

NEW FOREST NOTES JANUARY 2026

The Ashley Walk Bombing Range

It is thirty years since the first publication of Norman Parker's history of a remarkable wartime appropriation of New Forest land – "Ashley Walk, its Bombing Range, Landscape and History". Over the next few years, it was reprinted two or three times, selling many hundreds of copies, but it has been unavailable now for quite a while. The author died in 2024, but a further reprint will be available this month, produced by the New Forest History & Archaeology Group.

I worked with Norman at the time of the original publication, assisting in the very thorough fieldwork he undertook. I also provided a brief account of the landscape, management and early history of the range's site. In Wiltshire, his research into aviation history is well known, but I think this was his only excursion into New Forest matters, and very valuable it proved to be. His short book marked fifty years since the end of the war and then all but the most durable targets and other evidence of the range had more or less melted back into the Forest landscape. Another three decades has done much to complete the process.



The central part of the Ashley Walk bombing range as photographed by the RAF in 1947

Bombing of the Ashley Walk range commenced in the latter part of 1940 after a brief but vigorous opposition had been overcome. Nine miles of six feet high chain link fencing had been erected around much of the north tip of the Forest and the commoners' livestock had been more or less excluded. Still, the range then comprised little more than open space for bombing trials. Over succeeding years, a complicated suite of target infrastructure was provided for the testing of nearly every type of bomb and projectile used by our forces in WW2. Railway line targets, aircraft pens, wall targets and slit trenches proved durable and traces of them are still visible. More ephemeral targets included vehicles, aircraft, and air to ground firing targets and all trace of these has vanished.

The range, when fully developed, was in three parts. There was the high explosive area around Leaden Hall to Hampton Ridge and from this nearly 400 craters survive. Next, east of Cooper's Hill, a fragmentation range was used largely for testing anti-personnel weapons. Finally, there was the 2,000-yard diameter practice range, which could be illuminated by night and where bombs could be dropped from 14,000 feet. Only inert bombs were used here and the targets were remarkably close to the houses at Ogdens in the Latchmore valley. One or two of the armour piercing bomb casings from here still decorate my farmyard after giving good service in increasing the weight of a too light field roller!

The author's death, of course, prevented much updating in the new edition of the original text, but one important exception is a fundamental reinterpretation of the Submarine Pens. This vast concrete structure near Pitts Wood was buried under a mound after the war, but survived the bombing and to this day retains its curious if inaccurate name. It was originally thought to be a replica of the German U-boat pens on the French coast and that is certainly what it looked like. More recent research by Robert Cole has proved this to be incorrect. It was in fact built to test the efficacy of specially designed public air-raid shelters and its correct title was the Ministry of Home Security Target. Robert Cole's research into the structure is included in the new edition.

Bouncing bombs of two types were tested on Ashley Walk, but the big "Upkeep" mines as used in the Dams Raid, were not dropped here until well after that event. The "Tallboy" bombs, whose deep craters survive at Ashley Hole, provided enduring watering points for Forest livestock, which are invaluable during periods of drought.

Perhaps the most spectacular test conducted at Ashley Walk was the dropping of the largest bomb ever to fall on England – the "Grand Slam". This, coming only weeks before the war's end, was almost the swan-song of the range as it fell on 13th March 1945, creating a crater 130 ft in diameter and variously described as either 30 ft or 70 ft in depth. The following day a second Grand Slam destroyed the Bielefeld viaduct, which had defied all earlier attempts to wreck it. Today you will find little trace of the Ashley crater beyond a shallow rush covered depression. It was clearly too dangerous to leave unrestored.



Ashley Lodge before it was wrecked by bombing

Unlike the account of the bombing range itself, the story of management, earlier history and landscape in Ashley Walk has undergone considerable revision since the original publication, not least because much forestry policy has changed for the better in recent years, affecting the fine plantations which dominate the southern parts of the Walk. Fresh threats, such as that to the Latchmore Valley, its beautiful woodlands and historical sites, have had to be overcome, while others remain hanging over Ashley Walk to this day. Forestry England tries to cram in increasingly large and disruptive recreational events, despite the fact that this is the largest and most important of the Forest's designated tranquil areas.

