

NEW FOREST NOTES NOVEMBER 2014

The story of beehives past and present

It is a modern tradition in the New Forest that as the summer advances little groups of beehives appear in quiet corners among the gorse bushes, so that their inmates may take advantage of the heather blossom on the surrounding heaths. The hives are licenced by the Forestry Commission, but I have no idea when this modern practice commenced. By October the flowering season is over and the hives have disappeared, no doubt to the relief of nervous walkers and of many ridden horses who are convinced that these alien boxes are inhabited by demons. Modern hives have little resemblance to the dome-shaped straw constructions of children's picture books, but those more picturesque bee homes have a very long and widespread history in the Forest – a history which has only recently been understood.

If you look at a current large scale Ordnance Survey map of the New Forest, you can find several placenames which recall bee-keeping past. In the north, near Godshill, there is Hive Garn Bottom and Hive Gardens, while to the south of Burley is Anthony's Bee Bottom. On older maps, other names now forgotten also appear. For example near Matley Wood south east of Lyndhurst is Cole's Bee Garden, forgotten since it was recorded on a map two hundred years ago. Even today, local people still call the nearby valley from Parkhill Lawn to Matley "Bee Gardens". For those who know how to identify them, the gardens are still there.

What is or was a bee garden and when were they in use in the New Forest? Because they were operated by poor people of the Forest villages, few written records have survived and we must rely almost entirely on the extremely fragile physical evidence that is to be found in the Forest itself. That evidence was first discovered by the late Mr.H.A.Collinson in the 1960s. In walking on Holmsley Ridge south of Burley, he noticed very faint circles, squares and rectangles in the peat and as he searched he found more and more of them, covering almost the whole of the ridge. In later years many of the best gardens were destroyed by the Forestry Commission when a gravel pit was established at Holmsley, but historians were by then on the trail of gardens across the Forest. As the years went by, many hundreds of these sites were found in the south west part of the Forest. Today we know that there were other classes of bee garden and the type identified by Mr.Collinson is still called the "Holmsley Ridge type".

The best way to see a Holmsley Ridge type garden is to look at recently burnt areas where these very slight features are not masked by vegetation and the best location is that where they were first discovered. A typical garden is a rectangle measuring perhaps 5 x 7 metres and surrounded by a shallow ditch no more than about 10-15 cms deep. Outside this there is a low bank perhaps 1.5m wide and again only about 10cm high. There is no entrance through the bank and ditch. All but the best preserved are invisible to lidar and very few can be seen from the air, yet there are many hundreds already recorded. Occasionally a bee garden may be larger than average and sometimes they may be circular, although circles are quite rare. Although many have been excavated, nothing

has ever been found to give a clue as to their operation. It is assumed that they worked like this. When hives were put out on the Forest in summer (especially if of straw) they needed protection against ponies, cattle and the wet. A small ditch was dug around the hives to provide drainage and perhaps water for the bees. On the upcast spoil bank, a stout hurdle or similar fence was erected to exclude livestock. No doubt the gardens were reused year after year, sometimes attracting the names of their "owners" as with Cole or Anthony.

As to the date of these gardens we have little information. They seem to have been in use in the mid-17th century as there are many records in existence of their makers being brought before the forest courts for the encroachment of tiny parcels of land on which the offender "had there placed seven hives" or similar. Richard Reeves, who has done much research into the early history of the Forest, believes that some may be earlier in date and represent the hiring out by local officers of the right to take honey, the honey being a traditional perquisite of those officers.

Holmsley Ridge type bee gardens seem not to have been confined to the New Forest. They are also found to the west, with examples on Sopley Common and near Alderholt. In the Forest itself their distribution is largely limited to the south west, around Burley and extending to Brockenhurst. At Brockenhurst many dozens are to be found on low-lying damp heath. A single isolated example has recently been found near Bull Hill and there is another on Plaitford Common. Apart from these and isolated groups on Minstead Manor waste and near Matley, remaining areas of the map are so far blank.

