

NEW FOREST NOTES FEBRUARY 2022

Snowdrops from the Great War

It is said that a quarter of the land area of Britain changed hands in the years immediately following the end of the First World War. The New Forest fared as badly in this revolution as anywhere else. One great estate after another, or at least parts of them, came under the auctioneer's hammer in those years. Land speculators and jerry builders had a field day, throwing up miles of ribbon development on most of the significant roads leading into the Forest. Some of them specialised in stripping saleable timber from the great woods they acquired and as they did so they broke down the fences and left the land derelict, sometimes exacerbating the already serious problems of animals straying into farmland and villages in the surrounding countryside. The neat cottages and well-kept small farms vanished in a sea of mediocrity, in the hands of "the new freeholders". It was a process in which succeeding generations participated with enthusiasm. Even today, echoes of it remain with us as the modest little houses then built are knocked down and replaced with "executive homes" with triple garages, swimming pools and tennis courts.

It must have been a terrible time for those families which had cherished their estates for perhaps generations. Death duties increased in 1919 and agricultural rents were held artificially low and were in any case a poor investment. Estate owners and their heirs had been hit hard by the slaughter of the war and now saw no alternative but to sell up. It must have seemed that everything was conspiring to destroy the fabric of the English countryside and its communities.

My own village (Hale) fell victim to this process along with the rest, although strangely not as a result of the recent world war. Here the heir to the estate, Colonel Joseph Goff, had died on a South African hillside fourteen years before the Great War, leading his troops against Boer trenches at Magersfontein. Thereafter, following more deaths, the remnants of the family lost heart or interest and the estate was sold as a whole in 1920 and then almost immediately re-sold in lots. Several of these lots became my own small farm and much later (1979) a little parcel of woodland was added. The woods had somehow escaped the attention of the asset-strippers, although the long frontage to the Forest forming part of the same lot had been developed with cheap little houses.

In those days I was young enough and enthusiastic enough to set about clearing the rhododendron with which almost every square yard was infested. A short time into this task I uncovered a small patch of snowdrops, completely isolated on top of a little knoll. How they came there I had no idea. Their survival must have depended on a small gap in the rhododendrons. One day I enquired about the snowdrops when talking to a former owner, Mr. Harry Dear, who could remember Hale before the great sale. I think it was his father's business that was later responsible for the housing development on the Forest frontage. I had not really expected him to know anything about so insignificant a patch of flowers, but he remembered it very clearly. He told me about returning on leave from the horrors of war in

France and walking down into this quiet woodland where he encountered the snowdrops. That must have made a very deep impression in that it survived in his memory more than seventy years later and after the intervention of yet another war with Germany.



As the years passed, the rhododendrons started to reassert their dominance of the wood and are only now being pushed back again by a dedicated band of volunteers. The snowdrops can breathe once more, but I am little nearer to discovering their origin. They must now be well into their second century. Further down the same valley (not on my land) the Goffs established “The Horses’ Grave” for the burial of favourite mounts and there is also a single written reference to other horses being buried in these woods. I have, over the years, marked the graves of several of my own horses with snowdrop planting, so perhaps this is a long and almost instinctive custom. The photograph shows the newly discovered flowers in 1979 and I liked to imagine the colonel’s mother, Lady Adela Goff, or members of her family establishing this little patch of flowers almost a century earlier.

Commemorative and memorial trees

In 1953 I was living at Fritham and I can just remember the planting of a coronation tree on the Open Forest where Hydes Lane enters the village. It lasted for a few months and was then snapped off and disappeared. The coronation day was a memorable one for me as my mother won the prize for the Fritham housewife who could shout “God save the Queen” the loudest. Such were the unsophisticated amusements of the 1950s !

