

NOTES ON WOOLMER FOREST.

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A paper read at Lynchborough Park, Woolmer Forest, on the occasion of the unveiling of a Memorial Tablet near the Queen Victoria Oak, by The Countess of Selborne, September 22nd, 1902.

The earliest archæological discoveries that have been made in Woolmer Forest are relics of the British Bronze Age, that remote period before the time of the Romans, of which the tumuli whose remains still exist here and there in the forest area are surviving traces. Two small torques, some bronze rings and bracelets and a bronze palstave of this period found in the forest are described by Sir John Evans in his work on bronze implements, and one of them is engraved. The hoard of bronze relics found at or near Blackmoor included fragments of swords and large and small spear heads, as described in Professor Bell's edition of White's Selborne. A bronze implement has also been found at Liss, and is engraved in the Journal of the British Archæological Association, volume xii.

The Roman remains found in Woolmer have been abundant, the most notable of which are the coins, vases and other objects found at Blackmoor, the hoard of coins found in Woolmer Park, and the sarcophagus discovered at Binstead. During the Anglo-Saxon period of our history the country afterwards known as Woolmer Forest and Alice Holt was a district which lay between the more settled parts of Hampshire and of Surrey, and contained but a few villages. The land at that time was what was then known as folk-land, the wood land and other forest land belonging to the State, *i.e.*, Wessex.

After the Norman Conquest the remains of the Anglo-Saxon forests were still areas of great extent, and existed in all or very nearly all the counties. Forests and fens were alike in being Crown property. The forests being under forest law were grouped for administrative purposes into those beyond the river Trent, and those this side Trent, and Justices of the Forest for these two parts of the country were appointed.

It is hardly possible for us fully to realise the importance attached to hunting as a sport by our forefathers. There were no less than four gradations in the kind of sport which might by royal licence be enjoyed by nobles, knights, and other landowners. These were the hunting rights of the Forests, the privilege of Free Chace, the privilege of a Park, and the privilege of Free Warren. All these were dependent on royal grants. With few exceptions the forests were royal demesne, and were kept under the authority of the Crown—as Woolmer was. The animals that could be hunted and killed under these several ancient franchises were different. The forest included all wild animals within it, but the wild beasts of the forest specially were the hart, the hind, the hare, the boar, and the wolf. The beasts of the chase were the buck, doe, fox, martoon, and roe. The Park was an enclosed chase, and the same animals might be hunted within it. The Free Warren privilege was more limited. The beasts and fowls of Warren were the hare, the cony, the pheasant, and the partridge. There was one animal that infested the woods of Hampshire, even as late as the 13th century and that was apparently a nuisance. This was the wild cat. In this neighbourhood there were wild cats, and in the 54 Hen. III., *i.e.*, about 1270, two persons, Robert of Warnford and William Kernet, were allowed to kill wild cats within the forest of Wolvemere and Aylesholt, as appears in the national records.

The materials for a history of Woolmer Forest and Alice Holt are very considerable. Nearly all the numerous calendars of State papers contain references to existing records concerning both Woolmer and Alice Holt. From the material which has come under my notice I think these

Crown lands were administered worst during the latter part of the 17th century, when great abuses prevailed. Their custodians appear at times to have farmed them for their own advantage without any consideration for the public interest.

The gradual inclosure of parts of Woolmer went on during the middle ages, and many grants of assart or power to inclose were made to those who held land around it. These grants were not confined to individuals. Thus the Abbey of Waverley held an estate at Dokenford, near Binstead, and in 6 Edward III. the Abbott obtained a royal licence to inclose 40 acres that were within the metes of the forest of Woolmer. In the succeeding centuries licences for inclosure here and there were occasionally given. The National Records of the time of James I. contain references to Bills of the Attorney General in the Court of Exchequer, against various persons residing on the border of the forest who were in possession of land claimed by the Crown. In Charles I.'s time some 60 acres were allowed to be inclosed near Binstead, the order being dated 26th March, 1639.

The State papers show that William Viscount Wallingford and Edward Ramsey were granted the custody of the forest and chase of Aylsholt and Woolmer on July 3rd, 1625, together with a rent of £31 2s. 11d. reserved out of the manors of East and West Wordelham. As we walk through East Worldham at the present day we may see old tenements some of which must date back much earlier than the date of this grant.

