

NEW FOREST NOTES JUNE 2021

Oakley Inclosure

In May of last year, with normal business more or less closed down, I started to write about the inclosures (plantations) of the Forest. With the then prevailing view that “it will all be over by Christmas”, I assumed that I would simply cover a handful of the more interesting woods before returning to normal. Now, over a year later, little seems to have changed except for the vast and damaging surge in recreational use and abuse of the Forest. Opinion now seems divided between those who predict a further serious wave of infection in the autumn and others anticipating absolute normality by the summer with everyone doing exactly as they please. As an adherent to neither creed, I will continue to write about inclosures for the time being and this month I turn to the largest of them all – Oakley Inclosure.

Oakley is a vast sprawling inclosure stretching continuously from the honeypot recreation site of Bolderwood to the outskirts of Burley village over two and a half miles to the south west. At 823 acres, there are few other inclosures in the Forest that approach it for size, yet it is perhaps the least known of the Forest’s plantations. Apart from a heavily used tourist trail through the centre and one other cycle track, there is little selling of it for recreational use. The only small car park adjoins Undersley Wood on the south edge of Oakley. Perhaps this lack of development is not surprising as there is little to offer the average visitor – no ice cream sales, lavatories, access to cuddly animals or easy paths to ancient beautiful woods – but it is full of interest for those who appreciate the Forest’s history.

The inclosure was approved by the Commissioners appointed to look into such proposals, on the 18th June 1851 and was made during the following years. It caused huge annoyance in Burley where the fences came to within one hundred yards of the little holdings then occupied by commoners. At the same time there was widespread felling of ancient trees with, it was said, 850 fine beeches among other trees cut down and sold merely for firewood. Great swathes of what we now call “ancient ornamental woodland” were simply swept away and the only beautiful woods surviving the slaughter being that adjoining Ridley known as Oakley Wood and some fine old pollards at Blackensford Hill. The latter were cut down by the Forestry Commission over 20 years ago in a process which the leading authority on the Forest, the late Colin Tubbs, described as an “outrageous piece of vandalism”.

Today’s visitors to Oakley will see very few ancient trees at all, except in the small area adjoining Ridley Wood which has been thrown open from the inclosure. The photograph shows one of the finest pollarded beeches there, photographed in 2009. There are some relatively modern compensations in the fine Douglas fir which crowns Woolfield Hill and the two avenues of the same tree dating from the making of the plantation. One of these runs southwards from Blackensford Hill and the other northwards from Undersley Wood. There are some significant areas of 1853-1860 oak. Unfortunately, Oakley is not a good place to visit on foot or horseback. Since the abandonment of

hunting, or even before that, the network of rides has been allowed to fall into a dreadful state of decay, with many of them deliberately blocked or abandoned, probably to reduce costs, but the inclosure is hardly unusual in that respect.



Oakley was the subject of a most remarkable row between warring factions of the Office of Woods as the plantation was being formed. A leading authority on forestry, James Brown, prescribed a rigid pattern of herringbone open drains and in this he was supported by the commissioner in charge of the Forest, Francis Kennedy. The scheme was opposed by the Deputy Surveyor and the Treasury advisor, Mr.Clutton. Furious allegations of improper conduct were exchanged between the opposing sides. The surviving pattern of drains demonstrates the eventual dominance of the Brown faction, although Kennedy, for a variety of reasons, was eventually dismissed.

In the 1960s, the Forestry Commission was busy laying out a vast network of gravel roads throughout the Forest, many of which have since been designated as tourist trails, although they were originally intended solely for forestry purposes. In Oakley, however, the main gravel road from Bolderwood Farm to Woods Corner is of a much earlier date. A major part in its construction was taken by the late Gerald Forward on his return from military service in 1923, working for the then newly formed Forestry Commission. However, he did not enjoy the work and shortly afterwards became an agister and ultimately an elected verderer.

As to the ancient past, Oakley has a much earlier history than the plantation and even the ancient woods which preceded it. Roman pottery was made here on a small scale and faint terraces



The gravel road from Woods Corner to Bolderwood – 1860 oak plantation

on the hillsides show the site of long forgotten agricultural use. The plantation is also extremely rich in charcoal pits, many of them unusually well preserved and probably surviving evidence of the large clearances of old timber in the 1850s. Near Woods Corner bricks were manufactured, probably in the 17th to 18th centuries and further north is one of the largest prehistoric water heating sites (likely to be Bronze Age) in the New Forest.