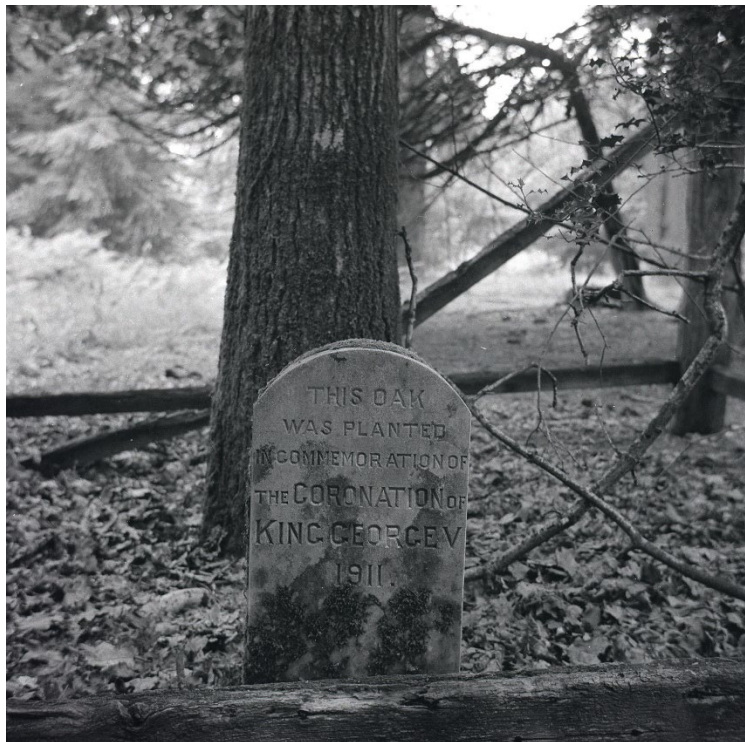
Now, as we approach the 70th anniversary of Her Majesty’s accession, the Forest will probably see a deluge of applications for such planting and no longer of the “stick it in and hope it will survive” type. Today’s planting requires consent from Forestry England, Natural England and the Verderers. It probably needs a committee to promote the scheme and to raise funds. It will certainly need secure post and rail protection and, no doubt, public liability

insurance. Unfortunately, the local authorities and community groups responsible for such applications are often no longer content with commemorating major national events. Any excuse to decorate the Forest with planting or street furniture like benches and seats or information plaques and boards is eagerly adopted. Occasionally, the fruits of such applications can be of lasting value to the Forest as in the case of the “Commoners Passage” at Harvestslade which commemorates two leading members of the Commoners Defence Association – Freda Harding and Capt. Tim Moore. It gives safe access across a dangerous bog. Another, known as Admiral Murray’s Passage, was constructed in memory of a well-known member of the Buckhounds who is variously said to have been killed on Backley Plain or in Puckpits, in 1901. This has allowed riders to cross Withybed Bottom near Minstead in relative safety for more than a hundred years. I say “relative” safety, because the New Forest author, C.R. Acton, wrote in 1936 that when the memorial crossing was being planned, a



modest marker stone recording the death was proposed. Apparently one member of the hunt said “Every horse will shy at it” and, as Acton rightly observed, every horse *does* shy at it. These beneficial works are, however, the exception and an early application in the anticipated flood reached the Verderers in January. It was a two-part request, the first being for the replacement planting of trees in Pound Lane at Burley where recent safety fellings have taken place. This is within the residential heart of the village, although the verges are still technically Forest land. The Court decided the request was reasonable and approved the proposed works. The second part of the application was for a small grove of trees, adjoining similar planting in the past, and located well out on the Open Forest. This the Verderers decided was not acceptable and it was, in any case, unlikely to receive consent from Natural England. The general feeling was that commemorative planting of this type would be welcomed on council or privately owned non-common land in a village, but not on the Open Forest. In view of the exceptional nature of the forthcoming jubilee, it was decided that planting on the Open Forest of one native tree per village, is likely to be acceptable provided the chosen site is first of all

agreed. In general, such trees should comprise an addition to established woodland edge and should not be stuck out in the open. However, one idea which was not considered by the Verderers and which might be very worthwhile is the “adoption” of a naturally established tree already growing on the Open Forest. This was done for the so-called “Normandy Oak” (commemorating the successful landings in 1944) located off the Bolderwood Road. Since natural regeneration was still occurring in 1953, it should not be too difficult to find suitable 70-year-old candidates on the edge of most Forest villages. Such adoption would be less expensive, more secure, and less obtrusive than new planting and it should need little formal approval. Unless something like this is decided on, I imagine we are about to see up to a couple of dozen commemorative tree applications from communities across the Forest.



The Forestry Commission did at one stage institute a sensible and much valued facility which allowed bereaved families to plant a memorial tree in the former walled vegetable garden area at Bolderwood, but I believe that this scheme has long been abandoned. The formal gardens of the old palace there also accommodated the 1911 coronation oak of George V, with its attendant memorial stone. The photograph here was taken in 1965, twenty-two years before it was felled by the October hurricane of 1987. Such areas of Crown Freehold are well suited to accommodate commemorative trees, but would no doubt fail to satisfy the civic ambitions of promoters who want their projects acknowledged more locally by an admiring electorate.

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