

## **NEW FOREST NOTES JUNE 2009**

### **Spedegue's Dropper & Arthur Conan Doyle**

Following my mention last month of a murder (double) at Little Eye Green, the dreadful events were described in the correspondence columns of the Lymington Times by one retired police officer, while another wrote to me privately on the same subject. I also understand that the murders formed the basis of a film in the 1990s, much to the distress of the victims' relatives. Altogether it is rather sad that so beautiful a place should be scarred by such a memory, so this is an opportunity to give the last word to a rather more cheerful reference to the Green.

In 1929 Sir Arthur Conan Doyle published a short story with the curious name of "Spedegue's Dropper" and I have always felt that the opening scene could well have been inspired by Little Eye Green. Conan Doyle, of course, owned the large house adjoining Bignell Wood and bearing the same name. He used it, with his second wife, as a sort of holiday home from 1925 until his death. Behind the house and leading into the wood is a small gate and if you walk out from this gate for three hundred yards, the first clearing you come to is Little Eye Green. I have lost the copy of the story which I once possessed and have been unable to check the detail, but from memory it was something like this.

On a summer's evening, a cricket expert went for a walk in the New Forest and in due course came to a green clearing. There he saw a small group playing cricket. As he watched, it became apparent that one of them (a local teacher named Spedegue) had invented an entirely new form of bowling of such power and accuracy that the batsman was without defence against it. In great secrecy, Spedegue was encouraged to develop his technique and was at the last moment drafted into the England test team. Spedegue's dropper was then unleashed on the unsuspecting Australians with delightful and inevitable consequences.

Of course there is no way of proving what green was in Conan Doyle's mind, but Little Eye Green must be a prime candidate. In an attempt to check the detail of the story, I tried the Christopher Tower Library in Lyndhurst, but without success. The temporary librarian, Peter Roberts, tells me that they have a very good collection of New Forest fiction, but that this story is new to him. I think it was originally issued as part of a collection called "The Maracot Deep and Other Stories", so if anyone has a spare copy they would like to donate to the library, I am sure that would be most welcome.

### **Chaos and congestion at Fritham**

I try to avoid Fritham at the weekends because it gets very busy. In the early part of last month I was compelled to deliver some equipment there, to a work site in the Forest, on both a Saturday and Sunday at about lunchtime. Conditions around the Royal Oak and the adjacent car parks and Open Forest were indescribably bad. Cars were parked on the verges and on the road surface for hundreds of yards, and the car parks were full to overflowing, with the overspill stretching down the hill towards Eyeworth. The surfaces of the car parks were

ruted and the “street furniture” broken and dirty. Queues of people stretched away from the pub, whether waiting for service or for lavatories I do not know. The entire environment was nothing short of disgusting, a disgrace to the New Forest and also to the responsible authorities. All this is nothing new. It is due entirely to the lack of action by those authorities who are too terrified or too idle to take the control measures necessary. For years there has been an attitude on the part of the Forestry Commission, the planners and the highway authority that there is nothing that can be done but pretend that the problem does not exist and allow it to get worse. Sometimes a few yards of ditch get dug and sometimes a few more rails or notices appear, but this response is wholly inadequate. There is an ostrich-like view that control measures are so unpopular that they cannot be undertaken and that acknowledging that this part of the New Forest is being abused by gross over-use is not “visitor friendly” and therefore not to be contemplated. Nobody in the Forestry Commission, or indeed within the National Park, seems prepared to admit the obvious: that you cannot go on pouring more and more pressure into a tiny corner of the Forest without the sort of appalling results which are apparent at Fritham. We were told that a National Park would solve this sort of evil, yet in its plans it appears obsessed with minor development detail, pursuing householders who cut a four inch diameter branch off a tree or put two ponies into a paddock, while turning a blind eye to the issues which really matter.