For those interested in the pre-bombing history of the area, there are still traces of two houses which were once crucial to the Walk's management and which the RAF destroyed. The first was Amberwood Cottage, where all that remains today is some of the now overgrown garden shrubs and the foundations of the old stable building. Here the woodman (Broad and his family) in charge of the 1815 oak plantation, lived at the beginning of the 20th century. He created amazing topiary which is illustrated in the book.

A little further north was the imposing Ashley Lodge from which the little empire of the Walk was overseen by a resident Groomkeeper and his employees. The photograph here shows the building in the years immediately before its destruction, when occupied by the keeper Gulliver.

Copies of Norman Parker's book can be obtained later this month via the New Forest History & Archaeology Group's website or from the New Forest Heritage Centre bookshop in Lyndhurst.

Red kites and ridden horses

I suppose it is only in recent years that the population of red kites in this part of the country has risen to the present levels. Five years ago, the sight of a kite overhead was a rare event, but there is now seldom a day when I do not see one if I am working outdoors. They seem to have an

uncanny ability to detect carrion. When a deer died in a field near my home the kites discovered the carcass within hours and it was stripped of all flesh over the next few days.

Their activities over the Forest seem particularly curious in that they are attracted to ridden horses and not, presumably, in anticipation of an imminent equine death. Several times over the last few months one of these birds has appeared out of nowhere, flying very slowly and so low above the horses' heads that almost every feather can be distinguished. It is a spectacular, if initially rather alarming sight. The kite does not seem to be particularly interested in nearby grazing Forest ponies. It is the movement of the ridden horses which seems to be the attraction.

A search of the internet shows that this is not unusual behaviour. It is thought that the bird is watching for small prey disturbed by the moving hooves. Similarly, there are recorded cases of kites following agricultural machinery. I imagine that the bird does not regard quiet riders as a source of human danger and has learnt that horses can be a potentially valuable source of food.

One hundred and fifty years of the New Forest Verderers

The New Forest Court of Verderers was established in 1877 and so reaches its 150th anniversary in eighteen months' time. Of course, tourism interests like to describe it as "the ancient court of verderers" and so does FE's advertising board outside the courtroom, but that is complete nonsense. The present court is actually roughly contemporary with the County Council and nearly all its powers are derived from post-war legislation.

It seems only yesterday that the court reached its centenary and I can't remember any great excitement at that time, but the Forest was then only just in the early stages of becoming a tourist honeypot. The arrival of the national park was still years away. Nobody thought it was worth making much of a fuss. This time things should be very different as a small team of my colleagues has been appointed to devise suitable celebrations to take place at the peak of the 2027 holiday season. Their ideas look interesting, if perhaps rather costly.

Under the Forest Law, finally abolished in 1971, there had certainly been a minor judicial and administrative body presided over by verderers, but that was all but defunct by 1877. More for the sake of tradition than anything else, the new management committee took on the old title of Court of Verderers, while the agisters in their green liveries today add a bit of colour for the tourists in what would otherwise be a rather mundane council-style meeting.

There was actually, during the November meeting, a faint echo of the Verderers' more colourful past. The Deputy Surveyor and Official Verderer exchanged pleasantries with some visiting Canadian military officers. The latter were attending the court to acknowledge recent maintenance works and memorial services at the Canadians' Cross off the Bolderwood Road. The cross is located in what was a Canadian camp during WW2. I suppose (as with the Welsh), Canadians are expected to use their minority language in part of public speeches, so a portion of the presentment was in French. The Forest Law, of course, had its origins in France and French remained the principal

language of the educated population of this country for several centuries after 1066. As I listened (uncomprehendingly) to the words from the dock, I reflected that this was very probably the first presentment to be made to the Court in French since the 14th century, but of course at that date the present King's House with its courtroom had not been built. Its earliest portions are said to be of Tudor date.

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