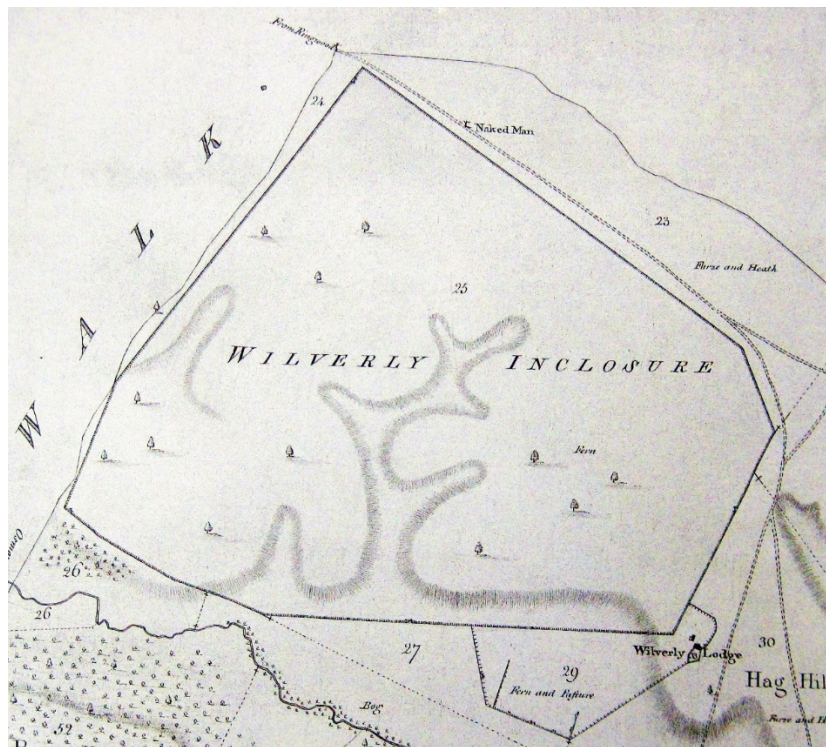


NEW FOREST NOTES FEBRUARY 2021

Wilverley Inclosure

The recent pressure of events in the Forest has rather interfered with my accounts of the inclosures, started during the first lockdown. Now that a sort of new normality of intense recreational use and damage has been established, I turn again to less troubling subjects and first of all to Wilverley Inclosure.

Of the statutory Inclosures considered so far, Wilverley is the oldest. It was made in 1775 and, as a timber plantation, it initially proved spectacularly unsuccessful. At 480 acres it was also one of the largest plantations to be made up to that time. It was formed during the second wave of 18th century inclosure for the growth of navy timber in the New Forest. This was a period of very lax management and supervision. Within twenty-five years Wilverley had been converted into a vast rabbit warren by the keeper responsible for the area. The keepers regarded rabbits as their special perquisite. A government report of 1789 showed that as a consequence of the conversion to rabbit farming it did not contain a single tree, so that the silviculturalists had to start again from scratch – a task they seem to have undertaken in about 1809.



Extract from Richardson, King and Driver's survey of 1787

The treeless state of Wilverley by the end of the 18th century concealed the fact that there was a much earlier history of silviculture on the site. In Elizabethan times, much of the land now forming the western side of the Inclosure had been subject to encoppicement, recorded in detail by a government surveyor, John Norden, in 1609. The three woods he examined were called Amley

Thornes, Muncion Wood and Wilverley. His report shows that even at that early date the woods were in a fairly decayed state. They were largely enclosed by bank and ditch, presumably with thorn hedges. Today it is still possible to trace much of the original bank alignments.

Even earlier than the encoppicement are the clear traces of ancient agriculture. Faint ridge and furrow corrugations in the land surface show that cultivation took place here, probably in Saxon times and even before the New Forest as a legal entity was established. Bronze Age burial mounds and water heating sites, together with field systems which are also likely to be prehistoric, all show that Wilverley has a very long history.

Today Wilverley appears at first sight to be a most unpromising area, ruined by man's efforts to exploit it for tourism and recreation over the last half century. It is bounded on the west by the A 35 road with incessant streams of noisy traffic. Roads also line two of the remaining three sides and a large Scout camp area has been established on the west side, accessed by vehicles through the centre of the wood. In the north east is a tourist car park filled with "visitor facilities". A quick count in October last year showed a total of sixty-two different notices displayed in this park. I don't know what the design capacity of the car park is, but the count probably works out at about one notice for every two or three cars. Things deep within the wood itself are not much better, with notices, seats and markers every hundred meters or so. All in all, Wilverley demonstrates all that is worst in management's attempt to tame and spoil a beautiful piece of countryside.

