

NEW FOREST NOTES MARCH 2022

Frame Heath and Hawkhill Inclosures

It is some months since the last in my series of notes on the Forest's Inclosures and a relatively quiet winter allows me to resume the story with two of the timber plantations in the south of the Forest. They both lie to the north of Beaulieu Heath West, sandwiched between the old aerodrome and the railway that cuts through the Forest to the north. Hawkhill, was one of the last of the 19th century Inclosures to be made and, at 394 acres, it is one of the larger ones. By the time of its planting, it had been made a legal requirement that all new plantations must be at least 300 acres in extent. That was so as to prevent the Office of Woods taking all the best land in small parcels and leaving only the poorest heath for the commoners. It was actually taken in 1870 and thus post-dates the first large scale Ordnance Survey maps. We therefore have a fine record of the area before the tree planting. Its northern part comprised a great swathe of land covered in ancient oak and beech trees, forming part of the beautiful Frame Wood. In their place came the widespread and rather dismal sea of conifers which dominated the Inclosure throughout its life. Only one block of ancient trees survived. That is known as Little Wood and it occupies the south east corner nearest to Beaulieu. The wood is now in an advanced state of decline through neglect and lack of any protection for natural regeneration, but it still contains some fine old oaks. The photograph shows how it looked fifty years ago.



In this part of the Inclosure, a maze of ancient banks indicates the site of farming many centuries before even the most ancient trees originated. Similarly, to the north of the central stream, Worts Gutter, ridge and furrow ploughing occupies much of the high ground and is probably of Saxon origin.

Hidden within the south edge of the Inclosure, just to the west of the present-day car park, is a series of low walls and banks, some of which were destroyed by the Forestry Commission a few years ago. They are divided by concrete and gravel trackways and the area comprised a bomb store for the WW2 Beaulieu Aerodrome. It is now difficult to see as the area has become colonized by gorse and scrub following widespread felling of the Inclosure trees. The government contractor responsible for making the site was evidently sufficiently proud of his work to initial and date it "JM 1942", inscribed while the concrete was still wet.

In recent years there has been a massive clearance of trees throughout Hawkhill Inclosure and it was originally arranged that the area would be opened up for seasonal (winter) grazing by the Forest stock. This scheme now seems to have been abandoned. Certainly, it is not open this winter and the cleared spaces created by the felling are now being overrun by coarse vegetation. It is altogether one of the less agreeable of the Forest's woods to visit. Much of the remaining conifer timber is due to be cleared over the next two decades, but Little Wood and the small area of planted hardwoods adjoining Stubbs Wood will be retained. It is one of those Inclosures where future planning and management seem rather unsatisfactory and uncertain.

Just after the Inclosure was made, Mr. David Kitcher from the hamlet of Furzey Lodge gave evidence to the 1875 parliamentary Select Committee on the New Forest. The verbatim record of his examination is included in the committee's report. He was, I think, the grandfather or great grandfather of my former colleague on the Verderers' Court, the late Mr. Jeff Kitcher. His evidence is a sad record of the loss suffered by cottagers and smallholders as a result of the taking of Hawkhill. Mr. Kitcher and his family lived within a few yards of the new plantation, then known as Moon Hills Inclosure. He told the committee how local commoners had received no notice of the intended appropriation of the land, before the marking-out process by surveyors commenced. Effectively, all that they were left with was the poor grazing on Beaulieu Heath and in the woodland to the north. It was his evidence, along with that of others, that led to legislation banning further planting of timber on the Open Forest – a ban which lasted for seventy-five years.

Frame Heath Inclosure (419 acres) lies on the opposite side of Frame Wood to Hawkhill and is again a largely conifer plantation, although recent conversion to broadleaved trees has been better accomplished here. In this case the long-term plan is that the wood will remain, although almost wholly as broadleaved trees. It will be opened up to grazing, presumably once the trees are well established. This is likely to take many years to achieve. Towards the east end there will be some areas of open space within the woodland.

