

NEW FOREST NOTES MAY 2020

The Forest's inclosures

I remember one of the great New Forest champions of the 20th century, Jean Cobb, writing: "What do they know of the New Forest who have no mud on their boots ?" It was, perhaps, something of a cliché, but it is as true now as it was then - fifty years ago. The difference today is that it is vital public health rules, rather than ignorance, which prevent even the most diligent student of the Forest from acquiring such mud (and thus knowledge), beyond that which is available through permitted daily exercise. Like most people I know virtually nothing of what is going on even a few miles away except what is reported to me by email or phone. Much of those reports is very discouraging. I have had appalling stories of illegal camping, wholesale verge parking and gateway obstruction, abuse by visitors determined to "get their recreation" and even continued lettings of holiday accommodation in defiance of the rules. Fortunately this behaviour does not yet seem to have overrun my quiet corner of the Forest. For weeks now I have driven nowhere except to the bits of my farm which are scattered about the village. Still, there is one bright spark in the overall gloom. I can reach one of the great inclosures in nine minutes brisk walk from the edge of my land and that can usually be achieved without encountering anyone else. Godshill Inclosure has therefore been the target of several of my permitted daily walks. This exercise has concentrated my mind on the Inclosures, whereas the work of the Verderers is normally far more to do with the Open Forest.

The Inclosures (or plantations authorized by Act of Parliament) were once the bustling heart of the Forest's economy giving employment to innumerable local people, providing timber for the nation in war and peace and inevitably lying at the centre of great controversies about how the Forest should be run. Today, while still comprising about 30% of the Crown land, they are quite definitely the poor relation of the New Forest. They are sadly neglected by Forestry England with fences often in ruins, drainage blocked and overflowing, rides waterlogged and overgrown and generally a shocking failure to carry out even simple maintenance like the removal of plastic tree guards which are, throughout the Forest, strangling the very trees they were installed to protect. The inclosures are increasingly seen as dumping grounds for problem uses – recreation pressures, minor bits of development, storage compounds and commercial activities – most of which is strictly illegal. Their future is uncertain with the recent Forest Design Plan foreseeing the abandonment and clearance of huge areas. It is not a good record for a nation of supposed tree-lovers.

Because one of the finest plantations is my nearest piece of true Forest (as opposed to Adjacent Commons), I thought it might be worth concentrating a little on the inclosures in these Notes during the present lock-down. Some, like Godshill and its neighbour Godshillwood Inclosure, have stories sufficiently complex to fill a small book. Others, such as Parkhill near Lyndhurst, occupy huge areas, but their history is much more limited. None, however, is without interest or some hidden gems of landscape. Perhaps first of all I should explain exactly what inclosures are.

If you had visited the New Forest in the time of Elizabeth I, almost the whole of the Crown land, except for farms and residential property, would have been heathland and open woods, with small patches of grassland. Here and there the odd few acres were fenced in to encourage the growth of timber through a system of encoppicement, but you could have ridden from Blackfield to the outskirts of Fordingbridge without ever opening a gate or finding your way blocked by a fence. Then, at the very end of the 17th century came a dramatic change as the Crown took powers to fence in 6,000 acres for timber planting. It was also empowered to fence a further similar area as soon as the trees on the first block were large enough to be safe from browsing ponies and deer and the original fences could be removed. This moving of inclosures could be repeated over and over again, at least in theory, and was limited only by the quality of the soil and its ability to support timber trees. The process became known as the “rolling power” and the newly fenced-in land was called “inclosures”, because inclosure was a legal process affecting common rights. The whole thing was far from straightforward. Management was inefficient and some inclosures failed. They were hated by the commoners – especially the large landowners who received enhanced rents because of common rights attached to their estates. The legal powers contained defects which had to be corrected and altogether it was well into the early years of the 19th century before massive areas of land were planted up and the Forest began to change beyond recognition.

Initially the Crown was seeking land for the growth of timber to build warships. The great inclosures made in the first two decades of the 19th century were expected to provide the navy of 2020 and later. By 1850, however, a new objective had taken precedence over future shipbuilding. This was the destruction of the commoners’ rights. It was to be achieved by planting up as much land as possible in preparation for the passing of a general inclosure Act of Parliament which everyone believed would come. The more land that was fenced in, the greater the share of the Forest the government would receive under such legislation and the less compensation would be given to the commoners because their rights would be depreciated in value. Between 1851 and 1875 the New Forest came very close to total destruction and was only saved by a massive campaign by the local gentry and by national bodies such as the Commons Preservation Society.

