

NEW FOREST NOTES JUNE 2017

The railway legacy

Of all the changes that have battered the New Forest over the last two hundred years, the arrival of the railway (built 1846-7) was probably the most radical – if not necessarily the most damaging. It commenced the alteration of the Forest from a quiet agricultural backwater to the booming tourist honeypot that it is today. J.G.Cox's excellent little booklet "Castleman's Corkscrew" gives an account of the construction. The Southampton and Dorchester Railway, as it was called, received parliamentary approval in 1845 and work on the Forest section (Ashurst to Ringwood) was completed by 1st May 1847. On that day the contractor, Morton Peto, ran a train from Lyndhurst Road to Dorchester to demonstrate his entitlement to a £5000 bonus for completion on time. Today I suppose a similar project would take perhaps fifteen years to get off the ground, let alone be actually constructed. So rapid was the progress that even the settlement of compensation to the Crown was not reached until July of 1846 and then at the staggering sum of £12,000. That, in modern terms might be in the region of a million pounds, paid for what was then looked on as virtually worthless barren heathland. The Crown's compensation enabled a start to be made on drainage projects which created and maintained many of the most valued grazing lawns of today, although it was later to become the subject of a lengthy legal dispute with the Verderers as to its proper allocation. The railway itself must have seemed a shattering intrusion into the quiet of the Forest. My great, great grandfather, who was then living in Lyndhurst, evidently regarded it as sufficiently interesting to break off from his usual pastoral landscapes to paint the new Ashurst (Lyndhurst Road) station in 1857.

The social consequences of the railway's arrival are well known and only too obvious in the present state of the Forest, but its legal legacy is much less widely known and still today dominates a lot of the business of the Verderers. One of the most important provisions of the Southampton and Dorchester Railway Act was that if any part of the land acquired from the Crown ceased to be used for railway purposes for a period of two years it should revert to the Forest and again become subject to the rights of the commoners. Such a reversion must have seemed at that time as improbable as the closure of the A 31 road and its return to grazing land would appear to us today, but closure of course is exactly what happened in 1964 when that part of the line west of Brockenhurst was shut down under the Beeching plans. An area of fifty-two acres was returned to the Forest, if not properly reinstated, in March of 1972. The return of the line itself would have presented considerable complications, but it was the ancillary enclosures (cottages, stations, sidings, hotels etc) that have kept the land agents and lawyers busy for many decades past and these reversions were not confined to the closed portions of the line. There are many former railway properties in the Forest scattered along the line north east of Brockenhurst. Some have been successfully recovered, while others remain the subject of long-running legal disputes.

No sooner had the western part of the railway closed down than all sorts of damaging development and property speculation ideas began to emerge. One of the earliest was a plan to turn the huge cutting at Blackhamsley Hill into a local authority landfill site for refuse. That, fortunately, failed to make any progress. Then in March 1966, two years after the closure, there emerged a

grandiose highway scheme of a type we seldom see today. The road from Wilverley Plain to Burley was closed and removed over the greater part. Traffic was diverted via Wilverley Lodge onto the old railway track and thence to an interchange at the Holmsley station site. In retrospect, I doubt if the project was legal, fenced as the new railway road was, but it did result in a considerable amount of fast traffic being diverted onto a new safe route. This has almost certainly saved the lives of countless ponies and cattle over the years and was an early proof of the efficacy of fencing in protecting Forest stock.

At the Holmsley end of this road scheme the A35 traffic is carried over the former railway (now road) on one of the old bridges and this is now in such a state of disrepair that it is going to need replacement. The cost will be huge. Moreover, because the temporary closure of the A35 is deemed impossible, a new bridge is proposed to the east of the present structure, resulting in a net loss (if a small one) of Forest land as the main road is diverted across it. The old bridge and the redundant portion of the present A35 will be removed. The plan has yet to be approved by the various authorities, including the Verderers, and it is likely to take as long to achieve this as the entire building of the Southampton and Dorchester line.

