

NEW FOREST NOTES MARCH 2007

Vanishing 20th Century Forest History

If you walk on almost any of the Forest's heaths, the skyline around you is likely to be punctuated by the rounded burial mounds (barrows) created in the Bronze Age, several thousand years ago. They were the product of many generations and have somehow survived the numerous more recent uses of the Forest, despite their fragile earth construction. In remarkable contrast to this, the massive brick and concrete structures which marked the use and abuse of the woods and heaths in our own times have almost completely disappeared, no doubt just because they were so incongruous as to be intolerable in a beautiful natural landscape. There is a much-quoted figure of nine thousand acres of encroachment upon the Forest during the Second World War, although this included probably no more than a third of that area which was intensively developed with buildings and other structures. When the War finished, all sorts of people who should have known better tried to secure bits of this developed land for civilian uses – airports, housing, recreational facilities and so on. In the end, good sense prevailed and piece by piece the land was returned to the Forest, although it has to be said that the work was usually under funded and badly done, as witness the dreadful mess of concrete fragments still scattered across Beaulieu Aerodrome to this day. The depots, gun sites, saw mills, aerodromes, bombing ranges and camps vanished almost completely over a period of fifty years, the last big concrete areas at Stoney Cross and Ashley Walk disappearing in the 1990s.

It was perfectly right that these alien intrusions on the Forest should be cleared away and in the long term heathland will probably reclaim their sites, just as it is doing with the wartime reseeded areas and grassed portions of the aerodromes. We now have the strange situation in which two hundred and forty barrow groups of the Bronze Age survive, yet I can think of only half a dozen significant World War Two structures which remain on Crown lands (there are others on National Trust property) and perhaps several dozen ragged earthworks which still mark the sites of poorly executed restoration work. The surviving structures comprise an observer's hut and the Submarine Pens at Hampton Ridge, two water troughs at Fritham, a water tower at Roundhill and, in Hawkhill Inclosure, the remains of an aerodrome bomb store. The last of these is being steadily destroyed by the Forestry Commission, apparently because it comprises a useful stockpile of earth. On National Trust land there is a complete wartime control bunker, some impressive brickwork which surrounded a direction-finding tower and a number of lesser building fragments. I wonder if it is now time to evolve a policy for protecting what little survives from the period. By this I certainly do not mean classifying them as tourist honeypots, plastered with sign boards, education trails, picnic tables, "interpretation" and all the paraphernalia beloved of recreation managers. The Verderers have enough trouble combating this sort of thing already. In most cases simply leaving them alone is sufficient, as silent and unembellished monuments to the past.

I do not particularly blame the Forestry Commission for what is happening at Hawkhill, because the site has not been notified to them as of historical significance. Perhaps the Forest community as a whole is at fault in that we have all been too slow in recognising the worth of what little remains of historical monuments of our own and our parents' time. It is a difficult question of balance. Save too much and you disfigure the Forest: keep too little and the highly fashionable "cultural heritage" is diminished. I have suggested to the appropriate officers of the Park that this is a subject which needs some fresh thinking.

As to the Hawkhill bomb store itself, it is a fascinating site, but one which I cannot pretend that I understand. What remains today is a series of overgrown trackways and two long low brick walls with many heavy iron rings set in them. There are also two massive earth banks, parallel to the walls, one of which is the target of the Forestry Commission's current lust for earth – perhaps for use in stream restoration – so that three quarters of it has now been destroyed. However, air photographs of April 1946 reveal far more of the site's layout. Behind each of the brick walls there were originally four compartments, apparently separated by earth banks and in which I assume the bombs were accommodated. An elliptical (one way ?) road layout is apparent, together with four buildings, probably of a Nissen hut type. I imagine the earth banking was to absorb blast in the event of accidental detonation or aerial attack. There were a number of other buildings just outside the Inclosure, all apparently protected by fire breaks and low earth blast walls rather similar to the aircraft pens at Hampton Ridge. Whether they were related to the bomb store or not is unclear. It would be interesting to hear an interpretation of this site by a military expert, or local memories of its use.

