

## **NEW FOREST NOTES JUNE 2014**

### **The wreckage in the Forest's Ancient woods**

When in January this year I wrote that the damage from the Christmas storms was not as bad as that of 1987 and 1990, it could not have been foreseen that the season of destruction was still far from over. We actually ended the winter with the Forest in a real mess. The Forestry Commission was remarkably quick in clearing the gravel roads, even though this seemed to involve pushing trees aside and leaving them in untidy heaps rather than a neat clearance. Still, in such an emergency, it would have been difficult to expect much better. There are still some parts of the Forest I have not visited since the storms, but the almost complete flattening of parts of Perrywood Ironshill Inclosure must rank high on the list of damage in the Inclosures. It certainly equals the destruction in such places as Sloden which occurred in the 1990 storm. The loss of such uniform blocks of conifers is more of a commercial problem than an aesthetic one. No doubt most of the timber will be salvaged and sold and in the long term there could be opportunities for replanting with broadleaved trees or returning land to Open Forest status. The far more worrying question is what will happen in the "Ancient Ornamental Woods".

The Open Forest woodland (or Ancient Ornamental woods as the New Forest's legislation calls them) amount to about 5000 acres and are thus a fairly small, but crucial, element of the Forest. The woods are largely old oak and beech, the most ancient of which date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is these veteran trees, especially the pollarded beeches, which were hit the hardest during the storms. Their loss is very sad, but given sensible levels of browsing pressure, they will be replaced by nature in due course. The losses will take generations to make good, but the more immediate problem is how the wreckage left by the storms will be dealt with. The Ancient Ornamental woods have been left in a most appalling state, with some of them so densely littered in fallen trees and limbs that access even on foot is very difficult. Under the inflexible prescriptions of current management, this impenetrable tangle of trees should be left to rot on the ground except in very restricted circumstances such as when a tree falls across a lawn or when access for stock management is blocked. The objective is to provide increasing amounts of food and shelter for rare beetles, flies, fungi and lichens. For all of these the Forest is renowned. They rightly deserve proper protection and reserves of food. There is also the entirely legitimate aim of protecting natural regeneration in tangles of bramble and fallen branches. The problem with all of this is to determine exactly what comprises proper provision.

The open heaths of the Forest are already in the grip of extreme scientific interests with nearly every stream system being subjected to some measure of filling with clay and rejects reinforced with posts and heather bales, irrespective of landscape consequences and other interests. The objective seems to be to eliminate every little waterfall (re-designated as "knick points") and every small area of "erosion" – features which give the streams their traditional character. So it is with the ancient woods, now managed with little regard for anything but rather obscure ecological considerations and with a blind disregard for their history.

The much valued organisms dependent upon dead wood are not the result of centuries during which the Forest was abandoned to a wilderness state comprising an impenetrable jungle of rotting timber, but of almost the exact reverse of this. The Forest's woodlands throughout history were, until the coming of the railways provided coal for the rich, the only source of fuel for the Forest's population, supplemented, for those with rights, by peat turf. Only in the years of growing affluence since WW2, when hard physical work has become unfashionable, has this changed. Such documentary evidence as we have suggests that the ancient woods were largely swept clean of accessible fallen timber until very recent times – and still the biological interest has prospered. There would always have been a reserve of wood which escaped the net because it was too difficult to extract, too knotted or too remote.

Large quantities of firewood, amounting to hundreds of loads a year, were provided from the old woods to satisfy the fuel rights of the commoners. Indeed, many trees were actually felled for this purpose – a policy which would find few advocates at the present time and which would be utterly unnecessary because of the superabundance of windfall timber. Even today the law requires the Forestry Commission to satisfy the much reduced number of fuel rights from the Open Forest woods. It is a law the Commission largely chooses to ignore, instead providing cord wood from the Inclosures.