The Wilverley diversion and the abandoned Blackhamsley dumping plan were not the only opportunities identified by potential developers. West of Holmsley and east of Wilverley Lodge the Forestry Commission opened up cycle routes on the old line. Plans to try forcing these routes through to Ringwood, invading a particularly quiet corner of the Forest, were thwarted by the failure of the railway drains below Dur Hill where the track bed has turned into an impenetrable bog. There was also much discussion in 1971, promoted by the Burley Village Protection Society, about the so-called "Burley bypass". This would have taken local traffic along the disused line into Ringwood and allowed the closure of the Picket Post junction. That scheme made no progress and a hugely expensive interchange was eventually built at Picket Post rendering a revival of the plan unthinkable. Finally, so far as the line itself was concerned, there was the 2009 appalling proposal by the Association of Train Operating Companies for the re-opening the railway, but that too seems to have faded away.

If the old line has attracted developers like bees to honey, the redundant buildings were even more of a draw and they included a number of potentially very valuable properties between Lyndhurst Road and Brockenhurst which had ceased to meet the strict wording of the Railway Act. Their history is extremely complex and the Verderers' files bulge with counsel's opinions and enormous bundles of plans, but to start with there was the case of Holmsley Station and the No.10 Gate cottage at Brockenhurst. When the line closed and the reversion provisions of the Act came into effect, the railway and its buildings were handed over not to the Forestry Commission as might have been expected, but to the Crown Estate (the previous "owner" of the Forest). The Estate commissioners set about selling off properties which were in fact again subject to common rights under the Act. A very long legal dispute followed in which the Crown Estate eventually (in 1977) paid the Verderers compensation of £3500. That was then quite a large sum. Included in this settlement was property improperly disposed of at Woodfidley east of Brockenhurst. No.11 Gatehouse was at the time still occupied by an ex-railway employee and did not form part of the agreement. The Verderers had felt it

inappropriate to take action there, but they came to regret that decision. In due course that bungalow too was sold and in that case the legal advice was that the commoners and not the Court would need to challenge the sale. No such challenge was made and an ultra-modern bungalow was built on its site, to the shame of the planners, in the depths of the Forest.

There was a more satisfactory outcome at Lyndhurst Road. There is 1991 the Crown Estate was contemplating the sale of property surrounding the station and by now the commissioners seemed to have learnt their lesson. Negotiations dragged on for the best part of a decade, but in 2000 the Verderers eventually received £120,000 as their 50% agreed share when a block of four railway cottages was sold at auction.

The railway's legacy of threats to the Forest and of disputes has been a dominant feature of my forty-five years' association with the Verderers and no doubt that legacy will continue for as long as the legal issues remain unresolved and the physical traces of the line and its infrastructure survive.

Ex-inclosures and the Forest's pony drifts

In June of last year I wrote about the Forestry Commission's radical plans to abandon much of its commercial timber-growing areas of the Forest (called Inclosures), turning them over largely to broadleaved amenity woodlands. The consultation process on these plans is, I am told, still grinding its way forward and we have yet to see the outcome, although it is difficult to believe that much will change from the draft. While the plans are mostly beneficial to the Forest, some problems are already beginning to show themselves as the Commission starts to pre-empt the results of the discussions.

The management of Forest stock requires the careful positioning of small wooden stockades (called pounds) into which ponies can be driven by the agisters. They are used particularly during the annual drifts (round-ups) and depend upon secure fencing of the approaches so that the driven animals are unable to escape. In the 19th century there were about nine "Forest pounds" such as those long abandoned examples at Canterton and Linwood, but the total today is probably nearer to four times that number. Many of them use the plantation boundaries as their approach fencing and if the Forestry Commission decides to abandon a particular wood any pound dependent on its fences becomes useless unless the Verderers decide to take over the cost of keeping them up. That presents the Court with a huge potential problem. Today the Forest is awash with subsidy money pouring into all sorts of projects – much of it emanating from the European Union. Pounds can be built and run-in fences adopted without regard to the cost, but the continued flow of money, in future from British public funds, cannot be guaranteed. The Court is wisely concerned not to burden itself with maintenance commitments it may not be able to meet. A great deal will depend on which plantations the Forestry Commission decides to keep inclosed in the long term and at what rate it will remove fences from the others. An initial attempt is being made this month to plan for the future by opening discussions with the Commission, but it is going to be an extremely complex task.

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