

NEW FOREST NOTES APRIL 2026

Stoney Cross – a president's grandfather, ditching and lights

At a time when we are given a daily and not always very encouraging dose of the USA's president's thoughts, I have been re-reading Henry Cole's 2010 account of President Obama's grandfather's brief time serving at Stoney Cross Aerodrome. Sergeant Stanley Dunham (the president's grandfather on his mother's side) was stationed on the aerodrome on D Day and for a few days thereafter, before being sent to Normandy. Unfortunately, the details of his time there are extremely sketchy and largely confined to an account of a party he organized which was attended by a "convoy of girls" imported from Southampton for the occasion. It was reported to have been a great success.

If this celebrity's visit was transitory, the very existence of the aerodrome too has almost vanished from view. The standard of restoration here (1966 and 1990) was such that a visitor from outside might today drive through the area and never realize that he was on the site of a huge wartime airfield. In those days, the ecologists had not yet banned the use of topsoil and other soft finishes in restoration works in the Forest. The results here were much better than, for example, on



Beaulieu Aerodrome. Last month, however, some very solid evidence of the past came to light. As part of Forestry England's preliminaries to its parking charge scheme, it was decided that one edge of the road to Linwood should be ditched. The actual allocation across the Forest of such areas to be protected may be questionable, but the work undertaken by the contractor's drivers is extremely neat and not to be confused with the earlier dangerous ditches at Longcross and Matley. So much of the turf has been saved and re-laid in the spoil bank that the ditching is likely to be virtually invisible within a year. Only the difficulty, caused by the ditching, of removing from the carriageway the dead bodies of livestock killed by traffic has been causing concern. Usually there are long clear runs of ditch, but at

Stoney Cross the unfortunate digger driver allocated the Linwood road must have been faced with an unexpected problem. The present road occupies a narrow strip built on the concrete edge of the old main runway, the remainder of which was removed sixty years ago. The new ditching is positioned roughly 5 to 6 ft from the carriageway (and runway) edge. Instead of the mixture of gravel and rubble encountered elsewhere, the digger driver was faced with a solid wall of immovable concrete every 50 ft and which was quite invisible from the surface. This continued for over a mile. It seems that the cables serving the original lights must have been buried beneath or along the concrete edge of the runway, while the lights themselves were set back in the grass. The intervening link was protected by the concrete walls. One or two of the steel light frames (as in the photograph) are still visible on the surface and the obstructing walls must have presented a considerable difficulty in the ditching process.

Minstead rat-running and more ancient problems

At the March Verderers' Court, Ms H. Standeven of Minstead parish council complained of rat-running in the village as drivers attempt to avoid delays on the A 31 and other adjacent main roads. She pointed out that the traffic was not just a danger and inconvenience to residents, but that verges are being damaged and livestock put at risk. She asked for the Court's support in combatting these nuisances.

The complaint is far from being a new one, because the village sits in the angle between the A 31 and A 337 roads, the latter giving access, via Lyndhurst, to the A 35. As soon as the A 31 becomes blocked, as it frequently does, drivers pour onto the lanes of Minstead, to the great distress of residents. This has been going on for as long as I can remember. I am sure the Verderers felt considerable sympathy for the complainant, but strangely enough, Minstead contains the largest block of common land within the Forest which is actually outside the Verderers' control. You can wander from Withybed Bottom (Forestry England land subject to all the Forest's regulations), across an invisible line to The Grove in Minstead, and at the end of your walk you will be in another legal world. There will be exactly the same heather beneath your feet, but all the rules will have changed.

Under the Forest Law, finally abolished in 1971, Minstead lay within the boundary of the New Forest, but not "within the Regard" of the Forest. In other words, the regulations which applied throughout the remainder of the Forest were not applicable here. Commoners grazing animals on common land within the village claimed to be exempt from the payment of marking fees to the Verderers and I don't think this was ever seriously challenged. They also claimed that their animals might wander onto the Crown lands free of charge, under the old and rather complex rules of "vicinage" (inter-commoning). Such wandering was almost inevitable because of the relatively small area of grazing available within the village. As recently as twenty-five years ago, Mr. Bob Cooper, then a well-known Minstead farmer and former lawyer, conducted a long-running campaign against the Verderers, claiming that his significant number of animals might graze the Forest free of charge. I don't think the Court ever questioned his right to graze there, but it did dispute most strongly that he could do so without paying. Marking fees are payable under the byelaws and as soon as a Minstead animal crosses the line, payment becomes due. That was a view upheld by the magistrates' court

when Mr. Cooper was prosecuted for breaking the byelaws. Then, when subsidy money began to flow into the Forest, administered by the Verderers, the Minstead commoners who did not pay fees or whose animals fell below an acceptable standard specified in the byelaws, were ineligible to receive payments. Economics quickly prevailed over arguments about legal technicalities. The protracted battle quietly died out and the rules which had governed this bit of the New Forest since the Norman Conquest fell into obscurity.

