

NEW FOREST  
NATIONAL PARK

# HISTORY OF THE NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK

## 3 The New Forest at war



Canadian War Memorial

### Memorials

War memorials such as the Canadian War Memorial and the memorial at Nomansland provide a present day reminder of the sacrifices made by the New Forest during the wars.

St Nicholas' church, Brockenhurst is home to around 100 graves of soldiers including 93 New Zealand, 1 Australian and 3 Indians. These men were amongst the thousands of casualties of the First World War brought from France for treatment in the wartime Brockenhurst Hospital. The graves are cared for by the Imperial War Commission.

### Introduction

**The New Forest is now regarded as a special place because of its wildlife, landscape and cultural heritage. During the war years it was special for entirely different reasons which centred on its ideal geographical and strategic location on the south coast of England.**

This factsheet looks at the role of the New Forest during both World Wars and examines the places and memories that commemorate that terrible time.

### Appropriation of buildings

Several large buildings were appropriated for the war effort. This included large manor houses such as Exbury House which was used as a military training camp, as well as local hotels.

The Forest Park Hotel in Brockenhurst was used as a field hospital during the First World War as was the Balmer Lawn Hotel. The latter was also taken over by Generals Eisenhower and Montgomery during the Second World War as a headquarters for the D-Day invasion of Europe in 1944.



War memorial, Nomansland

### Military occupation

The results of the military occupation were widespread and encompassed every aspect of life within the New Forest. This left a lasting legacy on the population and environment of the National Park. The legacy ranges from large scale visual impacts such as the changes to the built environment and coastal defences through to those which have become hidden through time, such as the scars left behind by the Ashley Bombing Range. In total 3,500 hectares were taken from the Forest during the Second World War for military training, airfields, bombing and explosive ranges. All of these were eventually returned to the Forest but in many locations their existence remains evident as scars on the landscape. The Forest itself became a vast camp prior to D-Day with troops waiting to leave for the invasion of Europe.

## Crop planting

**During the Second World War, and particularly between 1941 and 1952, 350 hectares of Open Forest were enclosed by the Hampshire War Agricultural Executive Committee.**

These areas were ploughed up and planted with agricultural crops to help with the war effort. After the war this newly formed agricultural land was reseeded to provide grazing land for the Forest livestock. One area that saw large scale ploughing and crop planting was Wilverley Plain. During the Second World War there was also a comeback in arable farming in Wiltshire as the country had to grow its own corn.

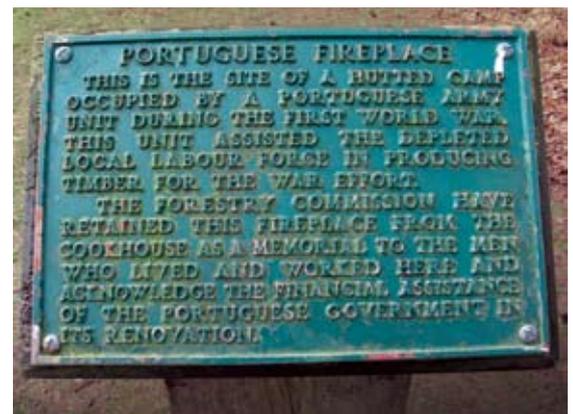


## Timber felling

During the two world wars Britain was unable to rely on timber imports and instead had to be self sufficient in its timber production. During the First World War imports of timber fell from 6.5 million tonnes in 1916 to only 2.5 million tonnes by 1918. Around 2,000 acres of timber were felled during World War I alone. Much of the timber felled was broadleaved deciduous trees and these were replaced with faster growing coniferous trees during the replanting that took place after the war. During World War II almost all the conifers in the New Forest aged between 25 - 35 years were cut down.

Felling licences were introduced during the war and these continued afterwards as a conservation measure. Trees were classified according to their felling priority with those that could be immediately felled (i.e. mature stands) taking priority.

As labour sources became scarce during the First World War it fell to a Portuguese army unit working within the Canadian Timber Corps to support the local population in felling timber for the war effort. Their help is recognised today by the remains of a fireplace that stood in the cookhouse of their camp. The fireplace is now known as the Portuguese Fireplace.



Commemorative Plaque at the Portuguese Fireplace

## Ashley Range

Ashley Walk is nowadays a tranquil area of heathland located near to Godshill in the north of the Forest. During the Second World War it was known as Ashley Range and was home to a large bombing range covering around 5,000 acres. It was here that the famous 'bouncing bomb' was tested and the ground reveals many scars and depressions that testify to its dramatic past. Viewed from above the past use of the site becomes clear as there are still large chalk target markings visible and from above the landscape is literally littered with craters made by the exploding bombs and shells. Many of these depressions are now filled with water and provide welcome watering holes for the livestock depastured on the heath.

