

NEW FOREST NOTES JANUARY 2019

The Verderers and the Great War – the aftermath – 1919-1923

Four years ago I started the story of how the Great War affected the Forest and the Verderers' administration of it (updated in subsequent January issues of New Forest Notes). The end of hostilities in November 1918 did not lessen the burden of war-related work upon the Court and its staff. Indeed, the battle to achieve a reasonable measure of restoration of the physical damage to the Forest was to last even longer than had the years of war. World War 1 may have caused great changes in the country as a whole, but it had also demonstrated just how vulnerable the Forest and its community were in a modern and increasingly mechanized world.

The Verderers must have thought the early indications of a return to normality were very hopeful. On the day the war ended the Clerk reported that two of the hangers at Beaulieu Aerodrome were about to be removed. The development of the aerodrome had been vast and by far the most damaging assault on the Forest of the war. By January 1919, however, it was clear that the Forest's return to pre-war conditions would be all but impossible. Some of the great estates around the Forest were on the point of collapse. That year over 7,600 acres of the Somerley Estate were put up for sale, while in 1920, 2,000 acres were sold at Hale. In the latter place wartime fellings had ruined many of the boundary fences, allowing animals to escape from the Forest. Although they had been repaired, the fences were now suffering constant vandalism from gypsies. Meanwhile, in the centre of the Forest at Matley Wood, the War Dogs Training School seemed out of control with repeated attacks on the commoners' stock resulting in injury and death. A firm letter to the War Office from the Verderers demanded that the dogs be removed from the Forest at once.

The end of hostilities seems to have unleashed an explosion of civilian motor traffic within the Forest, resulting in a growing number of livestock deaths, so that in May the Verderers received a petition from commoners demanding a 12 mph speed limit in the Forest. It was later recorded on one day (28th June) that no less than 227 cars had passed along the A35 west of Lyndhurst in a period of only one and a half hours ! In those days, of course, it remained unfenced.

An old enemy of the Court, the so-called "bombing school" at Bolton's Bench (Lyndhurst), remained active, with all its buildings standing, but training was said to have decreased. On Beaulieu Aerodrome, two sergeants (presumably lacking any more lethal enemy) were shooting at sparrows with "ball cartridges" and had managed to kill a valuable working mare grazing on the Forest. The culprits had been identified and £40 had been recovered for the aggrieved owner. Of the aerodrome itself, it was reported that only three planes remained there in May and the immense ranges of buildings were being used as a demobilizing station. Then on 20th and 21st June a huge sale took place, including huts, plant, water tanks, materials and bedding. This was the beginning of a process, repeated in subsequent sales, which led to utter chaos on the aerodrome as purchasers demolished buildings and spread debris (including much broken glass) across the area. It would be another three years before anything like order was restored.

By May also, the War Dog School had closed. The bombing school was in its last days with buildings removed and full closure promised by 1st June. It was typical of events at this time that the school remained in use through July.

In November 1919 the former agister A. Every's horse became entangled in barbed wire which remained liberally spread about Matley, resulting in a claim for £30. At the same time the Commoners' Defence Association, having got nowhere with its petition for a 12mph speed limit now presented a new request for a limit of 20mph. The Clerk pointed out that the Motor Car Act of 1903 made it an offence to drive on any road at more than 20mph, so they were only asking for what was already the law. Clearly motorists of those days were little different from now in their determination to ignore speed limits. Then, as now, the commoners paid the price.

In the same month restoration of the Forest at the aircraft height-finding facility near to the eastern boundary were agreed, except for the removal of a huge concrete base (which survives to this day) which it was said would remain "as a permanent reminder of the war - unless it was decided to remove it".

The early months of 1920 saw the filling of trenches at the mortar and bombing schools nearing completion, but there was still the problem of live shells sticking out of the ground near Longwater. The remaining war dog huts (presumably not the kennels) were occupied by navy gangs carrying out the restoration works. In the rest of that year there was only slow progress with the outstanding works, although another big sale of buildings took place on the aerodrome in July.