As to the future, the “200-year vision” for Oakley is of a return to native woodland (which I assume means broadleaves) and “pre-inclosure / natural reserve woodland”, which is rather ill-defined, but which sounds encouraging. Foresters must plan for the very long term, but a combination of climate change, tree diseases, politics and economics are likely to play havoc with such plans. Still, it is comforting to have a policy which at least seems to be heading in the right direction.

A July return to public meetings of the Verderers' Court

With, at the time of writing, the government hoping for a resumption of normality on 21st June, the Verderers are intending to return to public meetings on 21st July, before the usual summer break. The meeting is unlikely to be held in the cramped and ill-ventilated Queen's House, but there are alternatives in Lyndhurst. During renovations of the Queen's House many years ago, the court moved for a long period to the community centre.

While I am not much of an enthusiast for modern technology, I have to say that I don't share the evident dislike of Zoom shown by some of my colleagues. It has been a lifeline to Forest management over the past year, removing the threat of infection to both court members and staff – particularly those of us who are vulnerable because of ill health or age. For the time being it is intended that committee sessions will continue to be virtual.

It has not only been the format of meetings which has changed radically since the end of 2019, but also their content. Until recent times the bulk of the Verderers' business has been traditional matters such as the regulation and welfare of livestock, finance, employees, land management questions involving Forestry England and attempts to restrain unscrupulous people trying to encroach small portions of the common land. Almost overnight this work load has changed beyond recognition. In the May Zoom meeting of the Verderers, business dragged on for four-and-three-quarter hours, with a five-minute break in the middle. Zoom has a tendency to encourage lengthy speeches, for the delivery of which I am no doubt as guilty as anyone. I did not keep a precise log, but I estimate that perhaps three quarters of an hour was taken up with traditional business and the whole of the remaining four hours with public pressure issues. They include flagrant disregard of the byelaws, Forestry England's failure to enforce the rules, vulnerability of livestock to molestation by the public and its dogs and attempts to resolve friction between visitors (who don't understand and are frightened of animals) and the commoners' stock. Even problems arising from perfectly innocent public use such as intense wear on paths and grazing or legitimate (if anti-social) verge parking, now absorb immense amounts of time.

There is no doubt that the management of the New Forest is in a real mess, with the authorities unable or unwilling to tackle the issues at its core, yet everyone knows the problems and what needs to be done about them. The regulations are outdated and ineffective, while the objectives of the management agencies are in serious conflict with each other. Nobody now takes action on anything – they just talk about it. You can easily dodge the issues by suggesting more monitoring and study. Endless time can be absorbed by consultation and when you have exhausted all other possibilities there is always the opportunity to draft another report upon which you must of course consult. Such a report, originating from the national park, arrived in my inbox this week and it comprises (as usual) many pages of jargon and platitudes. It is out for public consultation this month. I almost long for a return to the days of Deputy Surveyor Donn Small. He was a tough character and sometimes rode rough-shod over local sensibilities, but he actually got things done in the Forest.

One eminent member of the Court recently suggested that the only way out of this administrative quagmire would be to seek a fresh New Forest Act. The Verderers have always been a bit cautious about this, believing that the risks might outweigh the potential benefits, but things are now so bad that I begin to wonder if the balance has changed and those risks now have to be faced.

A bridge too many



If you find a defective bridge in the Forest, it can be a long and difficult process to get it fixed. If it is on a popular visitors' route it may be dealt with overnight, but a remote bridge or passageway over a bog, used by commoners and other horse riders, can wait months before attention is given to it. Last month without warning or explanation, a new and apparently unauthorized footbridge appeared over Ditchend Brook near Fordingbridge at the point where there has always been a perfectly adequate ford. This was not a concoction of branches and old iron such as might have been built by children, but a well-formed bridge made of good quality materials. I am told that Forestry England investigators were quickly on the trail of the culprits and when I visited the site at the end of the month, all trace of it had vanished.

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