

# NEW FOREST NOTES JUNE 2015

## The latest stream filling projects

This summer the Forestry Commission is preparing to undertake an unprecedented number of stream filling projects across the New Forest, but mostly in the north. Nine of these major engineering operations are in the programme, one of which has planning permission, while in another case the rubber-stamping of an application is expected shortly. It is far from clear how the Forestry Commission determines which project will be the subject of an application and which will not, but with the National Park sitting in judgement on schemes for which it is effectively a joint promotor or supporter of the development, it probably does not matter very much. The result is more or less a foregone conclusion. Ordinary principles of justice (not necessarily the same as law) would suggest that the Park should not determine such applications and that they should be “called in” by central government. However, this is the New Forest and it tends to like its own rules.

When the stream filling scheme was first introduced, it had the not unreasonable objective of making good the damage caused by deep ugly drainage work of the 1970s. Few people, I think, would have had any objection if the programme had continued on the same basis – certainly I would not. The drainage channels were not only unsightly but dangerous and they did little to improve the grazing (their original objective). In addition, the ecologists did not like them, maintaining that they caused sub-divisions of the Forest to be classified as in “unfavourable condition”. Unfortunately things quickly got out of hand, with the promoters of stream filling scouring the Forest for every little bit of watercourse which could possibly be said to show signs of even natural processes of erosion. All regard for the history and landscape of the Forest was thrown out of the window. Money is, almost literally, being dumped into every discoverable hole in the Forest’s streams, so as to keep funds flowing and to support the army of “experts” employed in the process. Of course this is public money and, since government departments are notorious for wasting money, its expenditure might be regarded as of little consequence – if it were not for the damage being done to the Forest. On the other hand, even public money ultimately comes out of the pockets of all of us as taxpayers.

There seems to be a complete lack of acceptance that landscape is not static. Even in a fairly stable environment such as the New Forest, natural processes continue. Heavy run-off of rainwater may deepen the occasional stream course and natural waterfalls may form. Seepage terraces in some instances cut back into the hillsides and bogs expand, swallowing up sites which were once enclosed and cultivated land. Spring lines change over time and even pony paths, scoured by rainwater, can become shallow depressions across the heath over many generations. None of this is acceptable to the restorers. They must pour in clay and gravel at any cost.

Of the nine filling projects underway at the present time, only that at Stoney Cross Aerodrome is really true to the original objectives of the scheme. This will fill a deep straight drain which was excavated to take water away from the main north-south runway and the adjacent perimeter track. At the other extreme we have operations at three sites where the valleys are almost entirely natural and certainly free from significant artificial drainage work. At Picket Bottom there is a delightful little stream winding between portions of green lawn and bog, fed from springs in the hills above. Of over 700 metres of stream in the area to be treated, only 100 metres at the north end was once affected by

cut-back of an Inclosure drain and this erosion has already been arrested. Near Holmhill Inclosure another tiny watercourse which has seen no intensive draining is to be the target, while on Acres Down there is to be an attack on a minor piece of natural erosion further up the same brook. Acres Down actually raises other issues, of which more detail is set out below.

These schemes represent the extremes, where work is either clearly justified or absolutely unnecessary. More complex issues arise where there has been past modification of a watercourse, long since stabilised, and where often major intervention will cause far more damage than it has a chance of doing good. Into this category falls the impending work at Harvestslade, White Moor and Pondhead. Nature is a very good healer in the New Forest. The recovery of wartime encroachments is a fine example of this. Such stream filling sites are best left well alone. We have had examples such as the Longwater case where the restorers destroyed the drainage system around the Elizabethan Mallard Mead on the grounds that it was “not natural” despite four hundred years in which nature had taken over. One enthusiast even suggested filling the boundary ditch of an Iron Age field system near Fordingbridge !

### **Acres Down**

As part of its current stream filling work, the Forestry Commission intends to use Acres Down near Minstead as a series of transport routes and materials storage areas. On past evidence, this will involve the use of large lorries and/or very heavy all-terrain dumper machines. The proposal raises some worrying questions.

In the area between Ashurst Lodge and Denny, huge tracts of heathland here have been “closed” to the public for several years while the Forestry Commission looks for unexploded mortars left over from the WW1 training grounds there. To the best of my knowledge, neither man nor beast has ever been hurt by explosives in this area since the military abandoned it in the 1920s, but Acres Down has a very different and grizzly reputation. In the early 1950s there was a terrible tragedy here in which a child was killed – blown up by a grenade. Local memory says that several other youngsters were injured. I remember as a child being given stern warnings never to touch metal objects in the Forest, with the story of Acres Down being quoted as a frightening cautionary tale. Through the centre of these firing ranges, the Forestry Commission is to send a fleet of heavy vehicles in support of its filling operations. Since Acres Down’s reputation is well known, this seems at best, most imprudent.

After the child’s death, the authorities carried out a further check of the Down for explosives and then, in a state of increasing desperation, told the Forestry Commission to burn the three firing ranges here from end to end. The objective was to expose unexploded missiles and, it was hoped, to detonate some as the flames swept across them. Clearly this was not a fire to receive the close human supervision expected of today’s controlled burning. Dreadfully injured staff could have been the result. I think the wide firebreak trenches which cross the Down were probably made at this time (1951) in order to give some measure of control, although the formation of the breaks must have been a hazardous operation in itself. Perhaps the military and armoured vehicles were involved in making them.

So far as I know, the outcome of these precautions is not recorded, but it would be a brave or foolhardy person who could claim that Acres Down is now absolutely safe. It brings to mind the case in 1998 when the Commission sent a heavy tractor and rotovator to plough up Cooper's Hill in the heart of a fragmentation range which had specialized in testing anti-personnel devices. That work was part of a gorse regeneration project. Fortunately no injuries resulted, although only weeks before the army blew up an unexploded device about a quarter of a mile away at Amberwood Cottage.

### **Roman Burley**

Burley is home to many people who the Forest might traditionally have regarded as "foreigners", attracted by the beautiful surroundings, fine houses and proximity to the big towns of Southampton and Bournemouth. This is a fairly modern and entirely peaceful influx which has been progressing for less than one hundred and fifty years, but there is growing evidence of Burley's popularity at a time of more violent invasion.

None of the Forest's villages is able to claim a clear Roman origin, although a scattering of Roman pottery finds is distributed across the district without particular reference to present-day settlement. Burley, however, although no Silchester, does seem to have been of more than passing interest to the Romano-British population, if not their Roman masters. The village's leading local historian, Felicite Hardcastle, records how Roman pottery was found near the vicarage, although with no precise location being given. There was also a small but significant group of kilns operating in the area to the east of the village from Bratley Plain to Burley Lodge. Four separate and widely spaced kilns or kiln groups are known to have produced pottery there, the first having been discovered about two hundred years ago by workmen digging a hole for a gate post.

In more recent times it looked as though the flow of finds had dried up. Then, about forty years ago, forestry vehicles cut up a lawn to the east of the village revealing more Roman finds. In 2006, a small Roman settlement was found not far from Picket Post and it is commonly said (without much firm evidence) that the A 31 is on the line of a Roman road.

During the last decade, nothing further was added to our knowledge of Roman Burley, but a remarkable run of three separate finds of pottery has been made this spring, consolidating our view of Burley as an area of particular interest seventeen hundred years ago. The finds themselves are very unspectacular. They are mostly of "New Forest grey ware", coarse black and grey vessels used for kitchen purposes, but one piece is from a finer wine flagon or similar pot of a type made near Fordingbridge. Unimpressive they may be, but they are sufficient to show occupation and perhaps farming on the margins of the present-day village during Roman times.

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