be entitled to fence the land or to erect anything on it. I asked for, and received, an assurance that this would be brought to the attention of buyers.

It now appears that the County Council has raised doubts as to whether the Highways Agency in fact owns all the land it is seeking to sell and the disposal is accordingly in abeyance. I certainly had no interest in buying, but residents on the spot might be very anxious indeed to add to their properties, with all the scope for misunderstanding that the purchase of common land involves. I have grave doubts as to the wisdom of selling off pieces common land in this way. It would be much better held by a local council as public open space and perhaps that will be its ultimate destiny as the Valuation Office tells me that several local authorities have shewn interest.