

NEW FOREST NOTES SEPTEMBER 2015

An expensive and vanishing pond

If you drive from Southampton to Lyndhurst along the A35, the first piece of the New Forest you see as you cross the Ashurst railway bridge is Busketts Inclosure. It is a timber plantation of unremarkable character, rather flat, and made up of mixed hardwood and conifers. Busketts is much used by local people, but does not attract a great deal of interest from visitors, not least because it has no easily accessible and large car parks. The plantation was made in 1864 on what must have been open grassland and scattered woods such as survives today around the Ashurst camp site on the opposite side of the main road. The original planting of oak and Scots pine, where this survives, is now supplemented by an understorey of naturally regenerated beech which seems to be doing remarkably well.

Apart from the standard tree growth of the plantation, there are two interesting and entirely neglected features which are today almost forgotten. The first of these, right up against the railway bridge at Ashurst is a small arboretum. I know little about its history, but it appears to have been planted within a decade or so of the Inclosure being made and inside it is a circular embanked area which may have been part of the original layout. The arboretum extends to about one acre today, although more of it probably existed before the railway bridge and road junction were made after 1928. It is completely inaccessible due to a dense colonization by laurel, but it evidently contains some interesting mature conifers, including at least one monkey puzzle tree. The only other such tree I know of in the Forest (if still standing) is in Denny Inclosure. I remember many years ago one of the Deputy Surveyors considered restoring the arboretum, but decided against it, probably because public access would be difficult and dangerous given the adjacent main road and junction.

The second feature of Busketts has a long and troubled history, of which I was reminded recently in an email from a local resident. About four hundred yards west of the arboretum is the curiously-named Costicles Pond. In 1787, as shown on a map of that date, it must have been one of the most impressive expanses of open water in the New Forest, exceeded in size by only Whitten Pond at Burley. Hatchet Pond, the largest today, was not formed until after 1800 and unlike most Forest ponds it is entirely artificial in origin. If you go to Costicles today there is certainly no pond to be seen – just a boggy clearing in the trees, rapidly becoming overrun with scrub, but seventeen years ago the ecologists “discovered” Costicles Pond and got very excited about it. It was then described variously as an “ephemeral pond” or a “Mediterranean temporary pond” and a great deal of public money and effort was devoted to its restoration. This included the removal of all the trees and the erection of expensive fences and gates around it, including some very fine hand-made cleft oak or chestnut railing. The work was financed by “Life II”, a sort of predecessor of the present HLS money stream. Hard grazing of the site was prescribed as part of the restoration process. That did not work and it is hardly surprising in that the unfortunate livestock appointed to undertake the work was expected to graze 2.5 acres of swamp surrounded by trees. Any animals present in the summer months would have suffered dreadfully from fly attacks.

The Verderers at first took a dim view of this illegal enclosure. It is a very important principle in the Forest that the Inclosures may be used only for growing trees and for no other purpose unless authorized by statute. Eventually the Court agreed to take no action against the encroachment. In 2000, after the initial failure of the experiment, there was a proposal to create a corridor allowing access from the open Forest for more regular grazing, but this too came to nothing. Finally, in 2007, there was an elaborate plan to cut down part of Busketts Inclosure and to throw open the entire area to grazing. The proposals included new crossing places (for stock) on Bartley Water. This scheme too failed, partly because it involved the extension of grazing to areas outside the Forest perambulation along the Woodland Road and partly because nobody, including the National Lottery, seemed inclined to throw good money after bad. No doubt also the Forestry Commission was not overjoyed at the prospect of losing valuable timber growing land.

Today Costicles Pond lies abandoned, its fences and gates overgrown and the "pond" itself becoming choked with willow and other scrub. In a few years' time it will simply melt back into the plantation without leaving any trace beyond an ill-drained depression amongst the trees.

New Forest cavalry

Last month I was given a copy of a paper describing the use of animals (particularly mules) by the US army during WW2. In an age of mechanized warfare, aircraft and even the atomic bomb, it is remarkable that animals still played so important a transport role in the peripheral theatres of war such as Burma and North Africa. Even here in the New Forest, vast cavalry exercises and training of artillery horses took place throughout the First World War and right through to the late 1930s. In 1939 the Forest was deemed to be so full of other troops on various exercises that there would be no room for an intended visit by the cavalry !

