

## NEW FOREST NOTES JULY 2020

### The Armaments Research Department, Millersford

Just before this year's bird nesting season and, by coincidence, at the same time as human movement restrictions were imposed, the Forestry Commission's contractors finished another phase of levelling the nearly 2,000 acres of deep ploughing ruts left over from the Verderers' Inclosures across the Forest. It was not until we were let out again that I was able to see much of this work and even then only at Turf Hill Inclosure in my own part of the Forest. Here, in great strips across the former Inclosure, the stumps of the felled conifers have been dug out and transported away. Then the underlying ridge and furrow was levelled off with a tracked digger. In places this coarse levelling was refined by smoothing with a huge log gripped by the digger. In 90% of the treated areas the results were excellent and in a few years it should be possible to ride across the hills and valleys of Turf Hill in reasonable safety. This is important because the area immediately adjoins an important Forest pound used for pony drifts and colt hunting. Only in one area was there a significant problem and here the contractor had filled-in two essential drains, creating a morass in which I saw a pony nearly come to grief as she wallowed about up to her belly and only escaped with her life because she was a strong healthy mare. Others might have been less fortunate. The Forestry Commission has now agreed to fence off the affected area for a trial period in the hope that surface vegetation will consolidate and conditions will become less dangerous. It is a poor substitute for correcting the damage to the drainage, but the best compromise that could be achieved.



Away from the swampy area on the heathland slopes and plateau to the south, I remember we were told only a few years ago that stump removal and levelling was out of the question. Natural England, it was said, would never permit it. Heather would be destroyed by the disturbance and

would not re-establish itself. Reptiles would be driven out and altogether the scheme would be an ecological disaster. The commoners would just have to put up with it and stop grumbling. However, it was one of those occasions when the Verderers stood firm and insisted on restoration of some trial areas where the trees had been destroyed by the great storm of 1990. Here the heather was burnt off and the ruts levelled. The results were outstanding and the heather made a vigorous return the next season. The whole treated area fully recovered shortly thereafter, in defiance of the predictions of ecological doom. I think in fact the resistance had more to do with money than the awful consequences which were claimed as inevitable. Now that funds are pouring into the Forest (if not always very well directed), even the Forestry Commission seems enthusiastic to expand the restoration. The photograph shows the 2020 restored area on the left and the furrowed and stump covered ground on the right awaiting treatment.

On top of the Turf Hill ridge the restoration work has exposed lines of scattered brick rubble, areas of sand overlying the natural gravel and rather alarming tiles bearing the warning “electric cables”. They are an incongruous sight in this remote bit of heathland far from houses or other obvious development, but to those local residents of sufficiently advanced age they are easily explicable because this was the Turf Hill explosives testing range or more properly the Armaments Research Department Millersford (of WW2) which existed long before the inclosure was planted. The lines of detritus mark filled-in cable trenches, while the large grassy mounds looking like prehistoric burial mounds are the remains of demolished laboratories which were covered over with their original blast protection material when the site was closed after the war. On one of these mounds (originally Laboratory 13), a fine crab-apple tree has become established. I never pass it without thinking of an elderly lady who attended a reunion of ARD staff held at Woodfalls in 1995. Many former workers brought photographs, tools and other souvenirs of their days at the experimental station. This lady had worked in Laboratory 13. Her contribution to the display was the key to the door which she had locked for the last time nearly fifty years earlier.



At the top of the ridge, visiting children seem to have been busy collecting lumps of shrapnel and building little castles with them. Most pieces are now no more than unrecognizable balls of rust, but there are one or two which still show the form of the bomb casings from which they were torn. The photograph is of one such fragment only nine inches across, but weighing over 13lbs. That too triggered memories of my earlier days in Hale and the stories then still commonly in circulation amongst elderly residents.

Bomb testing at Millersford was with explosives placed on the ground and detonated electronically, rather than with devices dropped from the air. When the site first opened there were experiments with huge 1,000 lb cased bombs which

showered houses in Forest Road with a rain of shrapnel, causing complaints and claims for damage. Later on, and in response to public pressure, the larger explosions were of “bare charges”, but initially the policy was to give advance notice of big explosions and to receive claims for damage. One such advertisement for a forthcoming explosion gave the date and time – noon a few days hence. A few minutes after 12.00 on the day of the test the telephone rang at the ARD. A local woman reported that her valuable china collection had been seriously damaged and demanded to make a claim. The official who answered the phone regretted that her china had been affected, but suggested that Millersford could hardly be held responsible. He explained gently that technical problems had required postponement of the test to another day yet to be fixed.

On another occasion the Woodgreen commoner, Bert Lawes, was tending his cattle in the Forest when he was narrowly missed by a huge chunk of hot metal following a large explosion. His angry complaint was met with the cheerful response: “What are you worrying about ? It missed you didn’t it, and if it had hit you, that would have been your contribution to the war effort”. Perhaps it was significant that almost all the Millersford staff, except for the principal scientists, were people from the surrounding villages. Most were girls or teenage boys not old enough for military service. Everyone would have known Mr. Lawes and perhaps the farmer and the telephonist were acquainted.

### **Norley Inclosure**

Last month I started writing about the Inclosures of the Forest with Godshill and Godshill Wood in the extreme north west corner adjoining the river Avon. For July we move nearly 17 miles to the south east to an Inclosure made in the same year as Godshill – 1810. Both were part of the great Napoleonic wave of inclosure which marked the rise of silviculture in the New Forest. Norley, by contrast with Godshill, was a fairly small plantation of a little over 160 acres.

Norley Inclosure is made up very largely of conifer, even after the revised forestry policies favouring broadleaves has been in place for some years. A little of the original oak still survives around the forestry cottage in the south east. The area on which the plantation was made had been farmland in the distant past. Slight banks mark out fields which were probably made in the Iron Age and can still be seen from Bull Hill to Norleywood village. They can even be traced in the dense woodland of the Inclosure and are, I suppose, an indication of relatively fertile land on which oak might have been expected to thrive. Indeed, the Inclosure is surrounded by marl pits from which calcium rich material was quarried for use on the land, even into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It has also been suggested that such pits were the source of materials for the many cob cottages which used to dominate the adjoining villages, a number of which survive to this day.

Like Godshill there was an earlier phase of silviculture at Norley. At least three 17<sup>th</sup> century placenames are for coppices which almost certainly lay within the Inclosure and under the adjoining village of Norleywood. The latter originated largely after the 1851 New Forest Deer Removal Act as land was sold off from the Forest to pay the huge costs of preparing a register of claims to common

rights. This accounts for the very cramped layout of the settlement with its narrow lanes. The vendor was seeking to maximise his profits.

More than half of Norley Inclosure was felled in WW2 and further areas have been cleared and replanted since, so that there are few ancient trees to be seen. On the other hand a strange embanked area in the middle of the plantation known as "Old Norley" is shown on Driver's Map of 1787. This too could have had an early silvicultural origin.

If the Inclosure itself has few notable trees, the car park outside its south west corner contains some of the most picturesque Scots pine in the New Forest. In the long term the Forestry Commission plans that Norley shall return to broadleaved woodland, but that is two hundred years ahead. More immediately (16 years) it will be mostly mixed woodland with one or two pure broadleaved areas managed primarily for nature and with broadleaved planting expanded in the south east. The wet central valley, which I assume is the origin of the original name "Frogmoor", is to be cleared of trees and given the rather contradictory classification of "enclosed open forest habitats". I presume this means that it is to be free of tree cover, but still protected against the intense grazing pressure which is apparent on the heathland outside.

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