

NEW FOREST NOTES OCTOBER 2009

The Busketts Lawn Bomber

Last month a Marchwood resident wrote to me in response to the July "Notes" in which I described the proposed works at Mallard Mead and the history of Lyndhurst's sewerage arrangements. He had interesting memories of both, but in commenting on the effluent discharge to Bartley Water, which runs through Busketts Lawn inclosure, he also reminded me of a tragedy which occurred above that wood exactly half a century ago this month.

On 12th October 1959, there was an explosion in the sky over the Inclosure, in which a military jet, which the papers described as a "secret British A-bomber", was destroyed. The plane plunged into the wood north of Bartley Water and close to a gravel road. Two forestry workers from Lyndhurst were quickly on the scene, but the pilot (an American civilian) and his observer were both dead. The jet, described as a Blackburn NA 39 strike aircraft, was on a test flight from Boscombe Down and was one of seven pre-production planes then undergoing tests. The accident caused much interest at the time and I remember riding over from Cadnam on my pony (I was then still at school) and gazing at the large crater which the crash had left. It was a terrible loss for the airmen's families (I believe there is a local memorial), but it could so easily have been very much worse. Only half a mile to the east are the big houses of the Woodlands Road and the rather more modest bungalows of Alpine Road. What caused the crash and whether the bombers eventually went into service with the Navy, I do not know. *(Since this article appeared, I have been told that the aircraft subsequently became the Buccaneer which had a long history of service with the armed forces)*

Given that the New Forest is sandwiched between Eastleigh and Bournemouth airports and is also plagued by a great deal of military and pleasure flying, it is perhaps remarkable that there have been so few peacetime crashes here. It was very different during the last war. The heaths and woods are dotted with crash sites and enthusiasts even make a study of the subject. It seems to have an enduring fascination, perhaps because of the destruction of so much sophisticated and expensive technology in an instant rather than for any more macabre reasons. I remember that while on an archaeological surveying project in the north of the Forest about twenty years ago, my team stumbled on one of these crash sites. Little pools of congealed melted aluminium made islands in the heather as the plane had evidently burned fiercely, presumably killing its occupants. Most poignant amongst the miscellaneous debris was a sixpenny piece, lost by its owner along with his life and perhaps intended for use in a café or bar after that fatal flight.

Verderers' Election

Next month will see the election of three Verderers to serve for a term of six years. Nominations do not close until 9th November, but rumour suggests that there may be a record number of candidates, although in the past rumour has been known to make over-estimates on this subject. What is very far from a record (at least a positive one) is the disappointing

number of commoners who have chosen to register their right to vote. The total number of forms returned for the draft register is only 833 out of 1049 sent out. That is a drop of 20%, despite the best efforts of the Court to encourage and facilitate registration. There is a further worrying trend in that a significant number of the 215 reduction is represented by practising commoners – those who actually graze stock on the Forest.

The electoral register is made up of persons occupying not less than one acre to which rights of common over the Forest attach. That means that almost all the 595 practising commoners are entitled to vote and a good number register the right to do so. Many, however, do not and the number of non-practising commoners on the register is therefore probably quite a lot more than the nominal 238. I don't think any detailed analysis of the register has been made recently. The non-practising commoners on the register include retired commoners, occupiers of fields used for recreational horsekeeping, some larger householders, and farmers and landowners who choose not to depasture stock on the Forest. This group tends to comprise people with a particular interest in and love for the Forest, but their numbers also are dwindling as new money displaces the old Forest community. Busy new residents with employment in Bournemouth and Southampton who regard the New Forest simply as a pleasant commuting base and somewhere to keep the daughter's pony, do not always share local interests and values.

