

NEW FOREST NOTES MAY 2014

New light on the making of the New Forest

Two years ago, local historian Chris Read published a paper on the surviving physical evidence of former ploughing on the Crown lands of the New Forest. It was a paper written for specialists, but it now appears that it may be of much wider interest in that it has provided, for the first time, clues as to what actually happened on the ground when William I created the New Forest at the traditional date of 1079.

Early writers on the making of the Forest were in no doubt as to what happened. John Wise, author of the famous book "The New Forest: Its History and Scenery", quoted some of these writers, including the assertion that the making of the New Forest was "one of the worst pieces of cruelty ever committed by an English sovereign". Another wrote that William "caused churches and villages to be burnt down within its circuit" – all in the interests of creating a royal hunting ground. Wise dismissed much of these histories as wild exaggeration and concluded that only waste lands were taken into the Forest and that the "cultivated lands were spared". It is this last statement which current research is calling into question. Wise argued forcefully that no physical trace of the alleged destruction had ever been found and indeed none has – until, perhaps, within the last few years. He suggested that as the fragile remains of Bronze Age burial mounds were still visible across much of the Forest, the wreckage of burnt villages and churches would also leave some trace, and in this he was certainly correct. We have no records of Saxon buildings or proved enclosures of the period anywhere on the Forest and only very sparse records of pottery finds. Since Wise's time the debate has continued, but opinion has largely supported his views of the matter. Now, however, we do seem to have evidence of fairly widespread abandonment of arable land (forced or otherwise) across large parts of the southern Forest. Moreover, unlike the Iron Age field systems which have been known for many years, it looks as though this arable land vanished at about the same time as the Forest was made.

The new evidence has its roots in Chris Read's research. After describing the physical evidence, he goes on to consider the location of what he describes as "mediaeval fields", noting eight sites between Burley and Beaulieu, together with one smaller site near Fritham, where the characteristic ridge and furrow pattern produced by post-Roman ploughing may be seen. These are not always fields in the sense that we would know them today. Many have no obvious boundary banks and ditches and when they were planted with crops, livestock and deer must have been kept out by hurdles or other temporary barriers. Even where there are boundary banks, it is quite possible that some of these were re-used pre-Roman enclosures. Altogether, identification and interpretation is quite difficult.

Because of the way the Saxon teams of oxen were managed and the use of the newly introduced mould-board ploughs (which turn over the soil and move it sideways instead of just scratching it), ridges and troughs became more and more pronounced over the years, forming strips of ten to twenty metres wide. The result is like the surface of the sea, frozen at a moment in time. This time of year (May) is not the best to see such undulations as they are masked by bracken, but

walk in Stockley Inclosure or at Queen Bower in the late winter and the ridge and furrow pattern is very clear.

The problem with Chris Read's discoveries was that, until now, it has been very difficult to obtain a clear overall picture of the furrows. The areas involved were known to be large, but dense vegetation, extensive forestry damage and 19th century drainage systems, all tended to blur or obscure the picture and made difficult any assessment of the extent of this farming. Now we have lidar – a very detailed relief map prepared from the air – which shows every ridge and trough more than about 0.2m high. Lidar is also able to penetrate through woodland cover. The results are, in some places, quite remarkable. We know now that between Beaulieu and Brockenhurst, cultivated land (probably incorporating some pasture fields as well) extended to over 600 acres and that it “disappeared” at about the time the New Forest was made. Further north, near Lyndhurst, another great block of about 300 acres also vanished, while most of the remainder of Chris Read's discoveries, although smaller, seem to have suffered a similar fate. In one case lidar has actually added a previously unidentified area of ploughing and that is about three miles west of New Park. It is one of those problem cases where there are no obvious field boundaries and that led to its being overlooked in the past.

All of this is incontrovertible new evidence of loss or abandonment on a hitherto unrecognized scale, but it is not actual evidence of destruction by William the Conqueror. That, if it exists, will still have to be provided from documentary research, linking the field evidence to records such as Domesday. Such research is being undertaken by Richard Reeves of the Christopher Tower Library and I understand he is following up some promising leads. We will have to wait a little longer for the results.

