

NEW FOREST NOTES MAY 2003

Destruction of Highland Water ?

Just to the east of the Bolderwood tourist honeypot is a huge area of woodland known as Highland Water Inclosure. It was once fairly remote and quiet, but the opening-up of cycle routes through it has made it an increasingly busy recreation area. The Inclosure was planted in 1869, but contains within it much earlier blocks of woodland such as Holmhill (1815) and Puckpits (1700). There are also portions of "Ancient Ornamental" wood embedded in the later plantations, particularly at Wick Wood and close to Bolderwood. As an Inclosure, it is technically managed in part for timber production.

Last month I heard from a couple who found that their favourite walk (through Highland Water to Acres Down) had been ruined by felling and extraction, much of which appeared to them to be completely pointless and in some places little short of vandalism. There can be few more distressing experiences in the New Forest than to discover the ruin of some cherished place, so complaints of this nature should always be taken seriously. The problem is that one man's destruction can be another's (usually a forester's) sensible economic management. In the case of the Inclosures, the old rule book has recently been torn up and replaced by a complicated set of plans which were the result of the New Forest Design Forum's deliberations in the 1990s. In judging what is being done to Highland Water it is therefore necessary to ask two questions. Firstly, is the work in line with the design plan and, secondly, is it being carried out in a reasonable and sensitive manner? The answer to the first question seems to be a qualified "yes", but to the second question the answer is much less clear.

Throughout most of Highland Water, felling has recently been very heavy indeed. Large areas have been "clear felled" – a process which is technically illegal, although the Forestry Commission is in some difficulty over this because it is approved felling under the design plan, preparatory to the return of some areas to Open Forest status. Such blocks are to be seen adjoining Ringwood Ford Bottom. Here all the conifers have been removed, the brash cleared up and the extraction ruts filled in to a much higher standard than the Forestry Commission normally achieves. In some of these areas also, one or two tracks have even been restored. In short, the work has been efficiently done and promises well for the future. It may be of a suspicious nature, but this part of Highland Water looks like a show area – perhaps a destination for visiting dignitaries or for use in publicity displays. What remains unclear, as it has done throughout the design process, is how and when the fences will be realigned to admit grazing stock. Without such realignment, the work will be completely wasted as the area will quickly become covered in scrub.

Elsewhere in Highland Water, things are far less satisfactory. Clear felling of conifer for replacing with the same has taken place south west of Puckpits and seems an unquestionable violation of the 1877 New Forest Act. Dreadful damage to the tracks has occurred and there are few signs of restoration work, despite ideal weather conditions this

spring. I am sure the Commission will argue that the work is not yet complete and that of course everything will be put right when it is. Unfortunately it is now very difficult to believe such assurances. They were given in respect of Islands Thorns five years ago and the New Forest Association has been pressing ever since for some effective action, largely without success. Indeed, the mild-mannered chairman of the Association's woodland sub-committee, Tim Dixon, has been driven to writing in the annual report that: "the fobbing-off letters we have received from Forest Enterprise are wholly unworthy of a government department and make nonsense of Forest Enterprise's much trumpeted care for the environment". He goes on to describe the Commission's attitude to track restoration as a "continuing disgrace". The Commission remains extremely resistant to the proper restoration of extraction damage throughout the Forest and I am personally convinced that there is an unwritten policy of trying to eliminate as many of the old Forest rides as possible (to save cost), simply by destroying them so that they are unavailable for future public use. This is likely to remain a major area of conflict in future.

Other work being undertaken in the Inclosure includes the clearance of conifer from the margins of Highland Water stream itself, but this is in its very early stages and difficult to judge. Work on the watercourse is also to be undertaken and the whole area will probably look fairly dreadful for some years, before it starts to recover. Other, lesser, stream and seepage channels are also being cleared.

Finally, there has been very heavy thinning of the oak areas and such work so often seems to involve the removal of the finest old trees which in many cases are presumably the most valuable for timber. It is probably difficult to convict the Forestry Commission of violating the design plan in this respect, but it remains distressing. Rather more serious has been the removal of a number of oaks from the A&O areas, notably Wick Wood, which was not, I think, envisaged by Design Forum members and was in fact prohibited under earlier conservation policies.