Today Frame Heath Inclosure is a difficult wood to walk in. There are probably more deer-fenced plots within it than in any other Inclosure in the Forest and some of these block gates and formerly well-used rides. Such obstruction is a policy increasingly adopted by the foresters now that they no longer have to face the wrath of an active hunting community dependent on good access. No doubt the profusion of deer enclosures is the result of a high sika deer population in the area. However, the fences and gates are now regularly neglected and one of the largest plots has recently been broken-into by ponies which are wrecking anything small enough for them to tackle.

Frame Heath Inclosure is an area of wet clay and, except around Frame Wood and Ladycross Lodge, it seems not to have been occupied by early farmers. It was, however, valued by the local agricultural community (before being fenced in 1852) as a source of calcium-rich marl. This was widely quarried in a series of small pits. One very ancient pit existed on a small rise near the railway cottages and was later known as Wood Fidle Pond. The pond was destroyed by the original tree planters as they laid out their efficient system of open drains.

There is not much peace to be found in Frame Hath Inclosure as train drivers are required to give excruciating blasts on their sirens as they approach an utterly pointless footpath across the line. This is an appalling intrusion into a potentially quiet area, for the protection of a crossing that is both dangerous and unnecessary. Good pedestrian bridges exist within a quarter of a mile on each side and anyone fit enough to reach Woodfidley on foot can certainly adjust their walking route to take advantage of one of them. The railway is also responsible for some hideous steel buildings beside the line and it hopes to increase their number, as approved by the Verderers (subject to screening) in February 2022.

The firewood problem

I suppose that like many people in and around the Forest I managed during the February power cuts with the aid of a woodburning stove, but despite living in a well-wooded area with a wealth of fallen timber, obtaining supplies is not the simple and inexpensive business it was until a few years ago. For as long as the New Forest has existed, the fallen trees and waste wood from timber production have provided fuel for local households, supplementing the peat turf upon which many of the poorer cottagers depended. Now, commercial operators excepted, it is virtually impossible to obtain supplies from Forest Enterprise, while thousands of tons of wind-blown trees litter the woods across the Forest, blocking rides on which the commoners depend and disfiguring the landscape. Where these obstructions are actually attended-to (and that is quite rare), huge machines bulldoze the debris into ugly piles which further despoil the woodland scene and take years to rot away. Until within the last thirty years, all reasonably accessible fallen timber was sold by the local keeper on behalf of the Forestry Commission, subject to the perfectly reasonable retention of 25% of each tree which was reserved as food for beetles and grubs. I would regularly buy my fuel from Studley Wood or Hive Gardens which are the nearest blocks of open woodland to my home. Like other careful purchasers, I always tried to leave the site so that it was near to impossible to see where we had been. The waste was neatly stacked and any minor ruts carefully levelled off. Of course, there were a few rogues (mostly commercial operators) who made a dreadful mess and who should never have been permitted to buy again, but they were the exception.

The excuse for the dreadful mess into which the woods have degenerated is that the beetles demand the entire vast reserve of decaying wood for their enjoyment. This is an argument which it is impossible to accept. If the Forest has managed for centuries with removal of accessible fallen timber while the beetles flourished on the large stocks which could not be reached, why is it that their



survival now depends upon the total abandonment by humans of every stick that falls in the Ancient Ornamental woods? The claim that the debris fosters natural regeneration is equally invalid. All regeneration has been stopped for years past by high stocking levels and by out-of-control deer populations. Here and there, no doubt, a single half eaten sapling may struggle up within a bramble bush for a year or so, but that does not affect the overall picture of decline leading towards ultimate loss.

This is not the full extent of Forest Enterprise's disregard of the landscape qualities of the Forest's woodlands. Of late years it has, presumably at huge cost, adopted a policy of hideous disfigurement of "dangerous" trees which would once have been cleanly felled and removed. Such pollarding of ancient beech trees has only a minimal chance of success. The horrid results are clear to all beside the road at New Copse (illustrated) and can also be seen near Bolderwood. Again, the waste is not neatly removed, but is pushed into ugly heaps, some of which are on potential grazing land at Perrywood Ironshill. The fact that such thrown-open Inclosures are again subject to common rights is conveniently ignored by the authorities. Perrywood is littered with forestry rubbish for half a mile west of Ladycross.

I now have my own source of firewood off the Forest, but there must be many who are less fortunate and for whom the wholesale waste of a valuable resource is very sad and annoying.

Anthony Pasmore