In the north of the Forest, bee gardens are quite different in form, comprising more substantial earthwork enclosures with external ditches. They occur principally on Ibsley Common and are invariably square or rectangular. Compared to the Holmsley type, they are very rare with less than twenty five so far recorded. Unfortunately for a learned archaeological contractor recently pontificating on Forest earthworks, the placename element "garden" is not a guarantee of a *bee* garden. He describes King's Garden near Linwood as such a feature, whereas it has a much more exalted origin. It has been known for some years that it was made to commemorate the spot on which James I killed his first stag in 1608 !

Changes to the single payment scheme

The primary source of income for many small New Forest farmers is now the EU funded Single Payment Scheme, chiefly because of the "share" of the New Forest grazings allowed to each of them. In other words, they are taken (for subsidy purposes) to occupy large tracts of the common land as well as their own farms. Next year there is to be a reorganization of the scheme and a re-branding as the "Basic Payment Scheme". The money will, however, continue to flow as before and a recent meeting to explain the changes was held at Lyndhurst, addressed by speakers from the Rural Payments Agency and the Farm Advice Service. The scent of money ensured that it was very well supported. At the session I attended the audience was predominantly female suggesting that the old and politically incorrect maxim that "a woman's place is in the home" has been replaced by one which

states that “a woman’s place is in front of the computer screen”. Of course it could be that male New Forest farmers are just too embarrassed to admit that they are computer illiterate and consequently stayed away! Whatever the reason, all future claims will have to be made online rather than on paper as hitherto. The authorities will tolerate no nonsense about outdated operating systems and browsers. Only reasonably modern operating systems and software will do, so those clinging on to their user-friendly Windows XP will have to do better.

The Single Payment Scheme and its successor operate on the simple principle that you get a large chunk of money allocated to you each year with no questions asked (beyond form-filling), but in return for adhering strictly to the scheme rules. If you fail in observing the rules, you will be “fined” by a reduction in payments. It is a way of operating which the Verderers also have found extremely efficient in keeping good order in the Forest. A threat of prosecution under the byelaws is much less effective than the withholding of large parts of a hoped-for subsidy.

A curious situation has arisen in respect of some of the smallest farmers in that in future anyone with less than 5ha (including his “share” of the Forest) will lose his right to subsidy. He will also lose (without compensation) his valuable “entitlements” unless he sells them or makes other arrangements within deadlines specified. That may hit the very smallest commoners the hardest and seems unfair in the light of the large sums being collected by the more affluent members of the Forest community.

Some of the rules of the BPS are quite bizarre, including the keeping of records which have little relevance to many New Forest holdings. Those unfortunate enough (and I am one) to have land classified as within a “nitrate free zone” must, for example, calculate the quantities of dung dropped by the cattle that graze on that land and must then eject the offenders before permitted limits are exceeded. Many pieces of paper must be kept and updated regularly so that they can be presented to RPA inspectors on demand. Simple operations such as the use of a knapsack sprayer or the laying of rat poison will need a licence, only available after attending an expensive training course. Herbicide purchased from an agricultural merchant is subject to strict management and regulation, but the same material bought from a garden centre is not. It is European bureaucracy at its worst, but grumble as they might, I did not find anyone who was not prepared to knuckle down in order to keep on receiving the cash. The best advice given at the meeting was to consult the New Forest Land Advice Service if you are in any doubt as to how to find your way through the minefield.

Poison in the green bag

The news that more ponies have died through eating garden refuse dumped on the Forest is distressing, but is a problem which has been going on for as long as I can remember. There will always be ignorant or callous people living near the Forest and looking for a cost-free way of disposing of waste on someone else’s land. The Verderers are quite right, yet again, to highlight the problem, but there is another danger which everyone seems to have overlooked. Responsible residents who use the council’s garden waste collection service fill large green bags which they place

outside their front gates. On many occasions I have encountered ponies stuffing themselves on lawn mowings from these bags. It is high time that the New Forest District Council agreed to collect bags from *inside* property boundaries and announced clearly that it will do so. Guidance on the council's website is at best ambiguous and states that collection will be from "the edge of your property". No doubt the householder is fearful that failure to put it outside the gate (and thus on the Forest) will result in the lorry driver overlooking the collection.

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