

NEW FOREST NOTES SEPTEMBER 2019

Summer pressures on the Forest

Late July to mid-September is the time when the Forest comes under the most intense recreational pressure. Traffic clogs its roads and the chief honeypot recreation sites overflow, with linear verge parking spreading all along the roads from the official car parks at the popular ice cream sales and lavatory blocks. One Sunday early in August I passed the Bolderwood Green visitor attractions. These have one of the larger car parks in the Forest, but it was filled to capacity and there was parking on both sides of the road from Lyndhurst, extending from the ice cream sales northwards for more than three hundred metres. Some were even attempting to park on the edges of the narrow road southwards towards Mark Ash.

Clearly the visitors to such sites are not seeking peace and quiet which the Forest once used to afford, but rather a pleasant grassy area ideal for ball games and picnics in a happy gregarious environment with lots of like-minded visitors and easy access to refreshments and lavatories. As to the latter, one of the earliest visitor surveys (the South Hampshire Study 1966) showed that the most frequent visitor demands then were for more toilets and more water taps. The modern visitor brings his own plastic bottled water, but the demand for lavatories remains.

The sad thing is that although all this vast demand for recreation could quite well be provided elsewhere (on the urban fringe) and probably at a lower cost and greater convenience for visitors, the New Forest continues to be sold by the authorities as a must-visit destination with enticing trails, attractions, websites, guides and a whole army of officers whose main purpose seems to be to foster “enjoyment” rather than to control rampant misuse. A conclusion of the 1966 report was that “the only realistic answer to such a situation is to decide how many people can use the Forest at one time – to discover in effect, its capacity – and to ensure that this number is not exceeded”. These wise words from more than half a century ago have been swept aside by today’s national park dominated objectives.

A comparison of the apocalyptic predictions of the South Hampshire Study with what has actually happened to the Forest would be an interesting exercise, if not a particularly profitable one. Four years later the report “Conservation of the New Forest” pushed back, for a time, the worst effects of excess recreation and it is chiefly in the last decade that the deterioration has begun to equal or exceed the pressures of the 1960s.

The South Hampshire Study went on to carry out four case studies within the Forest – Balmer Lawn, Ashley Walk, Denny Wood and Stoney Cross. The last of these seems almost comical in that the report’s authors envisaged the development of what they called the “down-at-heel” disused airfield into a honeypot destination, accommodating five thousand people at peak periods, served by ten car parks and by a restaurant or a museum ! Fortunately by the time of the report’s publication the destruction and removal of the concrete runways and roads was well underway, with a second phase of concrete removal taking place twenty five years later. This work was just in time to save poor little

Fritham (temporarily) from becoming the Forest's super honeypot. That salvation was due largely to the determined efforts of several local verderers who resisted the howls of rage from car-borne recreational users who raced, learned to drive and flew powered model aircraft with little restraint and appalling disturbance to local residents.

The management of recreation at Stoney Cross has been something of a success story, but the picture across the Forest is today as deeply depressing as it was in 1966. Just occasionally and early in the morning when things are still quiet, one can obtain a glimpse of what the Forest once was and what it might have been again with determined action. This is true even in the height of summer. John Wise writing one hundred and fifty years ago said of our northern heaths: "the air blows off the Wiltshire Downs finer and keener than anywhere else. Here in the latter end of August, the three heathers one after the other, cover every plain and holt with their crimson glory, mixed with flashes of the dwarf furze." Some of this beauty remains, but the peace of the Forest he recorded is no more than a memory.

Completion of the Verderers' Court renovations

The renovation of the courtroom in the Queen's House has been going on for years and is now beginning its final phase. On the whole the work has been successful. The redecoration is excellent, as is the new seating and re-laying of the floor tiles. The reconstruction of the collapsing west bay has been to a better standard than the Edwardian original. Unfortunately some aspects of the work have not been as good. The sound amplification system is no better and fails to work more often than not when the court is sitting. The "educational" display (housed in the Verderers' old library cupboard) is to my mind rather poor, but it is seldom open to public view and certainly not on court days. Various untidy bits of modern equipment and unsuitable furniture still clutter one corner to the west of the Verderers' bench.