Of course all these large exercises were chiefly for regular troops from outside the district, with the Forest's proximity to Aldershot making it a particularly attractive training area. Perhaps more remarkable is that for a decade or more the Forest had its own home-grown cavalry, mounted on New Forest ponies and called the "New Forest Scouts".

So far as I am aware, nobody has researched the Scouts in detail, although Miss Hardcastle, in her "Records of Burley" includes some useful notes on the subject and several illustrations. In addition, an undated press cutting (probably about 1901) throws some light on the origin of the Scouts and their development into a potential fighting force. At the Royal Military Tournament, two ponies (14hh and 13.3hh) entered by the Scouts took first prize in the jumping competition for Auxiliary Forces, while the men of the corps also entered the winner in the sword versus lance contest, prompting the press report.

The "Black Week" of 1899, during which the owner of the Hale Estate, Col. Gerald Goff, was killed at Magersfontein, was followed by a government appeal for volunteers who could ride and shoot. On the formation of the first contingent of the Imperial Yeomanry, some of the local gentry, already much involved with pony breeding, decided that the Forest would prove an excellent recruiting

ground. A conversation in a train between Lord Arthur Cecil and the Hon. John Scott-Montagu, (MP for the New Forest) resulted in the formation of the Scouts. Lord Arthur was shortly afterwards appointed as a breeding expert to the Horse and Mule Breeding Commission of the Indian government, so was removed from the Forest. The leading lights in the force then seem to have been Mr.A.O.Lyon of Burley Lodge and Mr.Barker Hahlo of Foxlease at Lyndhurst. A company of mounted infantry, recruited entirely from the Forest and mounted on New Forest ponies, took part in the Hampshire Volunteer Infantry brigade training at Swanage in August 1900. The report says that “although neither officers nor men had by that time been able to acquire much knowledge of military drill or duties, and they had consequently all the appearance of raw troops, there were many signs that the elements of a really useful force were not wanting”. A contemporary photograph shows about fifty mounted men and one can imagine that a few years of Forest colt-hunting was an excellent preparation for mounted conflict.

Since the Boer War finished in May 1902, presumably the Scouts were never in fact in action in South Africa.

By 1907, the Volunteers had become Territorials and K Company (by this time known as the Burley Troop) was commanded by the well-known Forest figure of Lord Lucas. He was then riding with one artificial leg following severe wounding in South Africa. He was later killed in the Royal Flying Corps in WW1. Miss Hardcastle records that the Scouts continued in existence until 1914, so presumably the Forest ponies escaped the horrors of both South Africa and France, although many of their owners were less fortunate.

I wonder if any relics of the Scouts' uniforms survive in some forgotten corner of an attic in Burley or elsewhere.

The acorn threat

This is the time of year when pig keepers, horse owners and foresters all turn their eyes to the branches of oak trees above, if with different hopes and fears. My assessment in the present season is that we are in for a really bad acorn crop, probably worse than for a good many years past. My concern is that of the livestock keeper, in that ponies and cattle will gorge themselves on acorns and die if not denied access to this addictive poison. The small number of pig owners about to exercise their pannage rights will no doubt be rubbing their hands in satisfaction, as will those foresters hoping to secure natural regeneration of broadleaved plantations.

Every second tree seems to be heavily loaded with acorns, at least in the north of the Forest, and I don't think things are very different in other parts. There is nothing that can be done to protect ponies and cattle on the common land against the threat. The old story that lots of pigs turned out will solve the problem is simply a myth. The number of pigs available is quite insufficient relative to the volumes of acorns. On the other hand in fields, horse owners employ a variety of techniques to deter their addicted animals. It can be a major task given how many hedgerow oaks there are in the Forest.

Most effective is electric fencing, but there are others who report good results from spraying Jayes Fluid or even sewage sludge beneath the oak trees.

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