

NEW FOREST NOTES JUNE 2004

Remembering Gerald Lascelles

The austere little chapel in Lyndhurst's cemetery can scarcely before have seen anything like the events which took place there on 1st May. The pews were all filled and not only with human beings. In the row opposite me sat a large grey hawk with its back turned resolutely to the learned speakers, contentedly preening its feathers and occasionally gazing up into its owner's face. To my right another flapped irritably, while a third was probably asleep somewhere in the back row.

The occasion was a sort of memorial service for the Hon. Gerald Lascelles, seventy six years after his death, to mark the restoration of his grave and the reconstruction of its monument following the ravages of time and vandals. The odious work of the latter is all too obvious on many graves in this otherwise well maintained and dignified burial ground.

Lascelles was, of course, a very famous Deputy Surveyor (chief officer) of the New Forest, who held that position for 35 years from 1880. He subsequently wrote a book entitled "Thirty Five Years in the New Forest" which remains to this day one of the great classics of Forest literature. He was also a noted field sportsman and one of his great passions was falconry – hence the avian attendants at his memorial service. In 1872 he had become manager and hon. Secretary of the sport's leading body, "The Old Hawking Club", and he held this position for forty four years.

I have to admit that until I received an invitation from the British Falconry Club and British Hawking Association, I had been quite unaware that Lascelles was buried in Lyndhurst. As a younger son of the Earl of Harewood, I had assumed that he had returned to the family estates. I am not exactly sure that the great man would have approved of an invitation to a Verderer. He had spent most of his professional life locked in conflict with the Court, but time blunts old enmities. Moreover, his next door neighbours in life were two of my great-great-aunts and in death they lie only ten feet away, so perhaps family association was a less controversial justification for my presence. Anyhow, the present-day falconers of both Britain and the USA had done a fine and very costly job of restoring the Lascelles monument. It has to be said that it is a rather flamboyant monument comprising a white marble pillar entwined with carved ivy and surrounded by a kerb recording the deaths of Gerald, his wife and two sons. To this cleaned, re-erected and re-turfed monument, the falconers have added a small bronze plaque marking the restoration.

The service of re-dedication was conducted by the Rev. Camilla Walton, in the absence through ill health of Lyndhurst's vicar, the Rev. Peter Murphy. The vicar's illness was particularly unfortunate as he had played an important part in the restoration project. There were addresses from several falconers from both sides of the Atlantic and an excellent speech from the present Deputy Surveyor, Mike Seddon. A bag-piper had been engaged (for no very obvious reason) and in a cemetery filled with bluebells and surrounded by the Open Forest, it was a very pleasant little ceremony. If Lascelles could have foreseen his final

resting place, the course of his last earthly journey from the main road might have given him some grim satisfaction. A battle on behalf of the Lyndhurst Burial Board against the Verderers over the construction of the cemetery access road resulted in one of his more notable victories. A local historian present at the re-dedication remarked that it was probably the first time that three Deputy Surveyors (one live and two dead) had been together in Lyndhurst Cemetery, but I quite failed to find the grave of Lascelles's predecessor – Lawrence Henry Cumberbatch.



FALCONERS AT THE RESTORED LASCELLES MONUMENT

Americans do not do things by halves and the restoration team had a further, late afternoon, appointment visiting the restored grave of a second champion of their sport, Edward Blair Michell, in Somerset. To record both events they had printed 175 copies of a well-produced souvenir booklet describing the lives of the two men. This will no doubt become a collector's item.

The Progress Project

Last year I attended the inaugural dinner for the project, held at Rhinefield House. At the time I expressed some reservations about its usefulness and since then, as one of the Verderers' representatives on the consultative group, I have remained unconvinced.

The project is to do with recreation in the New Forest and in Fontainebleau Forest and seeks to reconcile the competing demands of leisure and conservation in heavily-used

honey pots such as we have here, administered by the Forestry Commission. It seemed to me from the outset that it was seeking to do the impossible. In the New Forest you must either give priority to conservation at the expense of restricting recreation or vice versa. The Minister's Mandate (the government's directive to the Commission on how to manage the Forest) requires the former, but in fact management practice usually seems to favour recreation. Anyhow, two meetings of Progress have now been held, the latest in the gracious setting of Minstead Lodge during May. The consultative group is made up of representatives of the various recreation pressure groups such as mountain bikers, dog walkers and horse riders. There are also commoners, councillors, landowners and others. The task before them at the first two meetings was to identify damaging behaviour by Forest users and to draft codes of conduct. The fundamental question as to whether the Forest can stand recreation at present levels, whether expressed through good or bad behaviour, was definitely not on the agenda.

