

New Forest Notes - September 1990

Boiling troughs

It is difficult to imagine the New Forest of three thousand years ago, but one of the strange features a time-traveller would certainly encounter are boiling troughs and their adjacent mounds of waste flint. These were not some exotic hot springs, but man-made water heating sites comprising a pit or trough sunk into the ground adjoining a permanent water supply. The flooded trough was heated probably to boiling point, by casting in stones heated in an adjacent fire. When these sites were first discovered in the New Forest in the 1960s it represented an important advance for archaeology in the area as they had previously been recorded only in the highland region of the country.

During September, the Hampshire Field Club plans to carry out an experimental reconstruction and firing of a New Forest Bronze Age boiling trough on private land close to the Forest boundary. The site chosen is in fields which were at one-time part of the Forest's Adjacent Commons and the remains of two original boiling troughs are known within one hundred yards of the experiment. Volunteers will construct a timber-lined pit with dimensions based on the results of excavation work in the Forest. Locally collected large flints will then be heated in a wood fire and dropped into the trough with the aim of reaching and maintaining boiling temperature. Two small scale experiments about twenty years ago showed that the process works well provided that the stones can be heated to a very high temperature and that there is a minimum of heat loss between the fire and water.

The characteristic "boiling mounds" of the Forest comprise the accumulation of cooled crazed flint removed from the troughs, suggesting that some were in use over a very long period or were used intensively for a shorter time. The process is quite impressive with clouds of steam and a great deal of hissing and cracking of the flints as they hit the water. One great mystery remains. The precise use of the boiling water is unknown. Most probable explanations include communal cooking, the removal of hair from skins or, at lower temperatures, even a humble bath.

New Verderer

History, although of a much more recent period, also figures this month in the choosing of a Verderer to replace the recently retired Mr. Maldwin Drummond. Back in the days when the Court was reconstituted under Queen Victoria, all members with the exception of the Official Verderer or chairman were elected. The Official Verderer nominally represented the interests of the Crown, which through its agents the Office of Woods, had been busily engaged in trying to enclose (effectively destroy) the Forest for more than a century. The legislators of that time decided that the Official Verderer should be specifically excluded from any say in the choice of someone to fill a casual vacancy on the Court. The matter was left entirely in the hands of the elected Verderers. When the next reconstitution of the Court came in 1949 and half the membership became "appointed" rather than elected, this exclusion of appointed Verderers from the choice of replacement for Mr. Drummond therefore lies with the four surviving elected members and is expected to be announced at the

September Court. The procedure has been little used during the last century although it did result in the choice of the first woman Verderer (Mrs. D. M. Crosthwaite-Eyre) in 1943. This time the successful aspirant will hold the post for little more than a year before having to stand for re-election, since he or she is appointed only for the unexpired balance of Mr. Drummond's term.

Learning about the Forest

As the autumn approaches, a new lecture season is about to start. There is, it appears, an almost insatiable desire to learn about the Forest, its history and traditions. The demands range from requests for after dinner speakers for a social club to courses for ten or more detailed lectures organized by the W.E.A. or Southampton University. Nor is this demand confined to the Forest itself as this winter the W.E.A. has New Forest courses planned for places as far away as Salisbury and Ferndown and I have speaking engagements from Winchester to Warminster. Unfortunately, the supply of knowledgeable and effective speakers has barely kept pace with the demand. This is a pity because there are few better methods of winning friends and supporters for the Forest. Anyone keen enough to turn out at night week after week through the winter is likely to remain firmly committed to the New Forest in after years. It is always a pleasure to me to come across former class members deep in the woods or at some Forest meeting. Their names always escape me, but I usually remember the faces.

Some years ago, the New Forest Section of the Field Club produced an excellent booklet listing speakers, their subjects, charges and requirements. This was extremely useful for the club secretaries and course organizers. A reissue is long overdue although it was expensive and time consuming to produce.

Another commoners survey

Members of the Commoners' Defence Association have just received a questionnaire seeking information about their businesses and their views on the future of commoning. The collection of such information can certainly do no harm and might be of some assistance in securing the future of New Forest farming. It is therefore to be hoped that the organizers will receive a good response. However, the New Forest Commoner shares that almost universal farmer's dislike of paperwork and especially of form-filling, so it may not prove easy to secure a very high response rate.

After dutifully filling and sending my copy of the form, I could not resist a slight feeling of irritation that there seems to be almost endless money and manpower for surveys and studies and virtually none for actually correcting the problems which are the subject of those investigations. By my reckoning, this is the sixth such study of some aspect of the commoning problem in as many years. This time it is under the auspices of Southampton University and has the backing of an influential group of local people, so perhaps it has a chance of doing more than add to a bookshelf already overloaded with redundant New Forest reports.

The Forest at night

I suspect that I have probably not been alone in the solution to the problem of exercising horses during the recent heat wave. With daytime temperatures of ninety degrees and the Forest infested with almost tropical swarms of horse-enraging flies, I have taken to riding at night, usually at fairly respectable hours, but on occasions up to one o'clock or beyond. By this means one sees an entirely different New Forest – a Forest without people and traffic excepted, without noise. It is the Forest as our grandfathers must have seen it and, on a clear moonlit night, it is incredibly beautiful. Anyone who uses this nighttime Forest has, in my view, an obligation to treat it with extreme respect and to protect its silence and solitude. Some rowdy organized night events of recent years have been the antithesis of such respect. For the quiet walker or rider at night there are many unexpected rewards including a strange sharpening of the senses. On a July night, almost every bush seemed alive with nightjars and on one short length of track I counted seventeen glow worms – more than I have ever seen in one place before.

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