All this leaves the Verderers with no direct power over the evils of rat-running, verge damage or danger to livestock within Minstead, although I am sure the Court would give enthusiastic support to other authorities and landowners who are better equipped to meet these challenges.

A gipsy's view of life in the Forest

Some time ago I received a request for permission to include, in a forthcoming publication, an extract from one of my late father's books. The subject of the extract was the great freeze of 1962-3. I was happy to agree and thought no more about the matter. Last month I received a copy of the new book – "Living in a Kenner (house), my New Forest Romani Gypsy Family" by Heather Cooper. If this was perhaps a book I would not have gone out of my way to buy, it was certainly a welcome change from the noxious stream of local authority reports and consultations from which I usually suffer. This was a book that I could actually read. It will be available from the New Forest Heritage Centre from 11th April.

I have to say straight away that I was brought up at a time when the Forest community lived in a state of constant cold war with the local gypsy camps. Keepers, agisters and police were always



One of the compounds (probably Shave Green) photographed by Juanita Berlin at about the time of closure in the early 1960s

trying to limit the activities of those who lived in the half dozen or so compounds. Landowners and residents nearby were in a perpetual state of fear of expected depredations on their property, real or imagined. Ms Cooper's book therefore gives a rare opportunity to reflect on those days from the opposite side of the social fence which divided the Forest. Her story is derived largely from information supplied by her parents, who were raised in the Shave Green camp, although she herself was born after the compounds were closed down.

The book is a mixture of verse and stories covering life in the camps in the first half of the twentieth century and then following her own family and others as they settled into, or struggled with, more conventional life after the 1960s. I am no judge of poetry, so I turned at once to the remaining text.

The Shave Green camp, as it was called, was in fact located in old sand pits on Brockishill, just west of the A 337 half way between Lyndhurst to Cadnam. Why it should have been so named is unclear as Shave Green itself is actually nearly a mile further north. Ms Cooper gives a vivid picture of life in the camp with all its difficulties and hardships, but also a great sense of community and mutual help amongst the residents. There was, for example, no water supply and water had to be collected from a tap a mile away. It follows, of course, that there was no modern sanitation. Accommodation was in flimsy huts made out of poles and fabric or, more luxuriously, in old vehicles. Cooking was in improvised stoves made out of old metal drums and the author tells us that remarkably good meals were produced. The report of the New Forest Committee of 1947 describes the camps as then hardly reaching the standard of the Stone Age and that is not inconsistent with Ms Cooper's account.

In those early post-war days, I lived very close to the Shave Green camp and, no doubt like most of the local children, I was warned to keep well away from Brockishill – especially when on my pony. I think this warning had more to do with the quantities of broken glass and sharp metal objects lying about than any direct threat to my safety. I followed the instruction to the letter and not until the camp had closed down did I see these dangers for myself.

Even as late as my early interest in Forest matters, complaints about Shave Green and the other camps came regularly before the Verderers. In 1951, Mr. O.T. Price, a noted hunting gentleman, complained to the Court of wire, six feet above the ground, strung between trees in the camp and potentially lethal to horsemen. Mr. Terrance Despard of Bartley Manor was a regular complainant about alleged violations of his property by camp residents.

Ms Cooper sees these conflicts through entirely different eyes and that makes her writing unusual and historically valuable. Perhaps her view of Romani life is a little over-rosy in places, just as the recorded opinions of local people may be an exaggeration of the evils of the camp, but this was all a long time ago. Still, she does not shy away from noting some of the more bizarre aspects of camp and post-camp life. It was always alleged that when some residents of the Forest camps were re-housed in nearby villages, they used their new baths for storing coal. I thought this was probably a myth and certainly the author does not mention it. She does, on the other hand, record the activities on one re-housed woman who was discovered using her WC for washing clothes in and extolling the virtues of this sanitary fitting as a valuable washing machine. Perhaps any of us might have done the same after half a lifetime trudging a mile each day for a meagre water supply.

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