

Aspects of Change in Ashdown Forest Occupations 1850 - 1914

A collation of text and images from the Group's exhibition Ashdown Forest in a Time of Change, 1850-1914 which was held at the Ashdown Forest Centre from 5 July to 31 August 2017

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Preface

In July and August 2017 the Ashdown Forest Research Group held its second exhibition at the Ashdown Forest Centre, Wych Cross.

Entitled "Ashdown Forest at a Time of Change: 1850-1914", the exhibition covered a diverse range of topics that illustrated some of the profound changes that were taking place to the Forest and its communities in the period from the middle of the 19th century through to the outbreak of the First World War.

We have now collated the text and images from the exhibition into a series of booklets based around these topics. They comprise:

- 1. Ashdown Forest at a Time of Change: A Timeline
- 2. Aspects of Change in Forest Occupations
- 3. Life and Leisure on the Forest
- 4. Changing Architectural Styles on the Forest Edge
- 5. The Development of Railways around Ashdown Forest

These booklets are being made available for download as PDFs from the website of the Conservators of Ashdown Forest – the address is on the back page.

If you wish to contact the authors of any of these booklets, please get in touch via the group's email address – also given on the back page.

Introduction

The 19th century was a period of agricultural and industrial change in the Ashdown Forest area. Partly there was a decline in traditional crafts and practices but there were also new opportunities created by the application of steam powered machinery, advances in science, technology and transport. Despite these changes many of the old ways of work continued across the forest well into the 20th century.

The photograph (following page, top) of Aaron Scott cutting turf on the forest in the late 19th century is a good example of physically tough manual agricultural labour that would later be mechanised. Turf and peat were cut mainly for domestic fuel and sometimes as a building material. The forest provided plenty of resources for a wide range of trades and crafts such as charcoal making, hoop and broom making, coppicing, litter (bracken) collecting, hurdle making , basket work, timber and forestry work.

The photograph (bottom) of a hay baler in Nutley shows how agricultural tasks were gradually mechanised. The baler pressed hay or straw into tight bundles that took up much less space than loose material. Many tasks such as sowing, hoeing, reaping, mowing, threshing, binding and baling previously done by hand by men, women and children became mechanised. Harvest time was a time of intense hard work and constant anxiety because of the prospect of bad weather ruining the crops. Improved tools, new inventions and innovations in agricultural equipment and particularly the use of steam power made many of these worries of less concern. With machines many tasks were completed more quickly and poor weather became less of a threat.



Steam-powered machinery

In the early 19th century, horse and human muscle power was the driving force on the forest. This changed with the introduction of steam powered machinery. This had the advantage of causing less physical damage to animals and developing more powerful and consistent machines. However, it also led to the slow decline of horses as working farm animals, the decline of many craft skills, some rural unemployment and, assisted by the expansion of local railways, some migration of population away from the forest area. Particularly from the 1870s, agriculture and forestry were in decline in some areas. Occupational changes are clearly seen in the census returns for 1881 to 1911 covering the Ashdown Forest area. In Chailey in 1911 Frederick Bray was a railway clerk, Frederick Pratt a retired engine fitter, Thomas Hall a foreman platelayer and Henry Duplock an LBSC railway platelayer. The London Brighton and South Coast Railway expanded from the 1850s through the 1870s and by the late 19th century employed some 2000 workers. By this time newly developed electrical equipment also affected traditional forest occupations.

The development of steam powered machinery and improved tools and implements in many ways changed the character of forest occupations. In the early Victorian period timber might be cut by two men with a two handled cross-cut saw in a physically demanding and time consuming way. As can be seen in the following photographs, a stationary steam engine in, for example Albert Turner's timber yard, could power a range of equipment,

transforming the processing of wood. Permanent saw mills developed on some of the larger forest estates, and also travelling saw mills might work near suitable woods. In Hartfield in 1881 Samuel Read, Edward and Obed Miles are recorded as a portable steam thrashers (threshers?), Richard Flawn as a proprietor of farm machinery and Samuel Jarratt as an engine driver. In Chailey, in 1911 Owen Funnell, aged 66, was a wood sawyer in a saw mill and Henry Barker a saw mill wood cleaver.



Steam engine driven saw bench



Timber yard in the 1880s

Brickmaking

The soil and clays of Ashdown Forest were ideally suited to brickmaking. After the repeal of the Brick Tax in 1850, the period of mid-Victorian prosperity saw an expansion of brickmaking through many forest parishes. Many innovations in the industry were demonstrated at the Great Exhibition in 1851.

Traditionally, bricks were made at, or near, the building site using locally available materials. Brickmaking was a very seasonal activity of digging clay by hand and preparing material, possibly with horse power, and moulding bricks by hand. The picture shows part of the Upper Brickyard at Marlpits in 1887 with the horse operated pug mill at the early stage of preparing the clay. Drying took place in open air clamps and firing in a simple wood-fired kiln. In 1891 in Withyham, William Divall was a brickmaker and John Kingswood a bricklayer. The census returns also show many brick workers had other jobs usually in farming as agricultural workers, or sometimes as carters using hand carts to transport finished bricks.