Such fallen trees as were not required for fuel rights were sold with, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, certain contractors being given exclusive rights to purchase within particular divisions of the Forest. They were thus assiduous in seeking out fallen trees. Local charcoal burners were also large consumers of fallen timber and of waste from production for the Navy. It is a measure of the extent to which fuel was prized and sought out that the Crown sold "moor wood", the local name for tree stumps and roots with which (presumably), the more impoverished and desperate purchasers had to be content. Anyone who has tried digging out a tree stump by hand will know that this is not something to be undertaken lightly.

Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as photography became widespread, the ancient woods figured in innumerable book illustrations. Occasionally a figure will be seen posing beside a newly fallen tree, but apart from this the woods are open and free of debris, almost unimaginably different from today's tangled mess. At this period there is also the evidence of early large scale Ordnance Survey maps (1860s onwards) which show a vast network of paths and rides, a network which survived well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but which now decreases every year as more and more become blocked and are conveniently forgotten about, allowing them to fall out of the Forestry Commission's occasional maintenance programmes.

During the two world wars the demand for fuel continued unabated and I can remember in the 1950s and 1960s the keen competition there was for any fallen branch in the woods adjoining my home village. After a storm, purchasers would be out early "reserving" anything they could find and quickly paying the keeper so that they could mark it "sold".

Despite all of this use, which must surely have continued since before the formation of the New Forest, the organisms so much valued by the ecologists survived. I certainly do not argue for the removal of all dead wood, but simply for the return of a more sensible system of management such as that which pertained thirty years ago when 20% of any fallen tree was retained for what local people disdainfully described as “beetle food”. Nor would I want to see a return to the bad old days of the 1960s when small contractors were allowed to run riot on their tractors in the ancient woods, cutting up the ground without thought to weather conditions or the convenience of others, with the Forestry Commission turning a blind eye. They and other small purchasers were their own worst enemies through this vandalism.

Like so many questions in the New Forest, the proper management of the ancient woods is a question of balance. Landscape, reasonable access, the convenience of residents and livestock welfare all need to be taken into account, but at the moment ecological extremism seems to be out of control to the exclusion of all other interests.

### **The mystery of a vanished cottage**

Scattered through the woods and heaths of the Forest are the half- forgotten sites of vanished dwellings ranging in status from the royal palace at Bolderwood, demolished in the 1830s, to its tiny neighbour, Holmhill Cottage, swept away by the Forestry Commission in 1978. The history of these dwellings is usually fairly well documented, but there is one about which I know very little, (perhaps because it is eighteen miles away at the other end of the Forest from where I live) and whose story has always fascinated me.

Cowleys Cottage lay on the south edge of Hilltop Heath, hard against the boundary of the Exbury estate and comprising an excrescence into the Forest from that half mile straight fence line. In other words, it was encroached from the Forest, although somehow its site later found its way within the estate’s fence. Perhaps it was sold by the Crown after abandonment. Anyhow, it was built sometime after 1810 and before 1868. It seems to have survived into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but I do not know when it disappeared. It was, by our standards, very remote and had no road access. A little paddock, which seems to have been attached to the cottage, existed south of the estate bank and here there was also a footpath access. Little now remains but the overgrown garden plot scattered with bricks and tile, together with an ancient yew tree which looks as though it may have pre-dated the dwelling.

The most curious physical survival at the site is the cottage’s water supply. Unlike most small dwellings of its type, which commonly had a brick or oak-lined well, Cowleys Cottage was served by a leat. This collected water from a pit or tank on the edge of a boggy area a long way to the north on the heath. The leat then conducted the flow to a further storage tank (which may once have been lined) just north of the cottage. Whether there was then a flow actually into the building is not clear and the leat itself is now dry.

Leats of any type are rare in the New Forest, although very common in areas such as Dartmoor. The only major examples I know of are the complex system of water management channels north of Brockenhurst which served a mediaeval mill.

I would be very interested to know how the cottage came to be built, who were its occupiers and when and why it was finally abandoned. Was it a piece of private enterprise encroachment, or did the estate or the Crown perhaps absorb a bit of Forest for a keeper's cottage ? Something of its history must be known by longstanding residents in the area.

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