The Warwickslade railway

Deep in the woods north of Brockenhurst a remarkable sight has been unfolding over the last few weeks. A railway is being built. It is being laid by the contractors obliterating the stream called Warwickslade Cutting with imported gravel and clay, as part of the Forestry Commission's stream-filling and diversion schemes. I have had grave reservations about the Warwickslade work from the start because, whatever the perceived long-term advantages, they are not worth the great disruption of the Forest and the immense public expenditure which is being poured into the work. Still, once permission had been given by the Verderers, it was clearly in the interests of all parties that damage and disruption should be kept to a minimum. Work started on each side of the A 35 and, despite excellent weather and ground conditions, the woodland quickly began to look a horrible mess, with the filled channel becoming a vast gravelled highway carrying an incessant traffic of tracked dumpers. Now I know perfectly well that much of this mess will be short-term, that the contractors involved have a good reputation for clearing up and that the autumn leaf-fall will quickly mask many of the scars, but that does not alter my concerns.

How does the railway fit into this vast engineering project? The idea is that it will reduce the disruption of the Forest demonstrated in the early phases of the work, by eliminating the need for many of the dumper movements. This should result in less ground damage and less noise and pollution. It will allow work to continue even in wet weather. I am told that two trains will operate from a newly constructed depot in Vinney Ridge where points allow the diversion of one train into a siding. There it will be loaded while the other travels up to a mile southwards towards Brockenhurst where the track runs parallel to the stream. Then

a huge excavator will lift the wagons from the bogies and tip their contents into the stream, returning them empty to the train with virtually no sideways movement.

The entire operation looks exactly like a child's train set on a vast scale. The rails, with "sleepers" ready attached, come in sections - straight or curved to suit their position. They fit together exactly as do the rail sections of the toy set. Some of the track-laying looks to me rather nightmarish from a safety point of view, with disintegrating sleepers and some sections supported on broken branches rammed into depressions under the track. However, I imagine that the trains will move slowly and even in a catastrophic derailment, nobody is likely to be hurt and little damage done. The wagons are little white painted containers which sit on the bogies, secured by lugs and presumably each containing a couple of cubic metres or so of fill. Every scrap of equipment seems to be brand new and must, with the track laying, have cost a fortune. I imagine that if it survives the battering of use, it will be available for future projects, but only where the gradients are slight. The Forest can thus expect a further push against the 19th Century and earlier stream system in the months ahead.

Light railways are actually not new in the Forest. The best recorded one was at Millyford off the Bolderwood road, where traces of the line can be seen to this day. It served the sawmill there during the First World War and several photographs of it in use survive. I also understand that there was a railway in the Hawkhill area, presumably serving a similar purpose of transporting timber for conversion, but of this I have been unable to discover any details. Perhaps various engine blocks and footings adjoining the gravel road to Tucker's Bridge may be associated with it.

Juliette de Bairacli Levy

This is a name which will probably be unfamiliar to most New Forest people unless they are interested in herbal medicine (on which she was an authority) or gipsy matters. I have only recently heard from a correspondent that she died in May of this year. A reference to her in these notes is justified by the fact that in 1958 she published a hard-back book "Wanderers in the New Forest" (she wrote a number of other books besides). That was at a time when books on the Forest were a great rarity in contrast to the half dozen or so which we may expect every year now. I have to admit that I found it then, and still do to some extent, a rather peculiar and sentimental book. It recounts her time spent in a tiny cob cottage at Frogham on the edge of the Forest with her two small children and it is dominated by stories of gypsies and the time she spent with them. I never met the lady, but photographs suggest that she was quite a striking person. A paperback reprint of her Forest book was issued in 1976 and I don't think I opened it from that time until the present. On re-reading it, I was struck by how it gives a picture of a New Forest which, although post-war, has almost completely vanished. Old commoners and old farming practices (including the harvesting of bracken) are described, while accounts of daily naked family bathing in Windmill Hill Pond are like something out of another world. Try doing that in modern-day Latchmoor Bottom as a hundred tourists and dog walkers a day tramp past the pond !

She clearly believed that no gipsy could do any wrong, and that the Forest authorities who controlled their activities were akin to Nazis, while her ideas as to how the Forest was managed were completely bizarre. Still, her book remains an interesting record of life in the northern Forest at the time and she was one of those curious and remarkable characters which once flourished here, but which now seem to have disappeared altogether.

Anthony Pasmore