

NEW FOREST NOTES SEPTEMBER 2006

Eyeworth Wood – firewood to beetle fodder

August is traditionally a quiet month in the Forest for everything but tourism. The Verderers do not meet and, the telephonist excepted, Queen's House seems to be devoid of staff, or at least of those staff members I want to contact. Last month, however, there was one very important and well-attended site meeting. This highlighted the growing and increasingly unbridgeable gulf between traditional land and resource use and extreme "scientific" conservation.

For years the Commoners have been complaining about the amount of fallen wood now left lying in the Open Woods of the Forest. It blocks tracks, prevents the maintenance of little lawns between the trees by grazing and makes normal stock management on horseback a virtual impossibility. It is also, in the practical eyes of many local people, an appalling waste of a natural resource (firewood) from which their ancestors have benefited for generations through casual sales by the Crown. My early years were spent in Fritham and in those days everyone's fire in the village was fed from the A&O woods. Trips to the keeper's cottage to buy firewood tickets were followed by weekends of cutting and hauling logs from the open woods around. After a storm, local people were out early to reserve the best and most accessible fallen branches. The pattern was repeated throughout the Forest.

The modern scientific conservationist on the other hand looks at fallen wood very differently. Left alone it is an invaluable asset. It must remain exactly where it falls for best advantage. There it must rot, subjected to varying patterns of light and air, providing rich habitat and feed for beetles, lichen and fungi. Any departure from this regime, if conceded at all, must be under protest and be kept to the minimum.

The battle of commoner versus conservationist is so intense that it is hard for any other interests to make themselves heard. Both parties have so far steadfastly ignored these other interests, first among which I place the appearance of the old woods. It was something for which hardly a voice was raised at the August site meeting in Eyeworth Wood just to the north of Fritham. Walk through Eyeworth Wood today, assuming you have the inclination to clamber through the wreckage of smashed branches and rotting trunks, and you will see exactly what I mean. The occasional decaying fallen stem, moss and fern covered, and making space for sunlight to penetrate, may be regarded as picturesque. It offends no one, but the impenetrable tangle of debris which is Eyeworth Wood today is anything but beautiful. In many places it resembles the aftermath of a hurricane. That is actually not so far from the truth, because the lowest stratum of debris is the uncleared detritus of the 1987 storm. Woodland beauty, like all beauty, is to some extent determined by personal preference, but it does have certain benchmarks as defined by the late John Lavender in a report on the subject in 1970. The most important of these is depth of view. One needs to be able to see through woodland for some distance to appreciate its qualities. The view must not be closed off on every hand by piles of rotting timber, the brambles it encourages and shattered holly

wrecked by falling branches. Look at any 19th Century book illustration of the New Forest woods, including photographs, and this essential depth of view is universally present. What was beautiful then remains beautiful today also, if increasingly difficult to find within our sadly neglected woods. Of course these paintings, drawings and photographs record the Forest under a system of management in which firewood was a valued resource. As the commoners rightly argue, the beetles and lichens survived that system perfectly well, yet the conservationists now demand that the A&O woods should now be managed as a sort of 5,000 acre refuse tip for waste timber. They say that the rare species did indeed survive, but that the recent abandonment of management has made things “so very much better”. Moreover, in the intervening century the occurrence of dead wood elsewhere has become increasingly rare, making the New Forest one of the last bastions in which large scale decay can take place unimpeded.

I think this is one of a number of instances in which the commoners are missing an opportunity. By concentrating too narrowly upon their own management concerns, they are failing to enlist the support of a very powerful ally in the shape of public opinion. Beautiful woodland maintained properly (and that means with due regard to conservation as well and certainly not a clean sweep of the woodland floor) has immense public appeal – far more than great piles of rotten timber, however much the beetles delight in it.

In Eyeworth, the two sides battled it out without, after two hours when I had to leave, reaching any very firm conclusions. The Forestry Commission agreed to re-open the main tracks and there will be some breaking-up and pushing aside of fallen stems to assist in stock management. Small amounts of firewood may be sold from the track clearance. Fallen timber will be moved from acknowledged grazing lawns. The impression I was left with is that it will still look rather dreadful, especially where wood is piled up, and that access on horseback for driving or inspecting stock will remain a nightmare.