So what is needed at Fritham ? Firstly there must be a frank acknowledgement that limits on the number of visitors at peak periods are essential. Of course there will be protests, rows and expense, but all those must be met. Parking capacity must be linked strictly to the ability of the village and adjacent Forest to stand pressure and that means substantial reduction. All verge and road parking must be absolutely prohibited in the affected areas. That means using the law and it means the continuing and unrelenting expense of enforcement officers, whether called wardens, rangers or parking attendants. Clearly at peak periods there will have to be signage at the entrance to the village, perhaps along the lines of “All car parks ahead full: no access except to private property”. The pub must make provision for a reasonable number of customers’ cars on its own land (for which the planners must give permission) and must not expect the Forest to bear the burden of its trade. Beyond that reasonable limit it should not be allowed to go. The appalling pressure of commercial establishments promoting the use of quiet areas to the north for cycling must cease – because that is a major contribution to the congestion and sordid conditions at Fritham. Similarly, the wholesale cycle trespass into the Open Forest from the Fritham car parks, connived-at by the Forestry Commission, must end. Then there is the further obvious point that if I want to enjoy a service or entertainment for which there is a greater demand than supply, I may need to book in advance, or pay for it or both. I don’t expect simply to barge in and grab that service or entertainment because I think I am entitled to it. What is so very different about the key pressure-points in the New Forest ? Is it so utterly unthinkable that if I want to visit an over-used car park on 20<sup>th</sup> June, I might have to apply for a ticket in

advance ? What will happen when, say, ten thousand cars want to visit Fritham at the weekend instead of what I imagine is now a thousand or two ?

If all this could be done, the worn-out verges would revert to grass, the residents' peace would return, the clog of parked cars would disappear, the qualities of a once-attractive village green would be restored, the beautiful woods and heaths north of the village would be relieved of pressure and would begin to breathe again. Those who visit would enjoy a quiet, clean, well-maintained and uncongested car park and a walk in a peaceful Forest beyond. Is all that really not worth £2 towards the costs of providing such an experience ? It is a price I would willingly pay when travelling in the West Country, but in the New Forest the "people" are assumed to have an absolute right to abuse the area to the point of destruction while the Forestry Commission and the Park simply look the other way. The manner in which much recreation is managed in the New Forest does no credit to a great public property and is as bad an advertisement for the national park system as it is possible to imagine.

#### **Change at the Commoners Defence**

The announcement of a new chairman for the Commoners' Defence Association is an important matter for the New Forest. I suppose that of all the voluntary posts in Forest management, that of chairman of the CDA is the most crucial and (after the Official Verderer), potentially the most influential. For some years past we have had the services of Brian Ingram in that office. He is a retired head agister and when he was first appointed there were not a few people who wondered how well he would cope with this essentially paper-pushing job after a career of practical outdoor work. They need not have worried. The general opinion is that the Association has been in remarkably good hands and continues to be the leading voice among innumerable voluntary groups in the Forest.

The new chairman, Mr. Graham Ferris, I do not know, but I am told that he is very well qualified for the job and that is a good start. Apart from the basic essentials for any chairman – tact blended with a certain degree of firmness – the New Forest requires three areas of competence. Firstly, it has a peculiar (although not very complicated) legal framework and a good understanding of that, whether as a society officer, Verderer or paid official, is absolutely essential. If you don't understand the basic land categories and how they are used and inter-relate, life is not going to be easy. Next there is the question of practical stock management on the Forest, which is essential to the agricultural branch of management such as the CDA or the Verderers and desirable in the Park and the Forestry Commission. This is sometimes portrayed as a mystical ability which can only be acquired by transfer from generation to generation. That is nonsense. It can be learnt just as forestry is learnt, but too few officials take the trouble to do so. Finally there is the too-little regarded question of geography. Many of the people I deal with (Forestry Commission staff generally being an honourable exception), really have no knowledge at all of the Forest on the ground and it is not a little irritating to know that some of them, often councillors, are in positions of great influence over what happens here. The late chairman of the CDA probably knows every weak fence and every overgrown ditch from Blackwell Common to Woodgreen and such an understanding is

exceptional, but I would like to see a rigorous geography exam for all those who set themselves up as arbiters of the Forest's destiny. At the moment I think there would be a very high failure rate.

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