

NEW FOREST NOTES MARCH 2011

The Phoney War of the Forestry Commission

The battle of the Forestry Commission is over almost before it started, at least so far as the New Forest is concerned. The government's climb-down on its proposals to sell some Commission lands and to hand the New Forest over to a charity were abandoned two weeks ago, before the Forest had really had an opportunity to mobilise its troops. Frantic discussions were in progress and the expenditure of large sums of money were being planned. There were delicious schemes for covering Boltons Bench with a mass equestrian protest, led by mounted agisters in gleaming liveries and with speeches from eminent Forest people. On a previous occasion of protest in Lyndhurst, one hundred and sixty years ago, the Deputy Surveyor was burnt in effigy with wood provided from the Forest by the Lord Warden's Steward. This time I think wood might well again have come from the Forest, but the effigy would have been that of Mrs Spelman while the Official Verderer and Deputy Surveyor might jointly have been invited to torch the bonfire.

All these ideas can now be put back in the box. The Verderers and Commission can recommence squabbling over camp sites, mountain bikes and stream filling – not that the intermission had really been particularly noticeable. The New Forest Association can subside back into torpor and the Commoners' Defence can resume grumbling in the background. In other words, things will be back to normal, but the government has given everyone a very nasty fright.

I suppose that even in a phoney war there are winners and losers. Chief amongst the former must be Dr. Julian Lewis who put his political neck on the block by backing Forest opinion and voting against his own party. I suppose it follows that Desmond Swayne, as a self-proclaimed enthusiast for changing the management of the Forest is the principal loser. I disagreed with his conclusion, but there was actually a good deal of sound reasoning in his speech to the Commons during the debate in parliament. As he pointed out, the Forestry Commission does not have a good reputation in the New Forest. I think rather too many rose-tinted glasses and short memories have been apparent over the last few weeks. Mr. Swayne listed some of the shortcomings. There was the dreadful sacrifice of thousands of acres of ancient deciduous woodland in the 1960s. There are still a few of us who remember that only too well. The Commission has generally shown a disregard of the special qualities of the Forest in boosting uncontrolled recreation. They hoodwinked the Forest, without any consultation, in the leasing the camp sites. They have failed to tackle long-running sores like extraction damage. They have infuriated the keepers by attacking their status and even the Forest's precious archaeological sites have been damaged and neglected in the last few years. Mr. Swayne's solutions to these problems might be likened to those of an over-severe schoolmaster who decides to solve bad behaviour in a pupil by wringing his neck and finding a new one. The rather gentler attitude of the Forest is still to hope for more moderate means of correction. It should in theory be possible to correct bad policies, but once a flawed constitution for the Forest is substituted for the present one, it would be near enough

impossible to reverse. That was the great threat of the government's proposals for the New Forest.

I have no doubt that my Verderer colleagues will join me in finding very gratifying Mr. Swayne's proposal (in his published letter to Jim Paice, the minister) that management of the Forest should be placed in the hands of the Court. There are a few practical and political reasons why this might not be desirable, but it does, I think, show that the Court is now widely accepted as the principal defender of the traditional New Forest. The Park's reputation remains on the floor after the problems over its various plans and, in any case, its violently conflicting objectives and suburban-dominated ethos make it the last body to be trusted with the Forest. The Commission has benefited from a surge of support recently, but in the long term continues to mismanage many important elements of the Forest. That leaves only the Court with a clear and exclusive commitment to the Forest, its livestock, traditions, tranquillity and natural beauty.

Dambusting

Just for once, the vexed subject of debris dams has not occupied too much of the Forest's attention over the last few weeks. The dambusting here described is of the historical sort and relates to the National Park's proposal that there should be a study of surviving World War II remains within the area. That is just the sort of thing the Park should be doing, rather than trying to meddle in the Forest's management or attempting to pack in yet more recreation. The proposal has been widely welcomed and I am sure will be fully supported by local historical groups.