Despite all of this, the Inclosure still contains some fine woodland with many fragments of the 1809 oak remaining. Some of the 20th century Douglas fir is particularly outstanding and the undulating landform adds greatly to the beauty of the wood. Outside the inclosure fences, and particularly on the east are some of the best and most scenic open-grown Scots pines in the Forest.

Adjoining the south east corner of the plantation is Wilverley Lodge (now privately owned), which was once crown property. Its brickwork and roofing suggest that the visible parts at least are not very old. The fields around it are much neglected and some of them are probably still crown freehold. Parts have even been absorbed into the Inclosure. The Lodge must have enjoyed some of the finest views towards the Isle of Wight of any home in the Forest, but it is now surrounded by high hedges and trees. Successive owners have probably decided that privacy is now more important than a spectacular outlook.

Wilverley is one of a very small group of Inclosures which were reinclosed during the term of office of Deputy Surveyor Gerald Lascelles. Each plantation he dealt with in this way was provided with specially-cast iron plates giving the history of the wood. In this part of the Forest other examples



are to be found at Rhinefield Sandys and Aldridge Hill. It was usual for the plates to be set up at the principal entrances to the woods and usually two or three of them were provided. At Wilverley I know of only one, although others may lie buried beneath the leaf mould. This survivor seems to have been dug up by the Forestry Commission, painted green and white and re-positioned in the middle of the wood as a visitor attraction. That may, at least, prevent it from being run down inadvertently by the drivers of heavy forestry machinery.

The new elected Verderer

Last month I wrote about the rules and arrangements for the appointment of a replacement elected member of the Court. The new system of inviting applications seems to have worked well and in future I would expect to see it adopted even when we are no longer governed by Covid restrictions. Eight applicants put their names forward, demonstrating a level of interest in the Forest's management not seen in some recent elections.

The result of the process was that the remaining elected members chose a well-known Forest figure – Graham Ferris from Sway – to serve until November 2024. Dr. Ferris is a former chairman of the New Forest Commoners' Defence Association and so is very familiar with the problems which face the Forest and the complex regulations under which the Court must work. Before taking up his role with the Commoners' Defence he had been chairman of the New Forest Equestrian Association and he has other equestrian-related sporting interests in the Forest today.

Growing pressures on Forest farming

With the current lockdown again resulting in the Forest being flooded with people and cars, the Verderers received reports of two serious consequences which might not have been anticipated. Firstly, at this time of year the agisters are busy checking on the condition and welfare of the Forest ponies and, as the winter weather becomes more severe, some animals lose condition and need to be removed to their owners' holdings. In most cases this can only be done by driving them on horseback to one of the many pounds within the Forest. This has always been a normal part of management and, since it is usually a winter activity, it presents few problems. Now, however, with the lockdown causing people to pour into the Forest, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the

agisters and commoners to carry out their work. The Court was told of a recent case in which the removal of a mare had to be abandoned because the surging masses of people made it difficult and dangerous to continue. Driving ponies is not a straightforward process and one often ends up at a capture point other than the one originally intended.

This may seem like a small matter, with the welfare of a single pony to be balanced against the enjoyment of hundreds of people coming from the adjoining towns in pursuit of recreation – lockdown rules to the contrary notwithstanding. That is not how the Forest community sees it. The same process has to be repeated many times across the entire Forest and with disruption such as occurred here becoming all too common. The authorities are going to have to decide how far the Forest is to continue as an urban recreation ground and to what extent (if at all) the traditional farming practices can be accommodated.

The second conflict with the public was brought to the Verderers' attention in a presentment from a commoner with ponies in the Cadnam area. Here, as a result of feeding by a motorist at the cricket pitch car park and the inevitable scrummage amongst ponies competing for the food, a mare was driven over the open door of a car and onto its bonnet. The incident was filmed by the person causing the mayhem and the Court was sent some really horrific pictures. The animal was located later and fortunately escaped serious injury. Perhaps the perpetrator also was lucky to escape unharmed. There have been many cases where the offering of food leads to aggression amongst the ponies and injury to those causing the trouble.

Of course, feeding of ponies has been a problem ever since car-borne visitors started coming to the Forest. At one time there was a specific byelaw prohibiting it, I believe made by Hampshire County Council, but that seems to have disappeared without trace. Nobody was ever prosecuted. On the other hand, it remains an offence under the Verderers' byelaws. Now, like every other interaction between the Forest and the public it seems to be reaching crisis point.

Anthony Pasmore