One final task remains to be undertaken and that is the restoration of the coat of arms which hangs above the Official Verderer's seat. It is said to have been restored some years ago, but the work was poorly done and if the coat of arms is to be saved (it is apparently painted on canvas) it now needs expert attention. This has been agreed by the Verderers and the Forestry Commission.

The coat of arms is said to have been prepared for the last Court of the Justice in Eyre held in the Forest in 1670 and the date a year earlier certainly appears on it. The Eyre court was held periodically in royal forests to deal with

the more serious offences against Forest Law and with various administrative matters. By the 18th century the Forest Law was more or less moribund and this last relic of the ancient forest code is a curious survival – not unfitted to a room so often and quite wrongly described as the home of the “ancient Court of Verderers”. In fact the Verderers derive most of their powers from post-war legislation and the origin of the Court is only about a decade before that of the county councils – but this does not at all suit the guide book writers and film makers.

Mobile placenames

The New Forest is extraordinarily rich in placenames, yet today there is probably a smaller percentage of the local population using them than ever before. A century ago everyone used them – the Forest workers and commoners because they were essential tools of their work and the wealthy residents because most of them were involved directly or indirectly with hunting. Everyone else followed along because they could not communicate properly with their neighbours without doing so. Now I don’t suppose there is more than a handful of people in my village with even the most basic knowledge of local Forest names. Why this should be is rather beyond me. Many of them spend hours walking dogs in the Forest, so it is not as though they were unfamiliar with the topography. Perhaps the present widespread inability to read maps is at the root of it. The larger scale Ordnance Survey maps are a treasure house of placename information, yet it is surprising how mobile some of these names are. A name may be fixed in position on an early edition and then moved a little – perhaps only 100m or so – on a later one, and then the process is repeated and the errors accumulate.

The great bible of Forest placenames is a map of 1787 (Richardson, King and Driver’s Map) which was prepared for a government survey at the end of the 18th century. This seems to have been used as the standard adopted by the Ordnance Survey when it published its first (small scale) maps of the Forest twenty years later. Even so, both authorities managed to miss out many names and some of these have survived by word of mouth alone for two hundred years or more.

A remarkable map of the mid-19th century held at the Christopher Tower Library has many of these “lost” names added to it by hand. For example, the colourful name Devil’s Claw is shown upon it astride the B 3078 on the southern edge of Homey Ridge. It must be sixty years since I last heard this name used and then it was by local commoners referring to an area of woodland in Crow’s Nest Bottom, about 1km further east. In the same area (towards Nomansland) the Ordnance Survey Map has “moved” the 1787 placename Two Beeches Bottom from one side of the great Bramshaw Wood ridge to the other and has shifted the heathland name Black Bush to occupy the vacant space left by the loss of Two Beeches Bottom. All this is confusing enough for those of us brought up in the Forest, so perhaps it is not surprising that incomers don’t trouble themselves with local names.

Many names have been “killed” altogether by the inclosure of land for plantations. At least nine names from the 1850s map in the library were wiped out by the making of Islands Thorns Inclosure in 1852. On the A 31 near Bolderwood the 1850s map shows Jerry’s Hat (a hat is a clump

of trees), but this became Slaughter Hollies in the 1890s because it marked the place where the Duke of Connaught's troops slaughtered a bullock for their camp. When I last heard the name it had become Killing Bushes. Perhaps there are now only one or two families of local commoners that still use it.

It will be very sad if the use of ancient local names dies out altogether, to be replaced by the banal placenames chosen by office-bound officials for car parks in the Forest such as "Bratley View". I suppose it is inevitable that as more and more Forestry Commission staff are outsiders or non-local contractors the placenames of the Forest will die. I do, however, remember thirty years ago one lady (a keen horsewoman not originally from the Forest and nothing to do with management) who set herself the task of learning every placename north of the A 31 and not just from a map, but by visiting the places – and very successful she was too. It is a pity that there are no others to follow her example.

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