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The Purlieu of the New Forest

The residents of Dibden Purlieu, sandwiched between Hythe and the common land of the New Forest, probably don't worry too much about the curious second half of their community's name. I imagine it can be an annoyance when trying to give one's address over the telephone but that is all. In fact, it has a very interesting origin which is key to an understanding of the New Forest's early history.

There are, scattered around the margins of the Forest, at least eight purlieu placenames. All but one (Hale Purlieu) appear on the great government survey of 1787 called Richardson, King and Driver's map. Only two of them, Dibden Purlieu and Hale Purlieu, seem true purlieus, derived from our former status as a royal forest and created under the special laws which governed the area. In simple terms they are areas once within the Forest and ruled by the Forest Law, but subsequently removed from that jurisdiction, although still remaining subject to special regulations. Their origin is described by the authority on local mediaeval history, the late David Stagg. John Manwood, an Elizabethan lawyer, gives an explanation of the name as follows: " 'tis derived from the French *Pur*, i.e. clear, intire, exempt, and *Lieu*, i.e. a Place; so that 'tis a Place exempt from the Forest." Although the expected pronunciation of purlieu seems to prevail across most of the Forest, at Hale it was always "Purley" until some years ago, but as the last of the old families die out it has fallen into line with other areas.

Throughout the 13th century there were repeated efforts by the Crown to expand the extent of royal forests, or at least to prevent them from being reduced. Since Forest Law imposed considerable burdens and costs on affected landowners, the kings' efforts were stoutly resisted. Repeated "perambulations" (surveys of the outer boundaries of the forests) were promised or demanded by the warring sides. The conflict reached a climax by 1280, at which date the original c. 1079 line had been greatly extended. It was claimed that the true line followed the Solent coast from Christchurch, up Southampton Water to Totton and then north to the Wiltshire boundary. It then followed that boundary westwards to the Avon and down that river back to the start. In practice, the lower Avon Valley and a coastal strip back to Lymington seem not to have been much affected, but David Stagg demonstrates the strong evidence of actual expansion on the east and north sides. Eventually, in the early 14th century, this expansion was forced back to more or less the line which had existed since the Norman Conquest. Much of the land between the old and the expanded line would thus have acquired the legal status of purlieu, although only the two placenames have survived.

The curious thing about the placenames is that of the eight, only two (Dibden and Hale) seem to fall within the true status of purlieu. The remaining six were all inside the legal boundary of the Forest from the start and remained there, theoretically subject to Forest Law until it was abolished in 1971. In the south there are several purlieu names at Holbury, inside the Forest, while the remainder lie close to the Avon Valley in the north west. With the exception of Ogden's Purlieu, they are all now

enclosed private land, although most were probably common land until the late 18th century. Bruins Purlieu or Brune's Purlieu (formerly Close Pits or Bruin's Moor) at Godshill is about 160 acres of pasture and heathland with a scattering of housing around the edges. A bit further south is a smaller area of former common recorded in 1787 as Mr. Coventry Bulkeley's Purlieu. Next there is a fragment of common and farmland adjoining Hyde Common described as the Rev. Harry Place's Purlieu, although this is probably just a part of the largest and most important purlieu of the Forest – Ogdens Purlieu. Nearly all of Ogdens remains common land today.

The modern dictionary definition of purlieu is an area of land near or surrounding a particular place, but it is hardly a word in common present-day use. It seems very likely that as the Forest Law declined the old legal classification was forgotten and the term became attached to bits of private land within the Forest, usually on the boundaries. If a piece of land adjoining the Forest and subject to common rights at Dibden was called a purlieu, why not similarly name a block inside the boundary at Godshill? Certainly, this seems to be how the word was used by Shakespeare in "As You Like It."



The heart of Ogdens Purlieu seen from the south west. Fir Pound is in middle ground right.

This leaves just the remarkable enigma of Ogden's Purlieu which lies north east of Ibsley Common. On the Ordnance Survey map it appears to have an area of about 300 acres. It is today within the perambulation of the New Forest and most of it is undisputed Crown (Forestry England)

property. However, this was not always the case and we do not need to go back very far in history to investigate its story. In 1800, its ownership was claimed by that evidently very enterprising clerical landowner, the Rev. Harry Place and those 300 acres were not nearly the extent of his ambitions. He was the freeholder of most of the village of Linwood, long before it came into the ownership of Lord Normanton's family. He believed that he was the owner not only of the village itself and the 300 acres to the north west, but also of a substantial strip of Forest to the east of Linwood and areas of heathland within the village itself. In all, the alleged total of his holding exceeded 1,000 acres.

