

# NEW FOREST NOTES MAY 2018

## Neglect of the Forest's historic sites

Scattered about the New Forest itself and the wider area within the control of the national park planning regime are many relics of our ancient past. The most prominent of these are the Iron Age hillforts. They range from impressive earthworks like the county council owned Buckland Rings to much more modest enclosures buried deep within the Forest's woods, although these latter may once have been in exposed hilltop environments. The purpose of these enigmatic enclosures is uncertain. At first sight they appear to be exactly what their name implies – great defensive forts, but it is also possible that they had some local government function or were refuges occupied in periods of trouble. There has been very little excavation within them, especially in the New Forest, and our knowledge of such sites depends largely upon research at such places as Danebury near Stockbridge. Nearly half of the hillforts in the New Forest are so-called scheduled ancient monuments. That means that they are supposed to have special protection against damage and development of all sorts, but it is a sad fact that whether scheduled or not, most have suffered significant damage in post war years. For example, the Forestry Commission cut through the ramparts of one enclosure to ease timber extraction, built a duck pond in another and in one case the construction of a sewage works was allowed in the ditch of an important fort. More forestry damage has occurred elsewhere on the Crown lands, while adjoining owners have damaged several sites on the fringe of the Forestry Commission's property. Outside the perambulation landowners have done much as they pleased and in one case this involved the dynamiting of tree stumps within a fort.

The scheduling "protection" has been afforded to the various sites at different times and one might reasonably have expected that the hillforts would by now have been among the best defended elements of the Forest's historic landscape. In fact almost the exact opposite applies as is demonstrated in recent research undertaken by Chris Read, to be published shortly. Unfortunately the forts are not the only scheduled sites to suffer in this way. Large numbers of the Bronze Age burial mounds which have been given scheduled status (and thus publicity) are targeted by treasure hunters operating with impunity on public access land in the Forest. The more the sites are advertised and classified as tourist attractions, the more vulnerable they become. It is altogether a very sorry story and demonstrates that in an area such as the New Forest which is under intense public pressure and without any effective policing, the scheduling is literally worse than useless.

Of course not all scheduling relates to above-ground features which are easy targets for vandals and thieves. The Forest possesses many Roman remains and some of these too are scheduled. Fortunately the incompetence of the relevant authorities means that numbers of the protective zones shown on Historic England's public maps are so wildly inaccurate that they "defend" entirely blank pieces of Forest, while the actual sites they are designed to protect lie quietly and anonymously elsewhere. Roman sites are particularly choice subjects for robbing, so it is fortunate that there are still many features of this period which have escaped the attention and damaging publicity of government "protection".

Finally (and this is a longstanding and serious complaint against management), the engineering works undertaken on the Forest threaten many classes of ancient site. The reports which the Forestry Commission obtains in advance of such works, intended to ensure no damage is done, are extraordinarily inaccurate and incomplete. Frequently they fail to record more of the archaeology than they actually find. Altogether I cannot remember a time since the 1960s when the historic environment of the Forest has been so badly neglected and even consciously abused. This is a sad reflection on the management of a great public property such as the New Forest.

### **Franchise Wood**

The recent purchase by the RSPB of a large area of woodland adjoining the Forest's north east boundary still seems to be shrouded in a certain amount of mystery. On the one hand we are told that the "Bird charity promises to open 1000 acre woods to the public", while elsewhere it has been said that there are no current plans to increase access beyond the present network of public rights of way. I am not sure of the exact boundaries of the land bought, but the present rights of way would seem to comprise a byway and a footpath from Bramshaw Telegraph and a bridleway near to the Redlynch end. This means that, unlike the adjacent Forest land, Franchise Wood has hitherto enjoyed a great deal of peace and quiet and is thus a haven for wildlife displaced from the intensely-disturbed land to the west. If the RSPB really intends to open this woodland to the public it would seem to defeat a principal objective of the purchase. Perhaps a substantial contribution to the purchase cost from the National Park Authority is a relevant consideration for the society, compelling it to concede more public access. We are promised consultations between the new owners and adjoining communities, but unless there have been confidential meetings, I don't think any such consultation has taken place to date. My own parish practically adjoins Franchise Wood and certainly there has been no discussion here. It would be sad to see a repeat of the Foxbury Plantation recreation area experiment in this peaceful area.