The really unfortunate thing is that Eyeworth Wood is not unique. To a greater or lesser extent the problem exists in every area of A&O wood in the Forest. We were told that Eyeworth is of exceptional scientific value and I do not doubt that, but very similar management practices are applied everywhere. Moreover, Eyeworth is certainly not some pristine area of wildwood which has survived from before human occupation of Britain. For three hundred years a good part of it was what then passed for an industrial and residential complex, although I appreciate that is not necessarily relevant to its present-day conservation value. Sixteen centuries can have a considerable mellowing effect.

Resident rage

I often think that you can get away with practically anything in the New Forest without challenge. Residents usually turn a blind eye to those throwing litter, trespassing on mountain bikes or lighting picnic fires. This is hardly surprising given the stream of foul language or worse directed against good citizens who challenge offenders, but there is one innocent activity which is guaranteed to produce an immediate and sometimes hostile reaction. Land surveying is like a red rag to a bull where many residents are concerned.

Appear almost anywhere in the Forest with a set of ranging poles and a level and you will be jumped-upon within minutes.

One of the many worthy projects financed in part by the NFDC's "Leader Plus" scheme is the supply of modern surveying equipment to the Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society. For those members of the charity who learned their surveying in the era of Gunter's chain and triangulation, the appearance on the scene of a total station (a sophisticated laser plan-making machine) has involved a lot of re-training. This has taken place in various parts of the Forest, usually remote from houses, but the final session was arranged for the edge of a village in the north on a quiet weekday morning in August.

Within minutes of the equipment being set up we were under observation. The sight of three elderly gentlemen of sober demeanour and dress, grouped around the total station like priests around a little green god on a yellow tripod altar, was clearly an intolerable provocation. An attacker soon issued from the nearest front door, demanding to know what was going on. After the inevitable flippant comment from one of my colleagues that we had just commenced setting out a motorway, I explained politely and in detail that the three people present were being trained in the use of modern surveying equipment. The challenger looked doubtful, but wandered off, keeping us under close scrutiny. As work progressed (and by ill luck came within a hundred metres of his house) he moved in again – this time for the kill. What I had told him was a "pack of nonsense". What were we really doing? Did we not know that this was the New Forest and that you cannot go about surveying things? Unless we told him at once what we were really doing, he was off to phone the police! In vain did we re-explain the humdrum reason for our harmless activity. There simply had to be a dark motive behind the appearance of these symbols of surveying evil. I really believe that if I had told him that we were from the British Bungalow Corporation, laying out plots for key workers' housing in the new National Park, he would have been very much happier.

New Forest paintings

In these notes for November 2003, I recorded the recovery of a New Forest painting by Sir Charles Burrard (1793-1870) of Lyndhurst, which had somehow found its way to Chicago and was then returned to this country. Since then I have been pursuing other works by this Forest artist and, with the consent of their owners, putting digital copies into the library at the New Forest Museum. Until this spring progress had been slow, with one or two paintings a year coming to light. Then in April I had a response to the Burrard website <http://www.gjcoop.plus.com/> from a lady in Dorset, a direct descendant of Sir Charles's daughter Emily. She possesses a fine collection of the artist's work and she put me in touch with other relatives in Tunbridge Wells and Cornwall, both of whom have been very helpful. The net result is that the Tunbridge and Dorset collections have been copied and I hope to see the Cornwall pictures later this month. More than 100 previously unknown Burrard painting copies will therefore be deposited in the Museum for local historians to see.

There were some other quite unexpected leads of these collections. For example, Laura Burrard (sister of Sir Charles) was, it seems, a superb artist of New Forest flowers. A

collection of 260 of her pictures, of which I was quite unaware, is held in the Natural History Museum, while other examples, including some landscapes, are in the private collections. Then there was the discovery of Paul Burrard, brother to Sir Charles, and another landscape painter. Writing in 1899, his niece Emily described him as "a remarkable youth, very clever . . . and blameless in life". His subjects included Beaulieu, Southampton Water and Christchurch at the beginning of the 19th Century, but his career was short. As Aide de Camp to Sir John Moore at the retreat to Corunna, he was mortally wounded by the same shell that killed his chief. Sir Charles's family suffered badly from the French wars – two killed, one drowned and one invalided.

There remains one great mystery. Assuming that Sir Charles's work was distributed among his married daughters, that possessed by only two families has so far been located. What happened to the remainder? One daughter, Laura, married the Rev. John Compton of Minstead, while Frederica married Capt. Norris of Lyndhurst. Both had children, but I know nothing of their descendants. Any information on the subject would be much appreciated.

Anthony Pasmore