

NEW FOREST NOTES - OCTOBER 2000

The roots of Forest evil?

In recent years the Forest has suffered repeated scare stories about the next recreational craze to be inflicted upon it. Most, fortunately, prove unfounded. Powered wheel-chair racing, tree-top rope walkways to allow city children to study meteorology and adventure tractor driving for visitors are the sort of nonsense which has been put about. When, therefore, I heard the latest in this series of threatened horrors, I was inclined to regard it with scepticism. "The Forestry Commission", I was told, "is going to dig a £20,000 hole off the Ornamental Drive, so that visitors can climb down it and look at the tree roots"! My informant kept a perfectly straight face throughout this story and assured me that it was absolutely true. The next day I telephoned Queen's House and enquired, rather diffidently, if there was anything in this extraordinary rumour. In essence, it seems, the information I had been given was correct. The hole (more precisely a trench) is being dug by a Forestry Commission licensee with the object of allowing visitors to look at tree roots. Whether or not it is costing £20,000, the Commission could not say. The licensee is an art group - evidently an art group of considerable means - and as I can claim little knowledge or appreciation of fringe artistic matters, I make no comment on the merits of their activities. The Commission officer to whom I spoke seemed a little sheepish about the whole affair, describing it as "bizarre, but vaguely educational", but then he is a gentleman renowned for his very charitable attitude towards public whims over the use of the New Forest. The multi-thousand pound hole is to be a temporary feature, filled-in after a few weeks when, presumably, the public's appetite for artistic root viewing is satisfied. As my original informant dryly remarked, "They can see the roots for nothing when the so-and-sos (he used a more colourful expression) blow down."

In the Forest of Dean, which is unprotected by an effective Verderers' Court and thus a virtual temple to intrusive recreation in all its forms, there is (or was on my last visit) a permanent exhibition of modern art suspended from the trees. This included stained glass which formed a lovely target for children with stones and catapults. The lily which the New Forest was once supposed to be is now to be gilded in the same appalling and expensive manner. Needless to say, the Verderers have been neither informed nor consulted, apparently because the abomination will be in an inclosure.

New Park Camp

The Forestry Commission is evidently not going to find it nearly so easy as it had supposed to relocate camping pitches to New Park. Over the month since their announcement, I have found scarcely anyone with a good word to say for the project, although the intended closure of Long Beech, Denny and Hollands Wood is universally welcomed by Forest people. The most cogent argument against the New Park scheme was put forward at a New Forest Association meeting and is as follows. If the commercial

company Centre Parcs was to acquire Hinchleslea and apply to the New Forest District Council for planning permission to erect a large camp site, the Forest would be in uproar. What is the difference between that and the New Park plan ? To this, of course, the Forestry Commission would reply that the Forest would benefit from the closure of three camps which it admits are very damaging. That is a very unconvincing justification. Because the Commission (acting for the public) is damaging the Forest and admits that it is doing so, should it really be allowed to do marginally less damage somewhere else as compensation for correcting the first wrong ? In the case of a private individual negotiating with the planners, perhaps there might be some slight reason to allow relocation of surrendered pitches, but with a public body managing national property there can be none.

Road widening by stealth

It has been a long-standing complaint in the Forest that the highway authority (Hampshire County Council) has widened roads by stealth. Broken gravel road margins are repeatedly patched with tarmac and eventually the whole road, original carriageway and patches, is resurfaced with tar creating a wider road. The whole process then starts again. Wider smoother surfaces lead to increased speed and thus to more ponies and cattle killed. This stealth widening is very difficult to prove but the Verderers have become a good deal more vigilant in preventing it over recent years. The latest, more overt, attempt at widening is on a large scale and affects the road across Broomy Plain (U106) from near the east gate of Milkham to a little west of Spring Bushes. This is a narrow road, surfaced with tarmac and edged with concrete strips. White lines along to the edge of the tarmac are intended to give the impression of an even narrower road and thus to discourage speed. The concrete was added some years ago, with the Verderers' rather reluctant consent, to replace the eroded gravel edges. It was said to be an experiment. The Court's misgivings were because the concrete in fact created a wider road surface. As an experiment, the concrete strips failed miserably. They are now broken and pitted and traffic is overrunning the grass margins beyond them, but this damaged state is remarkably serviceable in reducing speed.