The Woolmer forest of Gilbert White's day, which he tells us was about seven miles in length, and two and a half miles in breadth, abutted on or extended to the parishes of Greatham, Lyss, Rogate, and Trotton, Bramshott, Headley, and Kingsley, as well as Selborne. In the middle of the 18th century, when White wrote, the forest had certainly been much curtailed in extent by various inclosures here and there in the course of centuries. Gilbert White saw it before its final inclosure, and gives us here and there in his book interesting descriptions of it, but it was not the same great forest area in extent as it was in Norman and Saxon times.

There are letters patent of King John still in existence, which were addressed to the bailiffs, verderers, and men of Wloemar and Alseshold, the bailiff being Robert de Venoiz. This document is dated 7th John, 1206, from Chartres. At Worldham there are traditions of King John and his hunting in this forest district preserved in the name King John's Hill. These traditions are supported by history, for the itinerary of this King shows that he was at Worldham on May 21st and 22nd, 1204.

The bailiffs, verderers, and other officials of Woolmer are mentioned in the 2nd year of Henry III., when the knights, free tenants, and others of the bailiwick of Axiesholt and Wloemar were informed, as appears in the Patent Rolls, that the King had appointed Robert de Venoit his bailiff, and so long as he should remain, they were required to look to him as the King's officer. This is dated November 6th, 1217.

A prominent family in England in the time of Henry III. and Edward I. was that of de Valence, kinsmen of the King. The connection of this family with this part of Hampshire is shown to this day in the name of Newton Valence, near Selborne. There is still extant a writ of Edward I. to Aymer de Valence of interest in reference to Woolmer. It is a grant for two years to this effect "that if, in hunting with his own dogs in the woods adjoining the forest of Wolmere, his dogs do happen to enter that forest, he is not to be molested therefor." This looks as if they often did enter Woolmer Forest (Patent Rolls 29, Edward I.)

In 1295 we read of a grant of wood within the bounds of Woolmer apparently as an assistance to one engaged in the King's service in France. It is a licence after an inquisition made by R. de Strange, Justice of the Forest this side Trent, for Hugh de Bardolf staying in Gascony on the King's service to sell to "the value of £100 in his wood of Gretham within the metes of the forest of Wolvemere, notwithstanding that there is frequent repair of deer there (Patent Rolls 23, Edward I.)

In 1345 we read of a commission to Edward de St. John, keeper of the King's forest of Wolmere and Alsolt and Philip de Aundely supplying his place, to inquire on the oath

of the verderers, foresters, and other good men of the said forest, touching trespasses of vert and venison there, to imprison such as are found guilty by the inquisitions, and to send such inquisitions to the King.

The early administrative centre for the forests of Woolmer and Alice Holt was at Worldham, where there was a royal residence. This was probably at or near what is now called Kingsley, probably on the site in the early part of the 16th century of Lode Farm—Kingsley not improbably took its name from this. There is a writ in existence empowering Thomas Harpeote to choose masons, carpenters, and other workmen and labourers for necessary repairs to the King's castle at Windsor and among his other houses at Worldham. This is dated 1 Richard II., *i.e.*, 1378. Six knights or other men of substance in the neighbourhood of Alton were ordered in 1377 to inquire into the circumstances of the taking away of some of the King's goods at Worldham in 1377, and to report on the same. It was at Worldham that the forest courts for Woolmer and Alice Holt were held.

Before the end of the 14th century we read of Worldham as being held by Thomas Chaucer, son of Geoffrey Chaucer the poet, and with the manor probably went the officer of ranger of Woolmer.

There are many State papers bearing the privy seal which show that Prince Henry, afterwards Henry VIII., was often at Lode, and was himself ranger of Woolmer. Later on the State papers show that Sir William Sandys, afterwards Lord Sandys, Thomas, Earl of Arundel, and other men of distinction held the rangership of this forest.

Maladministration, however, went on; for we find that on March 29th, 1553, a Commission was issued from Westminster to John Poulet, Rich. Norton, Rich. Poulet, and Marlion Ryche to make inquisition concerning all wastes, sales and destructions in the parks of Wolmere, Halesholte and Wardelham.

In 1542 Sir Francis Bryan, who was known as Master of the Toils was granted £70 towards the cost of taking 140 quick red deer in Woolmer Forest for storing the new park of Woollavington.

