

New Forest Notes - October 1998

VIOLATION OF AN IRON AGE VILLAGE

School history books used to be full of stories of Saxon hordes overrunning peaceful villages at the end of the Roman occupation - burning and destroying as they went. Whether such horrors actually occurred in the New Forest, I do not know, but one Iron Age/Romano-British village site has had to wait an additional seventeen hundred years for its share of ravaging. Its violation was not by the sword of some hairy Teuton, but by the wheels of a Forestry Commission contractor intent on hauling out fir trees. Severe damage has been done to one of the Forest's most vulnerable and important multi-period archaeological sites on a remote wooded hilltop near Fritham. What makes this case so serious is that the Commission was well aware of the existence of the site. They had been told repeatedly how vulnerable it was and they had given clear assurances that no extraction whatever would be carried out within its boundaries.

For most people, archaeology is not exactly a fascinating subject, but like wildlife, landscape and farming, it has its proper place in the mosaic which makes up the New Forest. It deserves the respect of management. It happens that we know quite a lot about the history of this lost village because a certain amount of careful excavation was carried out there in the 1970s when the site was threatened by treasure hunters. The information then collected will help to put some flesh on the bare bones of the controversy.

Between three and four thousand years ago the hilltop was chosen for the building of an elaborate burial mound constructed almost entirely of small flint boulders which were probably collected from Forest streams and carried, with immense labour, to the site. A number of interments then probably took place and, despite the attention of 19th Century robbers, at least one survives intact. There is no evidence that the Bronze Age builders of the mound continued to use the site and for perhaps a thousand years the burial cairn may have formed a prominent and undisturbed landscape feature. Then, about a century before the birth of Christ, local Iron Age people, perhaps out of Dorset, established a settlement on the same site. They enclosed land with banks and ditches, built houses and outbuildings, probably cultivated crops and carried out minor industrial processes which we do not yet fully understand. The first settled Fritham residents had arrived. The village evidently proved popular and durable, for it continued in use throughout the Roman occupation. Towards the end of its life, the villagers were engaged in the production of pottery as part of the famous manufactory of Romano British "New Forest Ware". Fine lustrous drinking vessels, wine flagons, oil flagons, bowls and specialist pots were made in addition to ordinary kitchen wares. The fragile clay pottery kilns and workshops lie just below the woodland leafmould. With the departure of the Romans the village came to an end, although there is nothing to suggest that it was a violent death. Trees invaded the site and the burial mound, houses,

workshops, fields, pottery kilns, and village well vanished silently under the Forest floor. There they remain to this day as one of the great historical treasures of the New Forest.

Archaeological sites, like rare plants and birds, are supposed to receive careful protection in the New Forest. The Hampshire Field Club maintains a massive register of all archaeological features and regularly updates the Forestry Commission's maps which carry the same (confidential) information. Unfortunately there are plenty of people about who will rob sites, steal birds eggs and dig up rare plants. All sites notified to the Commission are graded according to their importance and vulnerability to forestry work. This grading ranges from 1A (very important sites which are exceptionally vulnerable to forestry work) to 3C (robust sites of minor importance). Our village fell firmly into the first group. The system was initiated in the 1970s after several sites had been inadvertently damaged by forestry work. It worked well until the last few years when repeated cases of wanton damage started to occur.

In 1997 the Forestry Commission announced that forestry work would take place in an Inclosure near the Iron Age village and all archaeological features in the affected area were marked by the Hampshire Field Club in company with forestry officials. Clear assurances were given that no work would take place in or near the village site. However, by the summer of 1998, huge flooded ruts had been cut across the very centre of the site, through the Iron Age enclosures containing fragile building remains, across the tail of the barrow and into the area occupied by 4th Century workshops and kilns. Exactly how much has been destroyed, we shall never know. For those who had worked meticulously surveying and excavating portions of the village, the destruction is heartbreaking and the loss to the Forest's history is certainly significant.

The Commission's explanation is that "the contractor exceeded his licence" - a standard excuse in such circumstances. In recent years we have been told the same thing when Roman kilns were overrun in Broomy Walk, when a Mediaeval site had gravel dumped upon it near Latchmore and so on. In the present case the Forestry Commission was warned repeatedly of the importance of the site and, in an entirely separate report, the late Colin Tubbs made it clear that any extraction damage in the area would be wholly unacceptable on ecological grounds. Even the agisters have had to complain to the Verderers' Staff Committee that the ruts are both deep and dangerous! Of course tighter controls have been promised for the future (again a standard response), but such words have been plentiful and cheap in recent years.

AN UNCERTAIN AUTUMN

On 13th of this month, the junior Environment minister, Mr. Alan Meale, MP, will be visiting the New Forest to make a flying assessment as part of his deliberations over the national park issue. His department is under intense pressure from national recreation groups to do something apparently "green" by making the New Forest into a national park and from local

authority circles seeking a measure of control and development opportunity in the Forest through a tailor-made park type administration fronted by the New Forest Committee. Forest interests want none of this so far as the "real" New Forest - the area within the gridded perambulation - is concerned, although there are mixed views on the treatment of the suburban fringe. All this comes at a time when the existing administration of the Forest by the Forestry Commission is being increasingly questioned. I know that I am repeatedly criticised for being "soft" on the Commission, but to my mind there is really very little wrong with the system. It is the way in which that system is being directed which seems, over the last year or so, to have started to get out of control. It is not the first time in the Forest's history that this has happened.

Despite a deluge of conservation jargon and an increasing number of good news press releases from the Forestry Commission to counter adverse publicity - all foreshadowed in their internal paper "Delivering the People's Mandate" - it is perfectly clear that the Forest is under intense and growing commercial pressure. Anyone who doubts this need only walk in the Inclosures to see it demonstrated on every side. Vast amounts of timber are being taken out - far more mature conifer than at any period in my lifetime. Extraction damage, seldom adequately corrected, is widespread. Rides are planted over or deer fenced across and gates are removed. Thirty year old safeguards for the Inclosures contained in the Minister's Mandate are under threat. The camp sites are being squeezed for profit, as witness the recent desperate attempts to secure permission for increased sales in camp shops. New management plans are being prepared which, despite some small and valuable concessions in releasing a few isolated woods from cropping, seem intent on tightening the Commission's commercial grip on the real gems - the Napoleonic oak plantations. Finally and certainly not least, the Commission seems intent on repudiating its agreement with the New Forest Association, made only last year, and aimed at ensuring a proper regard for amenity in the management of the Inclosures.

Altogether the picture is a bleak one. It seems almost designed to play into the hands of those local councils anxious for control of the New Forest. It is far from clear whether the aggressive commercial attitude is the result of a shift in government policy or of individual ambition at some level within the Forestry Commission.

MOBILE PHONES

After painting a rather depressing picture of recent Forestry Commission management, it is good to be able to record an instance in which a firm stand is being taken against outside commercial pressures. At the September Verderers' Court, the Forestry Commission's land agent told the Verderers that, with the support of successive Deputy Surveyors, he is continuing to resist innumerable applications for mobile phone masts in the Forest. If we have to accept an element of inconvenience as a result, that is a necessary price for protecting the Forest. He regards the "artificial tree aerials" as quite inappropriate to the New Forest. I have

seen one of these monstrosities in the Exmoor national park and I completely agree with the land agent's assessment. As to the inconvenience, the Verderers' staff suffer as much as anyone from poor reception for their mobile phones in the Forest. The possibility of going back to a radio communications system is being considered.

Just for once the appearance of the Forest seems to have forced its way to the top of the priorities list and for that the Commission deserves our praise and thanks.