So much for the historical and archaeological aspects of the discoveries, but there is one further very important conclusion from the work. It is now clear that the ancient woodland of the New Forest is, at least in part, very much less ancient than has been widely supposed. Huge tracts of what was formerly regarded as being directly descended from virgin “wild wood” in such places as Frame, Denny and Bolderford were in fact ordinary farmed fields to within historic times, and that is perhaps the most remarkable finding of this research. Chris Read has photographed large pollarded oaks, among the biggest trees in the Forest, growing on the ridges of this presumed Saxon ploughing. Taken alongside the areas of prehistoric agriculture, we are beginning to understand just how “new” the New Forest really is. In the south of the Forest there are certainly some heaths which seem never to have been enclosed or cultivated, while further north (roughly north of the A 31) this category of land becomes dominant, with only isolated enclosures. It is still too early to give an accurate assessment of how much of the so-called “Ancient Ornamental Woodland” is of fairly recent origin. My own guess (and it can be no more than a guess at present) is that about 30% of the 5000 acres total may fall into this category. If that is the case, it now looks as though some books on the Forest are going to have to be re-written.

Another bomb

The soldiers who were clearing mortar bombs from Matley Heath last year seem to have lost interest over the winter, or perhaps they were assigned to more important work. They left behind a remarkable collection of red and white ranging poles set out around the boundary of their danger area – an area we were not supposed to enter. The fact that thousands of people and animals have been tramping through it for nearly a century, entirely without incident, suggests that the danger is not very severe. As to the ranging poles, I can only attribute their continuing presence on the heath to a very poor market for secondhand surveying equipment. However, having said all this, I certainly do not want to belittle the risks from explosives lying about the Forest. I am of that generation which was taught as children (just after WW2) never to pick up metal objects washed up on the beach or left lying about the Forest. It was good training.

Last month I was working with a team near Beaulieu and just before packing up for the day, one member asked me to look at a metal cylinder projecting from the peat. It turned out to be a rather evil looking projectile embedded tail first in the ground very close to the centre of an air-to-ground firing target. It was apparently unexploded. I am told that the weapons dropped here contained only small charges and were designed to emit smoke to indicate the accuracy of the attack, but still they would no doubt be sufficient to blow the hand off any small child pounding them with a lump of concrete. The Forestry Commission has since arranged for the safe removal of the bomb, but there do seem to be rather a lot of such unpleasant items still lying about the Forest. As to the airman who released the bomb seventy years ago, its failure to explode must have deprived him of credit for a highly accurate attack which missed the centre of the target by only nine metres.

The tale of a dead cow

Just before Easter I arrived home to find a message on my answer machine that my last surviving cow was dead. Her lifeless body had been spotted in one of my fields adjoining the Forest by a neighbour walking her dog. I received this news with mixed feelings of sadness and relief. The cow was elderly, quite useless and had been kept (at considerable expense) entirely out of sentiment. Still, it was surprising how suddenly death had struck as there had been no sign of illness or distress when her breakfast was served. I set out to deal with the body, but on arriving at the field I could see neither corpse nor cow. Eventually, after some searching, I discovered the victim seated comfortably in a stable (from which she had evicted the lawful occupant) and chewing the cud. No doubt it was my imagination, but she seemed to have a self-satisfied grin on her face. My telephone informant, a lady with much experience of horses, but less of cows, had been fooled by a bit of motionless sunbathing as the old cow soaked up the first warmth of Spring, stretched out on the grass.

In the Forest it is not cows but foals which are usually responsible for such deception. Every year the agisters are called to “dead” foals which are discovered by distressed holidaymakers. I feel there ought to be an old Chinese proverb to the effect that one must “always kick a dead cow before

reporting it to its owner". Kicking an un-dead foal might not be such a good idea as it is likely to explode into the air, but a bit of disturbance from a safe distance might be a good substitute.

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