

## **NEW FOREST NOTES MARCH 2004**

### **The end of Knightwood Inclosure**

These days I suppose few people come to the New Forest specifically to see the traditional attractions – Rufus Stone, Knightwood Oak and the like. Ranger-guided “safaris”, mountain biking and Forestry Commission’s Halloween pumpkin lantern competitions in the Forest seem more to the taste of the modern visitor. It has to be admitted that the Knightwood Oak is no longer a very beautiful specimen, mutilated and fenced off by the Commission in the interests of public safety, while Rufus Stone has always been nothing more than a rather uninspiring iron box. Now change is spreading beyond the public’s fancies for new recreation and even the old certainties of land classification and use are becoming blurred.

This change particularly affects the Inclosures. They are the Forest’s plantations, made chiefly between 1700 and 1870 and used for growing oak in the early years and later for planting conifers. Before 1851 they came in a variety of sizes, but after that date they were supposed to be a minimum of 300 acres to prevent the Office of Woods creaming off the best land. Thirty years ago everyone in the Forest knew exactly what an Inclosure was, how big it was, when it was made and what the Forestry Commission was permitted to do within it. All that certainty has now been swept away as different rules are applied to different bits of each plantation, largely as the result of the Forest Design Plan of the 1990s. The latest victim is the home of the Forest’s largest oak – Knightwood Inclosure.

Knightwood comprises 563 acres and was made in 1867 according to the map of a Select Committee report of 1875 although the acreage figure may include some smaller adjoining plantations. The Forestry Commission says it comprises 326 acres and was made in 1861 (Design Plan), so there is a good deal of confusion about the basics. It is in the centre of the Forest south west of Lyndhurst and, because it was one of the last statutory inclosures to be made in the New Forest, at a time when the Office of Woods was under fire for destroying ancient woodland as it created the new plantations, small fragments of Ancient Ornamental Woods were preserved along what is now the north part of the Ornamental Drive. They include the famous Knightwood Oak and the lesser known Eagle Oak. There is also quite a lot of heather surviving within the conifer areas. Large areas of trees south of Mark Ash have already been cleared as part of a bog restoration exercise.

At the February Verderers’ Court the Forestry Commission gave notice, as it is obliged to do by law, that it intends to throw open Knightwood Inclosure. In other words the fences and gates will be removed to permit grazing. The suspended common rights are then automatically restored. Such throwing open was formerly a normal part of the cycle of management of the Forest’s Inclosures. It was generally understood that the fences would be restored once replanting became necessary. In the case of Knightwood, things are likely to be rather different. Almost everything north of the Ornamental Drive (Mark Ash Road) is classified as “pasture woodland” in the Design Plan, together with a large area south east of

Church Moor and two lesser blocks in the south. The designation implies no further inclosure. Then there is a peculiar and vague category of land promised as “wooded heath” which appears to mean heathland with conifers left growing on it. Some of this will be provided in the centre of Knightwood. In addition to all this, the Forestry Commission is to retain various small parcels of Corsican pine and Scots pine for commercial production.

So much for what appears in the Design Plan, but it seems clear that legally the Commission could change its mind at any time, give the Verderers the required notice, reinstate the fences and plant conifers to the extent that it does not infringe the 1877 New Forest Act or other legislation. Such an occurrence is rather unlikely given today’s public opinion and the expressed intention of the Design Plan, but there is a great deal of uncertainty about the future. Forestry policies change every few years and pressures of global warming, over-population and the scarcity of natural resources (such as timber), could throw everything back into the melting pot in a few decades.

What changes will be immediately apparent on the ground following the Forestry Commission’s announcement ? Although the area at present contains little of grazing value, the activities of stock will undoubtedly open up the Inclosure by clearing some vegetation. There may be smoother grassy rides and natural regeneration may be further suppressed. For the first time in decades Forest animals will be able to wander freely from Warwickslade to Mark Ash and motorists will encounter animals on a length of highway formerly (in theory) stock free. A length of fence from the A 35 at Warwickslade to the original “Knight Wood” will be retained so that the commoners’ pound at Warwickslade will not be rendered useless. The retention of another length of fence north of Vinney Ridge is still under discussion. The fenced driftway through Anderwood will disappear – made redundant by the opening of Knightwood only a few yards to the east. As to trackways generally, the Verderers sought and were given by the Commission, an assurance that the realignment of fences will not be used as an excuse for the blocking-off of rides. Wicket gates at least will be provided.