The beginning of the 19th century was a time of change and uncertainty in the New Forest, no doubt fuelled by the ongoing war with France and the perceived need to expand timber production for the future building of warships. In 1800, an enquiry was established by Act of Parliament to consider encroachments on the Forest and other disputes between landowners and the Crown. On 10th April 1801 it started to consider cases concerning Broomy Walk on the west side of the Forest. The most significant of these was Harry Place's claim to Ogdens Purlieu. Indeed, it was probably one of the most extensive (but not the most valuable) claims in the entire Forest.

A very detailed abstract of the evidence given on both sides of the dispute was published by the Office of Woods in 1853. For anyone familiar with the area, it gives a fascinating picture of life in this (then) remote corner of the Forest two hundred and twenty-five years ago. The evidence for Mr. Place was largely based on a series of leases he had granted, many of them for pieces of land to be enclosed out of the common. Most were for the building of cottages and gardens and some for agricultural use. There are stories of disputes between commoners over the cutting of turf (for burning) and peat. At one stage a cart was seized and a payment had to be made to get it released. For the Crown, Forest officers described their felling of oak for Navy use, shooting over the alleged Purlieu and the killing of deer. There are two accounts of perambulations of the Purlieu made for Mr. Place and numerous attended by local people. These lists of boundary names, include several which are now lost. They include Valentine's Bush, Lady Well and Sash Ford. Valentine's Bush must have been at the western end of what later become Hasley Inclosure. The Purlieu extended from Abbots Well in the north to Spring Bushes in the south.

The case was concluded ten days later, with the award being a resounding defeat for Mr Place. His sole consolation was an acknowledgement of his right to cut turf and peat within the Purlieu.

It is clear that the government surveyors fourteen years earlier (the brothers A and W Driver in this part of the Forest) were much perplexed by Ogdens Purlieu. The northern 300 acres are shown as privately owned, but the land along the eastern side of Linwood is marked as Crown property. One very interesting feature of their map is the recording of a fir plantation near North Hollow. That today is known as Fir Pound and is probably the second earliest planting of Scots Pine in the New Forest. Part of the enquiry evidence suggests that it dates from about 1770, little more than a decade after the earliest plantation at Paddy Bussies Firs on Rockford Common only a mile away. Today the clumps of Scots Pine across the Purlieu are amongst the most beautiful in the Forest, beloved of

photographers and a key element of the landscape. It is hardly surprising that so many picture post cards and guide books are filled with pictures of this pine. It is clearly much loved by the public, while being hated by the ecologists. From their point of view and for grazing interests, its spread must be kept under control, but in clumps such as exist at Ogdens Purlieu, it is an essential part of the Forest landscape.

Bridges – good news and bad

At the January Verderers' Court, Forestry England gave an assurance that the bridge over Dockens Water at Woodford Bottom will be repaired shortly. For many months this has been a lethal threat to any rider attempting to use it. There are broken planks at the north end (covered by plastic matting) and the central part is so badly rotted that the boarding is reduced almost to pulp. Further down the same stream and on National Trust land, the crossing at Newlands has been impassible to horses and dangerous to pedestrians for a number of years. Now, finally, the County Council has undertaken to restore it during the summer.

At the other end of the Forest the picture is less encouraging. Between Perrywood and Furze Hill there is a path of no particular significance as a through route, but used and enjoyed by walkers and local people. At its centre is a pedestrian and horse bridge over a stream. Now this bridge is to be destroyed as part of a "conservation" project comprising the partial filling of the stream and the cutting down of an area of woodland. In place of the bridge, a ford will be made.



The doomed Perrywood foot and horse bridge

Little bridges such as this are an integral part of the Forest's landscape and character, illustrated by artists such as Heywood Sumner and much photographed in more recent times, but they are disliked by FE because they are costly to maintain. Conservation projects are increasingly being used as cover for getting rid of bridges and (more utilitarian) culverts across the Forest. I have no doubt that a

private landowner doing similar removal on a footpath would find County Council and National Park officers down on him in a moment, but FE seems able to avoid the rules which apply to others.

Anthony Pasmore