



NEW FOREST
NATIONAL PARK

HISTORY OF THE NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK

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The Medieval Forest

Light through trees

Introduction

The New Forest is neither new nor strictly speaking a forest. In fact its name comes from the time when the area was first designated as a royal hunting ground in 1079. It derives from the Latin *nova foresta*, which literally translates as 'new hunting ground'. The *nova foresta* was mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086. The 150 square miles of land that made up this hunting ground were taken into Crown ownership and strict laws were imposed to protect the Forest for royal hunting.

In Norman times a forest was defined as a territory of woods and pastures where the beasts of the chase were afforded safe protection. It was therefore a place for keeping deer and other animals. Even in the times of King William less than half the area of his *nova foresta* was covered by trees, and heathland made up a large proportion. The term 'forest' in this sense did not therefore necessarily refer to a wooded area.



Scene from the New Forest Tapestry (courtesy of the New Forest Association)

William, Duke of Normandy, invaded England on 28 September 1066. He fought and defeated the King of England, Harold Godwinsson, at the Battle of Hastings.

He was crowned William I and became popularly known as William the Conqueror. William went on to play an important role in shaping the landscape and future of the New Forest.



Fallow deer © MJ Matthews

Afforestation

Following his victory at the Battle of Hastings, King William "afforested" the area, which meant he placed it under forest law. William afforested 21 areas in this fashion across England.

Forest law was a Norman institution imported from the continent but it was unanimously unpopular with the local population. The forest law was a separate legal system with its own courts and officers. It was the responsibility of these courts to protect and preserve the venison and vert for the King's pleasure.

The venison referred to the beasts of the chase. These were the red deer, fallow deer, roe deer and the wild pig. The vert referred to the green undergrowth which was needed to feed the beasts of the chase. The provision of venison was the primary purpose of the hunt and the deer were protected absolutely.



Forest laws

These were set up to protect the beasts of the chase and their habitats including the vert. They precluded poaching and taking wood from the forest. The punishments for breaking these laws were severe and ranged from fines to, in the most severe cases, death.

Because of these forest laws the local peasants who lived on the land faced severe restrictions on their lifestyles. They were banned from enclosing their land by fencing or other means as this restricted the hunt. The forest laws were therefore extremely unpopular with the local population, who were unable to continue in their way of life that had existed up until the Norman rule. They were not allowed to protect their crops by fencing, they could not use the timber from the woodland for building houses and they were not allowed to hunt game to provide food for their families. As the 'underwood' was also protected they also faced a severe restriction on the availability of fuel.

Establishment of Common rights

It became clear that without some assistance local peasants would not be able to survive within the Forest. After much discontent, therefore, the local people were finally granted the common right to graze their livestock and domestic animals throughout the Forest as a means of compensation. This was the first step in the creation of the Common Rights which remain today. These rights regulated what was common practice before the afforestation took place. It also introduced restrictions at certain times of the year, such as preserving the browse during winter, to ensure the deer were protected.

Common rights today

Over 900 years later these common rights still survive and are still protected by law. People who are entitled to the common rights are termed commoners. There are around 500 practicing commoners across the New Forest today turning out a total of around 7,000 livestock. Without the constant grazing of these animals the beautiful and unique landscape of the National Park would not look like it does today. The livestock prevent the heathland from turning into heavy scrub and maintains its special character.



Pigs remain a present day sight in autumn



The Vert: Forest undergrowth

Venison: the beasts of the chase

The common rights

■ Common of Pasture

The right to turn out 'commonable animals' i.e. ponies, horned cattle and donkeys.

■ Common of Mast

The right to turn out pigs during the 60 day pannage season in autumn. The pigs eat the green acorns and beech mast which are poisonous to cattle and ponies.

■ Right of Fuel Wood

The right to cut wood for fuel

■ Common of Pasture of Sheep

The right to depasture sheep. Very few are now depastured.

■ Right of Common of Marl

The right to dig marl (lime-rich clay) from marl pits to use as fertiliser or building material. Now no longer practiced.

■ Right of Turbary

The right to cut turf for fuel. For every turf cut, two were left to preserve the land. Now no longer practiced.



Highland cow and calf

About William Rufus

William II, known as William Rufus because of his shock of red hair, was born as the third child of William I in 1057. William was crowned King of England on 26 September 1087 following the death of his father, William the Conqueror. His eldest brother Robert became King of Normandy.

William was thought to have increased the severity of punishments given to people who broke the forest law. In particular it is claimed that he introduced penalties of death and mutilation for interference with the King's deer. If someone was found to have shot at a deer they faced having their hands cut off, whilst those caught disturbing the deer faced blinding as their punishment. This brutal enforcement of the forest law no doubt became exaggerated in each subsequent account but there is no doubt about the relative harshness of William's rule.



Beech woodland, Poundhill Inclosure.

The inscription on the Rufus Stone reads:

Here stood the oak tree on which an arrow shot by Sir Walter Tyrrell at a stag, glanced and struck King William the Second, surnamed Rufus on the breast, of which he instantly died, on the second day of August, anno 1100. King William thus slain was laid on a cart, belonging to one Purkess, and drawn from hence, to Winchester, and buried in the Cathedral Church of that City



The Rufus Stone

This is a memorial stone that was erected to mark the supposed spot where William Rufus was killed. The stone was erected by John, Lord Delaware in 1745 and later in 1841 it was covered with iron by William Sturges Bourne Warden to protect it from further deterioration.

The stone is located just off the A31 in Canterton Glen, near to the village of Minstead. Modern research, however, suggests that this may not be the place where William fell. Instead it is believed that he could have died at another place known as Thorougham, just to the south of Beaulieu. The events surrounding his death have been shrouded in uncertainty and although his death has been documented as an accident there are some who believe it is likely that he may have been murdered.

On 2 August 1100 William Rufus went hunting in the Forest near Brockenhurst. Amongst the hunting party were William's youngest brother Henry, Gilbert de Clare and his younger brother Roger of Clare as well as Walter Tyrell. The group were hunting deer. During the hunt Walter Tyrell fired an arrow at a stag. This arrow missed its target and hit an oak tree deflecting it straight into the chest of King William Rufus. He is said to have died instantly. Suspicions were raised as to the 'accident' when Tyrell mounted his horse and fled from the scene. He is thought to have escaped to France, never to set foot in England again.



Rufus Stone

Further reading/ useful information

Other New Forest National Park Authority fact files

New Forest Centre Library

The New Forest: Colin R. Tubbs, 2001

The New Forest: Edward Rutherford (fiction)

www.new-forest-uk.co.uk/history.htm

www.hants.org.uk/newforest/history1.html

www.newforestnpa.gov.uk Factsheet available on CD, in large-print, or Braille on request

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