Muddled thinking seems to have prevailed from the start because, while most consultees seemed to regard codes of conduct as a "good thing", there was also an almost universal view that well-behaved and sensible users had no need of them and inconsiderate ones would certainly ignore them. Nevertheless, we worked away amending Forestry Commission drafts, often knocking out bits that different users found unacceptable – "too critical of use X, too unfriendly, too restrictive of MY very reasonable privileges in the Forest" – and came up with some fairly bland results which I do not expect will achieve very much. I suggested to the Commission's recreation manager that the exercise was rather pointless because his staff could have produced the completed text of the codes in a morning at a tiny fraction of the cost of the consultative committee. It appears that I had completely missed the point. The main object of the exercise was to ensure that all user groups had, in the jargon, "ownership" of the new codes !

I am rather inclined to think that the whole costly process, which will go on for several years, is being undertaken simply because vast amounts of EU money have become available for it and because it will give perceived respectability to the Forestry Commission's recreational plans in the years ahead – irrespective of whether or not they damage the Forest. Certainly the superficial nature of the subjects discussed in the first two meetings gives little ground for confidence that many of the real problems will be tackled. They would be too controversial and might force the Forestry Commission into some politically unpopular action. Still, I am told that more serious matters, such as recreational zoning, may be discussed later on, so that those of us who were inclined to be a bit fidgety towards the end of the last session will have to grit our teeth and keep attending.

A vanished landmark

May saw the disappearance, unmourned and probably almost un-noticed, of the huge green water tower which had, for more than sixty years, dominated the outline of Long Beech Inclosure. It was reduced to a heap of scrap iron. As a child I used to gaze up through the lattice of steel at the tank above. In those days it was surrounded by a small town, housing

bombed-out residents of Southampton who had taken over the huts vacated by the RAF when Stoney Cross closed. The tank was in fact the last surviving above-ground structure dating from the aerodrome days (leaving aside a couple of cattle troughs). It had survived even the concrete runways and perimeter tracks, broken up for hardcore in three phases of concrete crushing between 1966 and 2000. The Forestry Commission's land agent had told me in advance of the intended demolition, subject to a "bat man" finding no evidence of its being used for a roost. Presumably if such evidence had been forthcoming, demolition would have been prohibited. One is not allowed to annoy bats. This advance warning allowed me to take a number of photographs during March. Perhaps the similar Beaulieu Aerodrome water tower will shortly go the same way.

The restoration of Stoney Cross Aerodrome is now very nearly complete. A few patches of decaying concrete remain here and there, incorporated in car parks and camp sites and with two areas used as dumps for the Commission's bracken composting programme and heather bales. Nature, aided by pressure from the Verderers, has done a rather good job in obliterating this gross intrusion on the Forest and returning it to the heathland from which it was taken. Of the hundreds of buildings and other structures which once occupied the area between Fritham and Sluffers, now only a large underground petrol tank remains, years after the Court started pressing for its removal. I expect that will be quietly forgotten until it collapses under some unfortunate horseman or tractor driver perhaps twenty years hence.

Meals on wheels

Forest animals and human recreation do not always coexist very happily. Ponies, corrupted by tourists hand feeding them, can become over-demanding in the pursuit of treats. The occasional stallion will take a fancy to or chase off a ridden mare, while there was even a case of a sow defending her litter against a perceived attack by a jogger. Cattle are different. They look on people with disdain and, because they are seen as smelly and probably infectious beasts, fit only for the dinner table in suitable slices, the visitors ignore them. "They are so unlike the dear little ponies". It was therefore something of a surprise for the Verderers' office to receive a report of cows "molesting" cyclists in one of the big recreation areas. An agister was sent to investigate.

It turned out that the cows' owner was in the habit of distributing cattle food from a bag tied to his cycle. The herd had evidently thought deeply about this (insofar as cows think deeply about anything) and had come to the very reasonable conclusion that if breakfast arrived on a cycle, all cycles must necessarily carry cattle cake. It must only be necessary to trot after one to receive a meal issue.

The outcome of the story is not recorded. Perhaps with the end of winter the feeding ceased, the cows gave up their enthusiasm for cyclists and the molestation ceased.

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