However, by the late 19th century, improvements in technology, the increased demand for building materials and improvements in roads and railways led to more specialised brickmaking sites. The large number of visitors to the Brickmaking Show held in London on 25th May 1895 reflects this. The growth of railways required huge amounts of bricks for stations, platforms, tunnels and viaducts. The expansion of local railways enabled large supplies of coal and coke to be delivered as fuel to brickworks, replacing the previous need for large amounts of local timber. Moulding machines,

mechanical wire cutting of bricks and also coal fired kilns led to the development of continuous production at larger sites. However some traditional activity continued across the forest despite the decline in local brickmaking activity. Brickworks might also produce tiles, flower pots, ornamental and decorative items and drain pipes.



Quarrying

There is plenty of remaining evidence of quarrying for mineral extraction on the forest. The Wealden Iron Industry quarried huge amounts of iron ore, mainly from the Wealden Clay levels, for iron production. Clay was also supplied to local brick and tile works, and was also used as marl as a fertiliser, the calcium carbonate neutralising the local acid soils. Sand and stone was used by the building industry and for road works. The quarry close to the current Ashdown Forest Centre supplied the stone for the nearby building of St Richard de Wych Church, completed in 1886 (but demolished in 1974), once described as " one of the finest Victorian churches in Sussex". Local stone had also been used in the rebuilding of St Swithun's Church in East Grinstead after the steeple collapsed in 1785.

Quarrying was dangerous, physically demanding work, with basic hand tools such as picks, hammers, sledge hammers, crowbars and chisels. (All needing frequent attention from the local blacksmith). Workers tended to work in small teams, their clothes giving them little protection from the weather. As can be seen in the photograph of the stone quarry, a hand winch raised large stone blocks, scaffolding was very basic and the working area far from safe. Here, quarrying was mainly for the harder building stone seen today in many local buildings and also for restoring buildings and decorative stonework.

Through the Victorian period population growth and industrial development gathered pace. Demand for stone increased and

this led to the development of steam powered cranes and later, sawing, facing and polishing machines. The steam cranes lifted blocks of several tons to work areas for further processing. Some of this stone can be seen on the top edge of the quarry. Local fine grained sandstone was much in demand and the expansion of local railways made it easier to transport it around the area.



Steam engines

The development of steam power led to many changing agricultural and industrial practices on the forest. The photograph of the horse-drawn self binder on Count Munster's land shows a typical horse powered, mechanical, harvesting activity. This required lots of labour and fit and willing horses.

Steam engines, like the one in the photograph of an 1880's timber yard, revolutionised farming. They were used for a variety of agricultural activities such as ploughing, threshing, winnowing and draining. However they were expensive and complicated to operate. Some were bought by landowners for their tenant farmers and others were rented out by contractors.

After the 1850s, steam gradually replaced horses as the main power for pulling ploughs. For ploughing, 1 or 2 fixed (stationary) engines were positioned in the the headlands (edges) of a field and a plough was winched up and down furrows by a series of cables in drums turned by steam power. A later innovation was the multi-furrowed plough.

Land cultivated by skilled workers using steam power was often improved since the soil was less compacted by the horses. This might lead to improved crop yields per acre and therefore increased profitability. The speed and efficiency of steam ploughing might mean that more land could be prepared for a winter crop immediately after an autumn harvest. It also might free up horses to be used on other tasks around the farm. Steam power increased the pace of farming activities from the walking pace of labourers and horses to the higher speed of the engine (referred to as "horse power"). The less labour needed by steam power and the general agricultural depression after the 1870s did however mean a significant increase in rural unemployment.





Road maintenance

In the mid to late 19th century, as the railway network expanded around the forest area, more settlements developed around the stations. This increasing population is clearly seen in the census returns for 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911. This increased the demand for and movement of bulky goods into these areas. Also it enabled local agricultural businesses to send their produce to markets further away.

However, this sometimes had the effect of a worsening of local road conditions and maintenance. The existing turnpike trusts, controlling the main roads, began to lose money faced with competition from the railways. In the 1860s and 70s the local trusts were wound up and the responsibility for the upkeep of the roads fell back onto the local parishes. Some parishes did not look after their roads too well, although things began to improve after the County Council Act of 1888 gave the county overall responsibility for road repair and maintenance.

Road repairs were carried out by local men, often working in teams or gangs. There were also some travelling gangs of casual labourers. In the 1881 Hartfield Census, Thomas Divall is recorded as a roadman (road mender).

In the picture below, the work gang returning to Nutley shows what a team of road men might look like working on the forest. The work was physically hard, involving the breaking of stone, and the use of sand and clay in often unpleasant conditions. Many early roads were dusty and easily eroded by wear and weather. By 1914 a mix of tar and sand (tarmac) was used more widely to seal the surface.



The picture on the following page shows local road workers, Mr. Rubin and son, taking no doubt a well-earned break on the forest. Time for a sit down, a hot drink and thoughts of?



The Ashdown Forest Research Group is a group of enthusiastic volunteers who research the historical geography of Ashdown Forest. We focus particularly on the people who have lived and worked on the forest, and their impact on it, and the impact that the forest has, in turn, had on them.

Articles based on this research have been published in Ashdown Forest News and elsewhere. We also give talks and hold exhibitions of our work.

For more information about the group, a list of its publications, and contact details, please visit our page on the Ashdown Forest conservators' website:

http://www.ashdownforest.org/enjoy/history/AshdownRes earchGroup.php

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