### **Strange priorities**

To the west of Fritham is a car park at the rather strangely named Gorley Bushes. Gorley village lies nearly five miles away in the Avon Valley. Most people would probably know the car park better as the Royal Oak green. Here there are smart Forest cottages along one side of the green, the car park on another and the ancient Forest pub on the third. It is also an area containing a good deal of dereliction so far as the Forest land is concerned. The smooth grass verges which I remember from my childhood are long gone as incessant linear parking beside the road to the pub has reduced them to bare gravel and as traffic clogs that end of the village from morning till night, despite Gorley Bushes being one of the Forest's larger parks. The Forestry Commission's notice boards are gently decaying and the protecting wooden dragons' teeth are rotten or knocked over in places. The car park surface is a severe test of any car's shock absorbers. There is, however, one piece of infrastructure which is solid and in good order. That is a steel barrier preventing vehicular access to a gravel forestry road. I was therefore amazed when, amid all this decay, a workman with a generator appeared and methodically set about sanding down the perfectly adequate paint on the galvanised

iron structure. He clearly took pride in his work and on another occasion returned to give the barrier a completely unnecessary and gleaming coat of green paint. The priorities of Queen's House are unfathomable.

### **Holly disease**

It was good to hear at last month's Open Forest Advisory Committee that the Forestry Commission is beginning to take seriously the decline of the Forest's old holly woods. In these notes I have written many times about the desperate state of these invaluable constituents of the Forest's landscape, but those in authority took remarkably little interest in the subject. Then, a few years ago the first of a series of small experimental enclosures were formed in which the holly was coppiced or pollarded and protected from grazing stock. That was a valuable step forward, but everywhere else the decline has continued. In some cases individual landscape trees are dying, but right across the Forest the holly woods are in a terrible state of decline. I think there can be little doubt that the barking of the stems by ponies (a fairly recent phenomenon) is a primary cause of the trouble. In the few woods where barking is less in evidence the trees are much healthier. The Commission is now undertaking a study into a fungal disease – a form of *Neonectria* – which seems to be contributing to the decline and probably gaining a foothold because of the bark damage. In the meantime, the enclosure experiments so far have generally proved very successful with vigorous re-growth on the protected trees. A portion of one of the enclosures at Bolderwood has recently been taken down to see what effect the removal of protection will have, although it is generally anticipated that the new growth will be decimated within a short time, at least in the case of coppiced stools.

### **Training courses**

One of the better services provided by the national park is the holding of free training courses financed out of their numerous sources of grant funding. Some of these courses are in rather obscure subjects such as geophysics which have little relevance to the Crown lands, however valuable they may be on farmland. On the other hand the recent courses in the use of GIS (geographic information systems) software have been invaluable, especially to people of my generation who do not have a natural affinity for computers and all that goes with them. In the past I had struggled with complex and extremely expensive commercial programmes, but the park's two courses on the (free) QGIS programme have been very worthwhile. For anyone who has no idea what I am writing about, these programmes allow maps to be displayed, altered, added to, combined and printed from a computer screen, complete with very precise extracting of national grid references. They are particularly useful to naturalists, historians, archaeologists or anyone who is concerned with the management of land and the recording of what is done on it. Over the last few months the two courses held at Lyndhurst have covered first the basic use of QGIS and then the manipulation of lidar within the programme. Lidar is a specialist relief map of the earth's surface made from the air and used for such work as predicting flooding. In the New Forest its value is principally in interpreting the area's history but unfortunately only the very coarse images prepared by the Environment Agency are available to the public. Although the HLS scheme (public money) financed much more detailed images in the New

Forest, the park has so far steadfastly refused to make this information available except in a degraded form. There have been many, unsustainable, claims of copyright problems etc. However, the latest training course was told that progress is being made towards the release of the information, so we will have to see what happens. If obstruction continues, the HLS management Board should certainly take action to force the authority's hand.

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