## Charcoal burning

Charcoal burning made a comeback in the Forest during World War II having declined in previous years. Local timber was felled and burnt to make charcoal. This charcoal was then used to provide absorbers for the gas masks that were so necessary at the time. Alder was used as it provided a very fine charcoal particularly useful for the task at hand. In fact New Forest charcoal was used to help make around 40 million gas respirators!



The Portuguese Fireplace



Ponies grazing on re-seeded lawns  
at Wilverley Plain

## Airfields

There were 12 airfields built in the forest in total, 9 of which were specifically built for the Second World War. These included Beaulieu, Holmsley and Stoney Cross. Now only one remains open (Hurn airport), the rest having reverted to farmland and heath.

The first airfield to be built was East Boldre which was constructed on grass in 1910. The airfield was used during World War I to provide basic training to cover the Allied Western Front in northern France and Flanders. After the Armistice the R.A.F. closed it in 1919.

The Stoney Cross Airfield to the north of the A31 was used by both Royal Air Force and US Army Air Force units during WWII. The remains of the 2,000 yard runway is now a minor Forest road.

Beaulieu Airfield was opened in August 1942 on Beaulieu Heath. It was a relatively large airfield with three runways. The base was closed in 1950 and today you can still see sections of the runway. It is now used by members of the Beaulieu Model Aircraft Club and has changed from a military to recreational site.



Airfield monument, Holmsley



Potential World War II incendiary bomb  
(found between Beaulieu and Lyndhurst)

## The Beaulieu River

During the Second World War over 500 landing craft and barges used the Beaulieu River. The large houses along the rivers course were appropriated by the War Cabinet and used for a range of clandestine organisations such as the hydrographic survey and commando units.



Beaulieu River

To commemorate the people involved there is an anchor and plaque placed at Bucklers Hard dedicated to the Beaulieu River and another one at Exbury Gardens commemorating the troops that trained at Exbury training camp and left for the shore of Normandy from Exbury. The Beaulieu River was the last view of England that some troops ever saw.

## Coastal Defences

The New Forest coastline played an important part in securing the defence of the Solent during the wars and providing an important training resource. The existing coastal defences at Calshot and Hurst were once again drawn into action as training and strategic placements along the Solent.

### Calshot's war record

Calshot Spit was converted into a Naval Air Station in 1913. During the pre-war years it became famous for a 150 mile high speed air race called the Schneider Trophy.

At the outbreak of war in 1914 the race was put on hold and Calshot became responsible for coastal defence of the English Channel. New recruits were trained on site and the base expanded to house offices, large aircraft hangars and workshops, many of which are still evident today. In 1920 Calshot was renamed RAF Calshot and was used as a training centre as well as a base for coastal reconnaissance.

The military link continued into World War II when the site was used by the RAF for training crew and maintaining their fleet of flying boats. These boats were specifically designed to take off and land in water. The Sunderland flying boat was developed as a long range patrol aircraft. These planes proved a vital addition to the Dunkirk evacuations on 31 May 1940 where five seaplanes secured the return to safety of over 500 men.

### D-Day at Lepe

Lepe played an important part in the D-Day campaign, code named Operation Overlord, and provided a major departure points for troops, vehicles and supplies heading for the Normandy beaches.

The roads and woods around the area were filled with troops, tanks, guns and all kinds of army vehicles. Lepe itself came under the command of the shore station HMS Mastodon which had its headquarters at Exbury House.

Lepe was also a construction site for part of the prefabricated floating Mulberry Harbour. The Mulberry Harbours were towed across the English Channel and assembled off the Normandy coast. Their purpose was to speed up the process of unloading on the other side of the channel so that the Allied troops were supplied as quickly as possible. The sections of these harbours were towed across the English Channel and put together off the coast of Normandy.

There are two "dolphin" iron structures still visible in the sea at Lepe. These are the remains of jetties which were used as moorings to load the ships bound for Normandy. On the shoreline are two bollards which were used to secure ships during the loading of troops and supplies.

### Further reading/ useful information

Other New Forest National Park Authority fact files

*The New Forest* : Colin R. Tubbs, 2001

*The New Forest at War* : John Leete, 2004

*D-Day at Lepe* : Hampshire County Council leaflet

*A history of Calshot Spit* : Hampshire County Council

[www.newforestnpa.gov.uk](http://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk) Factsheet available on CD, in large-print, or Braille on request

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