

NEW FOREST NOTES MARCH 2015

Hale Purlieu – exploitation of a tranquil area

At the extreme northern tip of the New Forest is a common called Hale Purlieu. It comprises 406 acres of heath and woodland with an additional 105 acres of abandoned plantation (Millersford) on its southern edge, separating it from the Crown lands of the New Forest. I know the common quite well as I have lived within a mile or so of its edge for the past forty five years. The strange word “purlieu” means an area which was once under Forest Law, but which was subsequently disafforested. Hale Purlieu was given to the National Trust in 1950 by a local resident named Chance, presumably in the expectation that its beauty and peace would be thereby protected. In landscape terms it is not the most spectacular part of the Forest, but it does have the advantage of being fairly peaceful compared to the great recreation areas to the south. One meets the occasional dog walker (usually of the more responsible type) and sometimes a local resident on a pony, but that is about the extent of the disturbance it suffers. For many years my cattle and ponies grazed the Purlieu in peace and quiet, although I have none there at present. There are still a good number of local commoners, mostly with only a handful of animals.

Last week this tranquil environment was shattered when the National Trust hired out Hale Purlieu and Millersford for a day to an orienteering club. Neither I, nor anyone in the village I have spoken to, can remember anything of the sort happening before. It was done without any consultation with the local commoners. At best this was discourteous and high handed and at worst probably damaging and even illegal. I have considerable doubts as to whether an owner of common land can undertake activities on that land which are damaging to the commoners, without their consent. It is different on the Crown lands where the Verderers act for the commoners. The problem with orienteering in particular is that it involves saturation disturbance. That is exactly what occurred at Hale. I don't think I have ever seen the ponies so distressed as they were during this operation. Little herds were galloping about all over the place as runners, many dressed in fluorescent clothing and waving maps, came at them from every direction and continuing over a long period. The disturbance was not confined to the Purlieu alone, but spread through Millersford and along Deadman Bottom (presumably with the connivance of the Forestry Commission) where there was the same pandemonium. As soon as the ponies thought that they had discovered an escape route, they were faced with another bunch of runners bursting from the bushes in front of them and causing a further wild gallop. The problem was exacerbated by the fact that the Purlieu is a triangular area fenced on two sides, making escape particularly difficult.

Ponies, of course, are disturbed by the annual drifts or round-ups. The drifts are essential management operations (not recreation) and are for the ultimate benefit of the livestock. By comparison with orienteering their effect is small. The riders pass through an area quickly, scooping up such ponies as they can capture, while the remainder settle back to grazing undisturbed. Within fifteen minutes all is quiet again. However, even the drifts at the end of last year were, in many cases, cancelled because of the outbreak of strangles in the Forest ponies. This horrible infection

makes breathing difficult for the sufferers and the last thing that should be done is to gallop them about. The Hale drift was one of those cancelled because of strangles, but on the Purlieu the infection is still very active and these were the animals which were being hounded unmercifully, if unwittingly, by the runners. I was stopped by one dog walker concerned at the distress of the ponies and presumably in the vague hope that because I was on a horse I could do something about it. Of course there was nothing I could do.

I find the attitude of a supposed conservation body in allowing this activity quite inexplicable. The National Trust would hardly let orienteers loose on the land of one of its tenant farmers without the fullest consultation and compensation and then only with the tenant's consent. Orienteering is just about the last type of event which should be inflicted on land being grazed by livestock. West of the Avon, only a few miles away, are hundreds of acres of Forestry Commission plantations open to the public, where there is no livestock and the sport could be accommodated without damage. I appreciate that rushing through bushes and ploughing across bogs following pre-determined courses may be regarded as essential elements of the entertainment, but it is just these activities which make it so inappropriate in the New Forest. The National Trust seems determined to copy the worst recreational ambitions of the Forestry Commission, as it is only a year or so since it started to allow the "boot camp" activities on its common at Rockford. The New Forest, and the Trust's land in particular, deserves better than to become a bottomless sump for recreation.