The County Council is now proposing to dig out the existing concrete which is about half a metre wide on each side of the tarmac. It wants to replace it with new material to a width of one metre each side, of which a quarter of a metre each side will be covered over with soil. Experience on the B 3078 has clearly demonstrated that such "burial" of road surface is quickly eroded by speeding traffic so that the net effect of the Broomy Plain scheme would be a surface 25% (one metre) wider than the existing. If the Commoners are correct in believing that wider smoother roads lead to more speed, Broomy Plain would quickly become another killing field. The Verderers have consequently refused permission for the widening, but indicated that a 100 metre experiment might be acceptable.

Heywood Sumner Exhibition

Just before Christmas 1940, Heywood Sumner died at his home, "Cuckoo Hill", on the western edge of the New Forest. Now, sixty years later, the St.Barbe Museum in Lymington is holding a comprehensive exhibition of his archaeological and artistic work relating to the New Forest. That last qualification (relating to the Forest) is important, because this remarkable man did not commence his archaeological career until the age of fifty eight. By that time he was already well known as an artist, a decorator of churches by the curious plaster etching technique known as sgraffito, as a designer of wallpaper and an illustrator of books, including the provision of twelve beautiful etchings for the "artist's edition" of Wise's "New Forest" in 1883. He had even qualified as a barrister in 1881, although he never practised law.

After coming to live in the New Forest in 1903, Sumner threw himself into a study of local history and topography and this, in due course, developed into an interest in archaeology which dominated his later years. He became a pioneer excavator with a particular interest in the Romano-British pottery industry of the Forest. His archaeological drawings are full of life and interest, quite unlike the dry lifeless productions of those who have followed in his footsteps. Such "irrelevant detail" includes forest animals, plants, trees and even the occasional ghost ! All this work was recorded in a series of books and papers. Those relating to the Forest started in 1910 with "The Book of Gorley", the story of his home village, the adjoining commons and the nearby parts of the Forest. In 1917 there followed a sumptuous limited edition "Ancient Earthworks of the New Forest" which comprised an account of most of the important archaeological field recording up to that date. In 1923 he published a pocket guide to the New Forest which ran to several editions, including one post-war reprint. Four years later there appeared "Excavations in New Forest Roman Pottery Sites" which was perhaps his most important contribution to our knowledge of the Forest's ancient history. Finally, in 1927, "Local Papers" comprised a republication of many of his contributions to learned journals and this is one of my favourites. His other published works over the same period deal with Cranborne Chase, parts of Salisbury Plain and the Bournemouth area.

Earlier this year I undertook, with two colleagues, a reassessment of the archaeology, landscape and recent history of Rockford and Ibsley Commons for the new owner - the National Trust. These commons were, quite literally, Heywood Sumner's back yard. The garden of "Cuckoo Hill" opens directly onto Ibsley Common and the house takes its name from the adjoining heather-covered knoll. The common thus formed the core of Sumner's Forest research and artistic work. The St.Barbe exhibition contains many beautiful and unpublished watercolours of Ibsley. I had long been an admirer of Heywood Sumner and my own work revealed just how meticulous and thorough was his original recording. Very little of his archaeological fieldwork needed correction, despite the passage of half a century

and despite the fact that many aids from which we benefit - aerial photography, detailed modern mapping etc - were not available to him. I sometimes felt that his ghost was keeping a benign eye on our activities as we re-examined his discoveries on those freezing January and February days.

For serious students of the New Forest, the exhibition is certainly not to be missed. It will probably be the only opportunity for most of us to see so many original Sumner works which have been gathered together from private collections. It runs until 25th November - Monday to Saturday, 10.00 am to 4.00 pm.

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