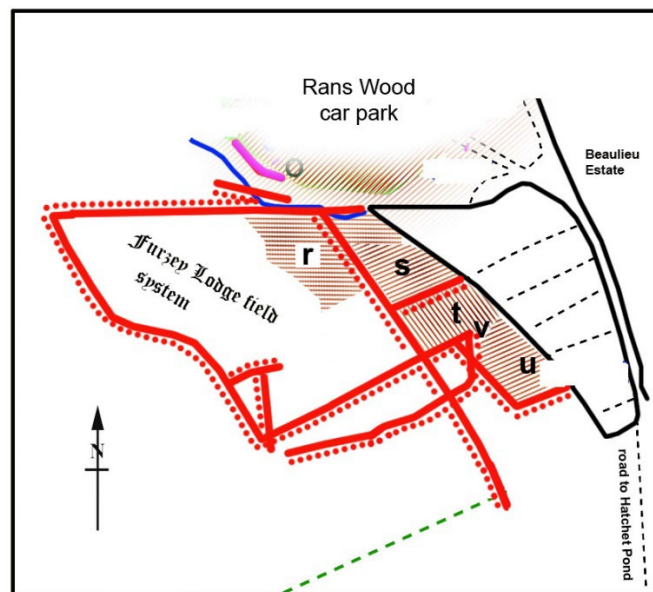


NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2023

Stream filling and its consequences

Sixty years ago the renowned New Forest naturalist and local historian, Colin Tubbs (together with his co-author E.L.Jones), published the first detailed study of the fragile remains of early farming which survive in the heaths and woodlands here. Colin was particularly interested in the little farms and smallholdings which had once surrounded much of Beaulieu Heath west. One of his most important discoveries was on the edge of the hamlet of Furzey Lodge. There he located an enclosure, now marked only by a bank and ditch, of about six acres, which had once been intensively cultivated, but which today is almost invisible to all but a trained eye. The makers of this smallholding at some time in the distant past had enclosed a small shallow valley, presumably surrounding it with a hedge or paling fence on top of the banks. At the same time, they directed the run-off from the adjacent heath around the outside of the enclosure so as to allow for the cultivation of their new homestead. Such enclosures cover only a tiny portion of the Forest, but are historically very important, while the one at Furzey Lodge is quite unique. There Colin Tubbs identified slight internal subdivisions and a remarkable pattern of ridges and furrows which were presumably formed to aid the growing of crops. The sketch map below shows the banks of his discovery in red, with the cultivation patterns shown diagrammatically in brown.



Over recent decades we have learnt a lot more about the pattern and origin of these ancient farms and Colin Tubbs's initial thoughts that they represented a fringe of abandoned forest-edge encroachments have been partly revised, but the importance of his early fieldwork remains unchallenged. In the intensively-developed landscape of Southern England, the survival of such physical remains is very rare indeed. It is therefore the more regrettable that Forestry England's legion of ecologists is promoting a stream filling and diversion project which will effectively destroy the integrity of the Furzey Lodge field system. They intend routing a stream across its centre, part filling-in the drainage pattern established by our mediaeval or later ancestors and generally wrecking the

setting of this important site. The map shows both the enclosure as identified by Tubbs, and refinements plotted by later researchers.

Forestry England's objective here, as throughout the Forest, is to restore what it considers to be important ecological conditions by getting rid of any streams that might have been modified by man. There are many hundreds of such streamlets throughout the Forest. They seek to replace them with slow-flowing weed-filled channels which flood regularly and which reduce the immediate surroundings from sometimes well-drained lawn to wet depressions. If such work involves the cutting down of streamside trees or killing them by drowning their root systems, that does not matter or is to be welcomed.

Now I appreciate that to the average Forest visitor, it is a matter of indifference whether the fragile evidence of our ancestors' land occupation is protected or is to be wrecked and replaced by a sluggish watercourse. He comes here for exercise and perhaps to enjoy the beauty of the landscape – not to study abstruse ecological or historical claims. Still, I believe that a national property so important as the New Forest should protect wider interests than simply a good day out for visitors. It should value the scarce and irreplaceable evidence of former land use. Over the years I have talked to many archaeologists of our other southern national parks and I am sure that none would have allowed on their own patches the sort of damage to “heritage assets” (in the jargon) that is intended here. The New Forest seems badly protected in so many ways.