The following year the Verderers were still deep in a long running conflict with the War Office over the state of Beaulieu Aerodrome. Rubbish and building refuse of all sorts, open pits and trenches still covered the site, to say nothing of the concrete bases of buildings. As late as November one large hut remained on the aerodrome, apparently occupied by a Mr. Vardy who was manufacturing agricultural equipment there. This gentleman had also evidently purchased some of the pipelines across the aerodrome and he had omitted to backfill the trenches after digging out the pipes. In the resulting morass an agister's horse became trapped. Even after the remaining aerodrome problems had been settled the court was still at war with Mr. Vardy over his various acts and omissions. Eventually in July of 1923 the Verderers convicted him of encroachment in the Court of Swainmote, fined him £5 and ordered the removal of the hut. Happily this is now all very old history and a descendant of the 1923 offender has recently provided invaluable information for a local history project in which I was involved !

July 1922 saw the beginning of the end for the Beaulieu Aerodrome problems. By this time it seems the War Office was thoroughly fed up with the whole business and the Verderers accepted £500 and themselves agreed to arrange for such clearance as could be purchased for that sum. That amounts to about £22,000 in today's money and the Verderers thought it very inadequate, but they too had had enough. A tender from Frank Kitcher Brothers of East Boldre was accordingly accepted

and the work went ahead. On 12th November 1923, five years after the war ended, the Clerk was able to report completion of the aerodrome works and at the same time the removal of Mr. Vardy's hut.

Fairy rings with a sinister origin

The Verderers' records are filled with information on the major WW1 encroachments on the Forest, but many lesser works escaped the Court's attention or were beyond the abilities of an overworked staff to deal with. Their nature sometimes remains obscure to this day.

Many years ago, in a wood west of Lyndhurst, I came across dozens of small earthwork circles scattered entirely randomly across a hillside. These small moss-covered banks and the curious location of many of them immediately beneath huge trees, might have induced a more imaginative observer than me to believe that they were the work of fairies haunting this ancient piece of Forest. Anyhow, I was sufficiently curious about the rings to call at a nearby cottage and ask the occupant if he knew anything about their origin. In those days there were many people with roots in the Forest still living in places such as this. Today these little houses are all modernized, extended and occupied by wealthy incomers who know nothing about the history of their surroundings and care even less.

I was fortunate in discovering a cottager with a long memory and I was told that in WW1 the hill had been used for military training and that the "pits" had been dug at that time. This conversation took place in March 1963 when, at an age of only about fifty years, the "fairy rings" would have been relatively newly made, whereas today they have passed their hundredth anniversary. I have occasionally been back there since, but I had not paid much more attention to the circles until this winter when I re-visited the site with several local historians. After looking in detail at more than twenty of the rings their conclusion was that there was nothing to connect the site with the gentle activities of fairies, but rather that these were nests for that signature horror of the Great War – the machine gun. No doubt following this exercise, the next constructions by the builders were on the battlefields of France. The design of the nests is quite variable with most being circular or oval and measuring about 23ft across. Some comprise two circles touching each other. All are surrounded by a low bank made of material excavated from the interior and there are some which comprise a short length of trench surrounded by a bank. In some cases there is a clear entrance left through the bank and there is sometimes a low mound in the centre on which, presumably, the gun was mounted. Why this site was never restored is unclear. Perhaps it was simply forgotten about while the larger questions such as dealing with Beaulieu Aerodrome occupied the minds of the authorities.

I cannot believe that any live firing actually took place here. That would have been far too dangerous with people living nearby and with nothing to prevent tourists or livestock from wandering into the danger area. Rather curiously, on the opposite side of the same area of wood was a small collection of similar circles, but with more complex plans. They too seem to be of First World War date, but they were nearly all levelled after 1945 and very little trace of them survives.

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