Hawkhill bomb store may be unspectacular and perhaps inadequate as a memorial of the history of Beaulieu Aerodrome, but it is all that we have and I would be sorry to see its continued destruction for no better purpose than providing filling material.

The root of evil

Over the last few years, vast sums of public money have been expended in the New Forest on bog and stream restoration. This started under the auspices of the European Life Funds and has more recently been carried on through an equally obscure source called Pathfinder. The conservationists tell us that this is an exciting project, invaluable to the Forest's environment, in that it is recreating rare lost habitats. Some of the more down-to-earth commoners, whose fathers and grandfathers had fought long to secure the improvement of the Forest's grazing, describe it in unrepeatable terms which may be roughly summarised as "an utter waste of money and ruinous to the pasture". If the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes, there can at least be no argument that the cause of all the work was simply the availability of money. Now the end of that seemingly endless flow of funds is in sight – or so it had appeared until very recently.

It now seems that, just as Pathfinder succeeded Life, so Pathfinder is likely to be followed by Heritage Lottery funds to continue the "good" work of manipulating the Forest's drainage systems. An application is to be made for between three and four million pounds for

various Forest purposes. The expenditure of £44,000 has been approved simply for the preparation of a bid for the main grant. I have attended one or two meetings on the subject at which everyone has been told very firmly that it was premature to consider specific projects requiring funding. All that was permitted was a rather vague document expressing ill-defined concerns about the future of the Forest and explaining the urgency of securing funds to meet those concerns. In short, the idea seems to have been "Lets see if we can get access to some money to solve our problems and then think about how to spend it !" Now, perhaps, we are at the stage of actually putting forward concrete ideas and it will be interesting to see what emerges. There will inevitably be some sweeteners for the commoners. How else should one stop them from complaining too noisily about yet more bog and stream restoration ? Perhaps a few other interesting little projects might get a look in as well, but I fear that we are also in for yet another massive push towards what the Verderers have recently referred-to as "extreme conservation".

Of course it may be that the Olympic Games will absorb any money which might otherwise have come here and the Forest's bid will then fall flat on its face. If not, this really does seem to be a case of the love of money being the root of at least a certain amount of Forest evil.

Animal accidents

With monotonous regularity, the Clerk to the Verderers announces the animal accident figures near the beginning of each public session of the Court, so that nearly everyone who hears them becomes hardened to the statistics. Every accident represents horrible animal suffering, distress for the drivers involved (if occasionally richly deserved), financial loss and a waste of public money. Palliatives like reflective collars, largely ignored speed limits and neglected notice boards have done little to bring down the shocking totals.

At the Verderers' Court in February, a regular contributor to the presentments, Mr. Bennett from Sway, put forward a suggestion which might just hold the key to making a real difference to the accident toll in certain areas. He pointed out that the pinch points, narrow road and markings on the route from Thorney Hill to Burley have had a significant effect on speed. He asked if a similar solution could be tried elsewhere. Why no-one else has come up with this very obvious and sensible idea, I do not know. The road in question was formerly extremely fast, but is now very uncomfortable and inconvenient to drive along. That is exactly as it should be on unfenced highways in the Forest. Between the crossroads at Thorney Hill and the outskirts of Burley is a distance of 1.3 miles. In 2006 there was one animal accident on this length, equivalent to 0.8 accidents per mile. Compare this with a road on the other side of Burley – that from Castle Hill to Picket Post – which is 1.2 miles long. Here the animal accident toll in 2006 was eight, equivalent to 6.6 accidents per mile and making this one of the worst killers in the Forest. Given that the traffic flows may be rather different, precise comparisons may be misleading, but the general picture is clear. Fast straight open roads kill, while slow narrow roads which are difficult to negotiate are relatively safe. If the Picket Post road were to be slowed in the same manner as that at Thorney Hill,

there is a real prospect of a substantial reduction in animal suffering - if at the cost of infuriating a few speeding motorists.

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