Far more readily understood by both visitors and non-specialist local users of the Forest is the effect that such stream filling is already having upon the character of the Forest from Beaulieu to Redlynch. The ecologists, blessed with huge sums of public money, seem to have an intense desire to obliterate much that makes the Forest's streams beautiful and lively. They seek to eliminate little

waterfalls, which they call “nick points”, exposed sandy or gravel banks between which streams of water race over golden beds of flint gravel and indeed almost everything that makes our watercourses appealing to those who value landscape. All must be reduced to a weed-dominated characterless uniformity. The chatter of little waterfalls, especially after heavy rain, seems particularly troublesome to the stream fillers. The photograph above shows such a waterfall near Fritham.

The great artist and historian, Heywood Sumner, wrote eloquently of the beauty and liveliness of the Forest’s streams in his “Local Papers”, condemning the “libel on New Forest streams” committed by Percival Lewis a century earlier. In this the latter claimed that “the New Forest’s streams and rivulets have little or no character”. I fear that today’s ecological extremism is condemning us to a future in which Lewis’s judgement will become the universal and accepted picture across the Forest. Nobody is suggesting that deep dangerous drains dug in the 1970s should not be restored to more natural courses, but there are very few of these remaining. It is the assault on every tiny stream in an unending box-ticking exercise that is so distressing.

Destroying the Forest’s tranquil zones

In the years immediately before the New Forest was classified as a national park, there existed a rather strange body called the New Forest Committee which, in retrospect, may be seen as a stalking horse for the creation of the park itself. The New Forest committee had no powers and little money. On the whole it did not achieve much and I suppose that few people now remember that it ever existed. It did, however, have one or two employees and members who had an interest in the Forest. Perhaps under their influence, and the Committee’s auspices, was produced an important report called “The Tranquil Areas of the New Forest Heritage Area”. It bears the logo of the Countryside Commission, so I imagine the Commission financed the research.

The Tranquil Areas report set out to identify those small remaining portions of the New Forest which still possessed the rather elusive quality of tranquillity. It took its authors twenty pages to define that quality and to explain the results of their work. In summary, the most tranquil areas of the Forest were those with the least disturbance from noise of all kinds and from visual and recreational disruption of the sense of remoteness and calm. Inevitably the report contains a good deal of jargon, but the work highlighted this rare quality of the Forest which to many people today remains the most important. The results were neatly summarised on a sort of contour map which graded the Forest into five zones from the most to the least disturbed. The worst areas were those against built-up areas like the Waterside and the district inland from the coastal development west of Lymington, together with large corridors of noise disturbance along the main roads – particularly the A 31. At the other extreme there were only two large blocks of tranquil land. The first of these was along the coast west of the Beaulieu River and for a mile or so inland. This area was classified as unusually tranquil because of the absence of disturbing features such as major roads, built up areas and recreational trails. It was and remains largely private land. The other significant block of tranquil land was at the opposite end of the Forest and was almost wholly controlled by the Forestry Commission and subject to common rights. It stretched from Fritham in the east to the edge of the Avon Valley in the west and

from Ditchend Brook in the north to Dockens Water in the south. Between these two blocks of land were fragments of relatively quiet areas, separated by roads and settlements. One additional small island of great tranquillity was identified south west of Burley – again largely private land.

The findings of the report were widely welcomed at the time and initially did much to influence future recreational and other development.

In 2015 the national park decided to re-visit this subject and in turn produced its own tranquil areas survey. This time it was forty pages long and with even more complex wording, but in essence its conclusions were the same. I find the original document rather more easily digestible, but the park version has a useful addition covering aircraft noise. A further twenty years of intensive pressure had degraded all areas, but the *relative* grading was largely unaltered. Now, after nearly another decade and thirty years since the original report, there are disturbing indications that Forestry England, either by accident or design, has abandoned the special status of its own tranquil area in the north west of the Forest. Even worse, it seems to be targeting it with major and highly disruptive recreational events and has been doing so unchallenged for several years. I know that like all public services it is short of money (no doubt the events are very profitable) and under great pressure from the public for more and more opportunities for “fun”, but such disregard of the area’s protected status is unforgivable. In the last few weeks, for example, FE has permitted two shattering invasions of the north west of the Forest – in addition to the now usual post-covid intensified use. In September a commercial company was allowed to run nearly three hundred people through the depths of the Forest for many hours, between Hyde and Fritham. Last month the earlier incursion was dwarfed by a day of saturation disturbance in which eight hundred participants were let loose across the same area. This time they were off tracks, plunging through woods and heathland in all directions, scattering livestock as they went. Both events brought in huge numbers of cars for runners and spectators. The ordinary car parks were filled to overflowing, with parking extending onto the verges and into nearby lanes and villages. One of the big camp sites (closed for the winter) was opened up for additional parking, trading vans and organizers.

A Forestry England paper, setting out in advance how the expected impact of the event was assessed, makes not the slightest reference to this being the Forest’s most important tranquil area. I don’t suppose it was given even a moment’s thought.

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