Altogether, I am not in the least surprised that my complainants should have been so upset at the state of Highland Water, but both here and throughout the Forest we are all going to have to get used to immense changes in the character of the Inclosures. There will be alleged conservation benefits and, more significant, the "agreement" which the design plan comprised also provided that many of the finest old hardwood plantations would be saved from felling. They include such areas as Amberwood, Backley, Bratley and Fletchers Thorns which, under the old rules, would all have been cut within the next few years. The benefits to the Forest are great, but we need to keep careful watch that the Forestry Commission does not exact a greater price than was provided-for in the contract.

Railway Questions

There is something romantic about a "lost" road and perhaps the same might be said of a closed railway. As with Kipling's way through the woods, "they closed the railway line south of Burley forty years ago". That part of the Southampton and Dorchester Railway which lies west of Brockenhurst was abandoned to the Forest with very minimal and inadequate

restoration, shortcomings which nature is now doing its best to remedy. The old line is already a growing source of interest to local historians and particularly those who specialise in technical railway matters such as signalling. One such enthusiast wrote to me a few weeks ago concerning two long-lost cottages on the line north of Holmsley Ridge. There were formerly a number of such tiny dwellings on the railway between Brockenhurst and Ringwood. One survives at Latchmoor and another, controversially and much altered, below Goatspen Plain. Some of these dwellings evidently had signalling functions, but the two lost cottages at Holmsley seem to have done nothing but control crossing gates – gates whose purpose remains a complete mystery. The western cottage, near Bur Bush, seemed to have no particular trackways leading to its gates, while the eastern one south of Shappen, looks from old maps to have been hardly more useful. Why were they made? Perhaps the crossings were demanded by the Office of Woods back in 1845 when the railway was planned, as a convenience to the occasional hunting gentleman who might wish to cross or as a route for the extraction of Forest produce such as turf or furze. My colleague, Dionis Macnair, tells me that the cottages were pulled down in the 1950s after a gipsy boy fell while climbing a chimney on one of the ruins and his parents threatened to sue the railway! She cannot, however, remember the gates in use and I have been unable to give my enquirer any more information.

Perhaps there are a few people still alive who can remember the cottages. If so, it would be very interesting to know the purpose of the gates, when they were abandoned and when the houses were vacated. Today it is still possible to trace the foundations of both cottages and the outline of the little garden plots with their surviving non-forest trees and, in one case, a neat circle of brickwork marking the filled-in well. Unfortunately, the old line at this point has been made into a tourist track and both sites have consequently attracted a filthy accumulation of litter. Moreover, visitors seem to have a passion for throwing about pieces of brick and concrete which are liberally spread over the adjacent heath. All of this detracts somewhat from the character and mystery of the place.

There is one more outstanding puzzle on this stretch of line. A little to the east of the present-day bridge on the road to Thorny Hill is a pair of bridge ramps and some brickwork which suggests that a bridge was demolished here, or perhaps never finished. There is no trace of it on the 1869 Ordnance Survey map, so presumably it disappeared in the very early years of the railway. No-one I have spoken to can throw any light on the subject.

Freda Harding

One hundred and forty years ago, the famous writer on the Forest, John Wise, recorded a number of New Forest sayings which have since completely disappeared. One of these, said of someone whose health was such that he would be unlikely to survive the winter was: "He will not climb up May hill." Too many pillars of the Forest community have this year failed to make that climb and the latest of these was a much loved and respected member of the commoners' community, Freda Harding, who died in April.

Freda had numerous interests in and around Burley, but was known to most of us as the very long-serving former secretary of the New Forest Commoners' Defence Association. She was always cheerful and usually managed to remain calm in that sometimes stressful job, but underneath a placid exterior she held some very decided views on Forest management and politics. At her funeral, one of her contemporaries on the CDA committee remarked that the Forest is now losing its most diligent servants much faster than they are being replaced. That is, perhaps, a standard grumble of a senior generation about a junior one, but it contains a considerable element of truth and Freda's loss will be keenly felt well beyond the limits of her immediate family.

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