There are in the national records many references here and there to offences committed against the forest laws, to punishments for the same, or to pardons given to these offenders, often after the exercise of the influence of some noble or prominent personage. Thus, in reference to Woolmer, there is, under the year 1208, a record in the Patent Rolls which is as follows:—"Pardon, at the instance of William de Warena, the King's kinsman, to John de Percy, of the trespass committed by him, in company of Geoffrey de Lucy, by taking a hind and fawn in Wloemere Forest, of which he was lately convicted before Roger de Clifford and his fellows, late justices itinerant of the forest in the county of Southampton." This kind of offence was never quite stopped. Woolmer, until the deer were entirely removed, suffered much from the deer stealers, or, as Gilbert White called them, the night hunters. It is probable that deer stealing went on for centuries in this neighbourhood after the severe penalties which prevailed under forest law in the time of the Norman kings had become obsolete and forgotten. Gilbert White gives us a graphic description of the night hunters in his time, and in the fine edition of the *Natural History of Selborne*, edited by Dr. Bowdler Sharp, an artist has given us a fine pictorial illustration of the deer stealers, showing us how, as Gilbert White says, "Over their ale they used to recount the exploits of their youth."

Gilbert White tells us that The Holt consists of a strong loam of a miry nature, carrying turf good for growing timber, while Woolmer is nothing but a hungry, sandy, barren waste. Geological investigations since White's time have shown the cause of this, for The Holt is situated on the Gault clay while the greater part of Woolmer is on the Folkestone beds of sand or sandstone, on which pine and fir alone flourish. The oaks of Temple and Blackmoor, however, were noted in Gilbert White's time, for, he says, they stand high in the estimation of purveyors, and have furnished much naval timber.

In 1633 timber was wanted for the Navy, and some that was suitable for shipbuilding was growing in Alice Holt. The difficulty was to convey it to the shipyards. 1,200 loads

of this timber had to be conveyed from this district to a place called Ham-Haw, in Surrey, on the Thames, whence it could be floated down the Thames to Deptford. This onerous duty of conveyance of so much timber along the country roads was laid on the county of Surrey through which the roads lay. The State Papers of 1633 show that the Justices of Surrey petitioned the Council to be eased of some part of this charge. The carriage of timber for the Navy was an onerous obligation to which the counties in which it was cut were liable in the 17th Century, for example, in 1633 the Justices of Wilts were found slack in conveying navy timber to Redbridge, and the burgesses of Salisbury alone were ordered to provide 122 carts for this purpose. On May 31st, 1638, the Council ordered the Justices of the Peace for Hants to deliver timber for navy purposes at the river Thames or at Portsmouth, and 200 loads to be taken from Quarry Hill to Ham-Haw on the Thames, and 500 loads from the parts of the county nearer Portsmouth to be conveyed to that place. Numerous examples of this kind could be cited, and the system must have been an onerous obligation on the counties.

We may look back on the forest in the several stages of its existence; in Roman time a Weald, or wild district with a few habitations; in Anglo-Saxon time as a great area of folk land that in this locality divided Hants and Surrey. As the Saxon hamlets and villages grew in it the better parts of this area became settled. In the time of the Norman, Plantagenet, and later Kings it became, and continued to be, Crown forest land, a great hunting ground, subject to the privileges of the commoners who lived in and near it, for pasturage, pannage, and turbary or peat digging and turf cutting, for without fuel of some kind they could not exist. In the 17th century its grantees or custodians allowed it to fall into a very neglected state, more or less living on its decay. Its final inclosure took place early in the 19th century, and it appears as if in the 20th century what remains of it will become a great military training ground. In 1812 Woolmer Forest was estimated to contain only 5276 acres, but the actual area was certainly somewhat greater. By an Act of Parliament in that year, the Crown obtained the right of inclosing 2,000 acres

in lieu of keeping deer. In the final inclosure the Crown obtained 3415 acres.

There are records and traditions concerning the visits of English sovereigns to Woolmer Forest and places within it. Most of our kings on their way from London to Portsmouth passed at various times through parts of it. King John was a great hunter; his name, which survives at Worldham, arose through his visits to the forest. In 1276, and again in 1280, Edward I. was at Selborne. He was also several times at Binstead. Henry VIII., in his youth, was certainly much at Lode, now Lode Farm. Queen Anne is known to have visited the forest, and the visit of Queen Victoria will be commemorated in after ages by the tablet unveiled to-day.—
(Sept. 22nd, 1902).