In 1877 the rules were laid down for the Forest as we know it today. The rolling power was removed and the Crown’s right of Inclosure limited to 17,600 acres (7,000 ha) of which only 16,000 acres might be fenced at any one time. The latter rule still applies today, but is now quite redundant as the Forestry England cuts down and abandons more and more of its woods. Forestry remained an important part of the local economy and a prime objective of management until about 1970. There were even new powers of inclosure granted in 1949, under which a further 2,000 acres were taken in and planted – the “Verderers’ Inclosures”. Great disputes about management objectives arose in the 1920s and again from 1968 as the Forestry Commission sought to remove all oak and beech trees from the Inclosures except for a nominal 4% of the area. The New Forest was to become a commercial conifer plantation. The Commission’s plans were eventually defeated and after that the foresters increasingly lost interest in timber production in the New Forest, giving up almost all their

newly acquired Verderers' Inclosures and also laying waste some of the late 19th century plantations such as Milkham, Slufers and Hawkhill.

The photograph is of part of a government map produced in 1867 and again in 1875 showing the dates at which all our inclosures were made, the dates on which they were "thrown open" (underlined) or to be thrown open and even (in blue) inclosures which were planned, but eventually defeated by the Act of 1877.



Next month I will make a start on describing the inclosures, beginning with two in the north and then moving on to the other end of the Forest.

Fake News

My copy of the New Forest Association's Spring Newsletter arrived on 1st April, but as I started to read through it the significance of the date had not occurred to me. The association seemed to have done a good job collecting stories at a time when everything was already beginning to shut down. One item, an apparently serious historical piece by the vice chairman, included a note on the well-known Forest author of the 1790s – the Reverend William Gilpin, vicar of Boldre and a noted authority of the picturesque. Some years after his death his work was lampooned by a satirical writer, William Coombe, under the title "Tour of Dr.Syntax in Pursuit of the Picturesque", with illustrations by the cartoonist Thomas Rowlandson. The association's April Fool, described below, was a welcome distraction from an increasingly unpleasant developing crisis.

The NFA report's article included a fine photograph of William Gilpin that I had not seen before and which had presumably just come to light. It differed a good deal from the copies of oil

paintings of him, which showed a balding elderly gentleman. It was also nothing like the cartoon pictures of Dr. Syntax. Then it suddenly dawned on me that “our” William Gilpin had been dead for twenty years before the development of the first tentative steps at photography and perhaps forty years before the art had developed to the point where such sophisticated portraits as this one were common ! Moreover, the subject was wearing the dress of a mid-Victorian gentleman rather than an 18th century cleric. The photograph was indeed of William Gilpin, but someone very different to the aesthete vicar of Boldre. Either by a clever choice or by accident, the picture was of a man with a more than passing resemblance in character to the great exponent of fake news across the Atlantic. The pictured William Gilpin was a flamboyant member of the Republican Party and a land speculator (for which information I am indebted to the internet). Unlike his present-day counterpart in the White House, he seems also to have been an enterprising soldier who raised (and attempted to finance) his own regiment in the Civil War – all without the authority of the federal government. He died nearly a century after the vicar.

The April Fool must have brought amusement to many members and one leading historian of the Forest described it to me as “Hilarious . . . and worth a million hours of fun”.

As to the real New Forest Gilpin, he seems to have been a remarkable character and a considerable philanthropist. Before coming to the Forest he was an enlightened headmaster of Cheam School. The income from his writings allowed him to endow the well-known school in his new parish.

Gilpin has a particular interest for me as he seems to have been on friendly terms with my great-great-great grandfather, General Sir Harry Burrard. In 1799 the latter submitted some of his drawings for critical comment by the great authority on the picturesque. The general had spent much time engaged in artistic pursuits while a prisoner of war in the fortress at Lisle. His niece, Caroline Bowles, was a girl pupil of Gilpin’s and she went on to become a noted poet of her day and a very competent artist. There is a fine collection of her work in Dorset. She eventually married (as his second wife) the ailing Poet Laureate, Robert Southey and nursed him until his death shortly afterwards. Her home in later years was at Buckland Cottage in Lymington.

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