I suppose that on balance the new uncertain status of Knightwood Inclosure will be beneficial, although lingering commercial forestry in parts of the block is likely to be an unsettling influence, never allowing a quiet reversion to Open Forest. Even the classification of “pasture woodland”, believed by most participants in the design process to have ensured the future security of the woodland, seems to be under reinterpretation to judge from some recent heavy fellings in Fletchers Thorns. Altogether Knightwood is going to need close watching by those bodies whose business it is to protect the Forest’s amenities.

#### **The Forest’s forgotten military sites**

Some years ago the Council for British Archaeology sponsored a scheme for recording the remains of (principally) World War II defence structures and sites. It was very successful, although work within the New Forest was rather limited. That is a pity because the Forest possesses an immense number of military sites and all but a few are very poorly recorded. We have good records of the three aerodromes, a bombing range and an explosives range, but many of the lesser sites are so little known that even their original

purpose is in danger of being forgotten. Both those involved professionally through the forces and those civilian workers who may have built the facilities or cleared them away after the war are becoming fewer every year. Even local collective memory is dimming as the old population of our villages is displaced by new commuters and retired people.

Fortunately one or two elderly residents have already recorded their memories – notably Walter Elsworth in his “Beaulieu in World War II” from which we know of the “Starfish” site on Hilltop Heath – an oil burning dummy target to distract bombers from their intended destination. There was another at Longdown and there were dummy airfields on Ridley Plain and at Millersford Bottom.

The unsolved wartime sites range from tiny clusters of buildings in remote places, such as are evidenced by the brick footings visible west of Dark Hat Wood, to quite large earthwork systems. What, for example, is the purpose of the series of embanked enclosures at Mogshade near the Canadian Cross memorial? They extend from Slaughter Hollies in the north almost to Bolderwood Green in the south and may have been connected with the Canadian forces who were camped here prior to D Day. All we know for certain is that they were built some time after November 1940 and show no sign of former occupation or use by December 1946. In the same part of the Forest, what was the installation east of Roe where roads and footings survive from the same period?

At the other end of the Forest, south of Beaulieu Road Station, was a large open storage area with one or two buildings. This clearly remained in use until after the war, but what was it for? Today only the road system survives, quickly becoming overgrown by the heath.

Perhaps most peculiar of all is the western part of Duckhole Bog near Wilverley where contemporary air photos show a large complex of structures or targets, all along the south facing slope. They appear to have been attacked from the air (at least forty presumed bomb craters are visible) and there are suggestions of much tank activity in the area. There must surely be someone still living in Burley, Brockenhurst or Sway who can remember (or has been told) what went on here.

As the records of the Forest's archaeology and history are being updated and refined, so these wartime sites should be added to the list. The Bronze Age boiling sites were used over perhaps a thousand years and we know a lot about them. WW2 sites were built, used and cleared away in little more than a decade and it is remarkable how quickly all record has been lost.

#### **New Forest Notes and the internet**

From January 1992 until July 2002, “New Forest Notes” appeared on Southampton University's Geodata Institute website - <http://www.geodata.soton.ac.uk/newforest/public/news/index.html> , where they remain. By 2001 there were difficulties in ensuring timely updating and publication ceased. Now the Notes, including back issues to July 2002, are again available on the internet, this time through the kind co-operation of Graham Cooper on his New Forest site –

<http://www.hants.gov.uk/newforest/index.html> . They will be updated monthly, shortly after publication in the paper and have the added advantage of a search facility.

Back in March 1999 I lamented the fact that none of the principal Forest management and advisory groups bothered to create good websites and there appeared to be little enthusiasm for doing so. Things could scarcely be more different now with innumerable sites ranging from excellent to rather poor and silly, covering every aspect of the Forest. It almost seems that if a new flower bed is dug at Queen's House a website covering its management has to be set up – especially if its planting is financed with European money. For all this, I still don't think that Graham Cooper's site has been bettered for a concise and accurate account of the Forest, although specialist sites go into more detail of particular subjects.

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