Death of a Deputy Surveyor

The recent death of John Perry will have saddened many people in the Forest. Deputy Surveyors seem to come in two varieties – gentlemen (which John Perry certainly was) and bruisers or "strong-arm silviculturalists" in the well-known words of Dr.F.E.Kenchington, author of "The Commoners' New Forest".

I served on the Verderers Court throughout John Perry's term of office and I cannot remember any very savage confrontations between the court and the Deputy Surveyor. That is not to say that the Court always got its way.

In 1996, John Perry wrote the introduction to a re-publication of Deputy Surveyor Gerald Lascelles's "Thirty Five Years in the New Forest", originally issued a century ago in 1915. Perry then described the book as a "delight" and that is a view that many people in the Forest still share.

When I wrote about the office of Deputy Surveyor in these notes in the early 1990s I received a hand written letter from John at Queen's House (rare even in those distant times) giving his views on the office and the results of some of his historical research. It is now a treasured addition to my original 1915 volume of "35 Years".

Placenames

Following last month's "Notes", I received a most interesting response on the subject of placenames from a resident of Norleywood. Firstly, he was able to pinpoint "Blake's Water" about which I had enquired. For those interested, it is at the ford below Greenmoor Reseeded and just south of Deep Moor on Beaulieu Heath. He suggested that it may have been named after a former forest officer living at Ladycross. He then added two further names which seem never to have appeared on published maps. The first is that of the little valley which runs north from Bull Hill, a little to the west of the crossroads and parallel to the main Beaulieu road. This he says is called "Jackie Thorn's Bottom". Thorn is a Forest surname with deep roots. Finally, there is "Bunkers Hill", being the high ground between Two Bridges Bottom and Deep Moor. Here my informant can remember searching for his family's three dairy cattle if they failed to return home on summer evenings. He still retains the bell worn by the lead cow. There can be very few of these bells remaining, while the little dairy herds which once dominated New Forest livestock had virtually disappeared within a few years of the end of WW2.

Shadows from the Cold War

Last month I was sorting through a box of vertical air photographs of the Forest taken on 18th September 1957 and trying to work out an explanation for four black lines on the heath south of Burley. Then I realized that these lines had no physical existence, but were simply shadows of the four great towers which once dominated Dur Hill and Holmsley. These 90ft timber structures and associated buildings will be remembered by many older Forest inhabitants, although (like me), I imagine that few will have had much idea as to their purpose. The Forest knew them as the "T&R Sites" – "T" at Dur Dill and "R" at Holmsley.

In 1952, the Air Ministry, after trying to side-step the Court, finally applied to the Verderers for land on which to construct facilities of "very great national importance". The Court was given no information as to what their purpose was. Lord Manners offered land on his estate which would have saved the Forest, but the Ministry refused on the grounds that it was in the "funnel" to Holmsley Aerodrome. When it was pointed out that Holmsley was closed and dismantled, the Ministry replied that they could have it operational within a week in the event of war. After a hard fought battle to rebuff the Ministry, led by Sir George Meyrick, the Court granted the land on a vote of four to three.

We now know, thanks to the website of Subterranea Britannica, exactly what the purpose of these sites was. Three miles to the south west lay of RAF Sopley. With its huge underground control bunker and powerful radar, its business was to locate and track Russian bombers and then to direct intercepting aircraft. It was not designed to survive a direct nuclear hit, but was expected to withstand heavy conventional bombing. The radar on the site would have interfered with radio communications with the intercepting aircraft, so the remote T & R sites in the Forest were required.

By the early 1970s the sites had become redundant, but in death they presented and even greater threat to the New Forest than in their silent and sinister working life. The Forestry

Commission cast covetous eyes on the huge buildings that might remain after the demolition of the towers. They began to think about all sorts of dangerous alternative uses to which they might be put. Both sites were deep in the Forest. The Holmsley site was proposed as a “study centre”, while at Dur Hill the possible new uses were not specified, but a car park was proposed as a start. This time the Verderers stood firm and all trace of the sites was cleared away. Now only the road to the Dur Hill site remains as an ugly scar on the landscape. The sites themselves live on only in a few faded snapshots and, of course, in their afternoon shadows on that autumn day in 1957.

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