The part of the announcement I found particularly interesting relates to the Ashley Walk bombing range. That is actually one of the WW 2 land uses about which we know a great deal, thanks to Norman Parker's research. The Park tells us that there are "over 200 bomb craters recorded at Coopers Hill and Ashley Hole, near Godshill – some of these were thought to be connected with trials of the bouncing bomb of the Dam Busters fame". In fact this is a bit of an over-estimate because a rough count suggests that there are only about 50 or so craters in the two locations combined, although many more exist across the entire Ashley Walk range. These craters actually had nothing to do with the bouncing bombs. It is, Norman Parker tells us, a myth that the bouncing bomb (the so-called Upkeep Mine) was tested at Ashley Walk in advance of the raid on the dams. Certainly such tests would have been out of the question at Coopers Hill which comprises a very narrow and steep sided feature. Upkeep was experimented-with later on when there was an idea that it could breach coastal defences, for which purpose it would have to run along the sea bed near to the shore. For those tests (in August 1943, months after the dams raid) a very flat expanse of heath was required, as unlike Coopers Hill as it is possible to find on the range. Leaden Hall was the obvious choice. Mr. Parker gives a graphic account of the two tests and their consequences, but in summary they were a complete failure with bombs scattered all over the range. They were eventually removed to a dump outside Pitts Wood, where the scrap steel was salvaged leaving behind heaps of inert filling. Moreover, the bouncing bombs tested at Ashley Walk

actually left no craters at all. They were filled with nothing more lethal than a lightweight concrete and hardly scratched the surface. The Ashley Hole craters were formed by various types of high explosive bombs, while those near Coopers Hill were largely caused by small explosions testing anti-personnel devices. In the floor of the valley south west of Coopers Hill (Ashley Bottom) are immense flooded craters which resulted from testing of "Tallboy" bombs, of which six live bombs were dropped onto the range, together with a number of inert bombs. This little valley was one of the most heavily bombed parts of the Forest and there was considerable damage to earlier archaeological sites. Through the same area runs the so-called "line target", representing a railway track which pilots could practice attacking from the air. I understand from the Park's archaeologist that this is a particularly rare and interesting survival. It is unfortunate that a portion of it is now threatened by stream engineering works.

For anyone interested, Norman Parker's report is still in print and is obtainable from the bookshop in the Park's New Forest Centre or direct from the New Forest Research and Publication Trust.

I can hardly leave the subject of bouncing bombs without repeating the famous story of the "Highball" test carried out on the 19th April (I assume 1943). This smaller anti-ship device was to be tested against the armoured wall target above Black Gutter and was regarded as so secret that the Cadnam to Fordingbridge road was closed for the period of the attack. A Mosquito successfully launched its bomb, which duly hit the target, and the guards immediately released the traffic. As the vehicles drew level with the target across the valley, another Mosquito arrived and delivered a second bomb in full public view. Nobody had told the guards that there would be two aircraft.

The Avon Water circle

Over the years, helpful readers of these notes have assisted in solving quite a few New Forest mysteries and February produced another such challenge. During a site inspection in advance of stream engineering works at Avon Water, a large circular earthwork was encountered on the north bank of the stream a short distance east of the point where the footpath from Brownhill Inclosure to Wilverley passes under the old railway. The bank, which is about six feet high encloses a boggy depression of perhaps thirty feet across which was presumably water-filled in the past. It is shown on a 1960s Ordnance Survey map as "pond". It is almost certainly also visible on a wartime air photo, but the area is heavily wooded and the photo is poor. There is no trace of it on earlier Ordnance maps (for example, that of 1909), although that does not necessarily mean that it did not exist. The stream course was altered in the last quarter of the 19th century, so I think the feature is likely to be less than 140 years old.

The site meeting was attended by the keeper, head agister, forest workers, commoners, the Park's assistant archaeologist and numerous other very knowledgeable people, yet not one of them had any idea what this strange enclosure is or when it was made. My own guess (and it can certainly be no more than a guess) is that it has something to do with shooting or fishing and that it was made during the early part of the last century. It must

have been intentionally flooded in its original form, but the immense earthworks would have been expensive to construct and it is not something which could have been made without permission from the Crown. If anyone knows the origin of the enclosure, I should be very interested to hear.

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