

ASHDOWN FOREST IN A TIME OF CHANGE: 1850-1914

The next exhibition by the *Ashdown Forest Research Group* will run in the Information Barn at the Ashdown Forest Centre from 5th July to 31st August 2017. The theme of the exhibition will be *Ashdown Forest at a time of Change* and will focus on how life on the Forest, which had been largely unchanged for centuries, was influenced and shaped by the Long 19th century (1800 – 1914). Topics to be covered will include the way in which housing styles developed, and occupations – both employment and leisure – changed during the period. The population of England grew during this time from around 8.3 million to somewhere over 35 million, and the exhibition will look at the effect of this change in the Forest area.



Although the exhibition will focus very much on the Forest, it did not exist in isolation, so part of the display will include a timeline showing some of the key local events side by side with what was going on nationally and globally. Some of the happenings make interesting juxtapositions. For example, in 1838, locals were excited to learn that Baden Powell, a Tonbridge clergyman, father of the founder of the Scouting movement, had dined at the Dorset Arms, Withyham after watching a ploughing match at Doggett's Farm in Buckhurst. In less happy circumstances, 58 children under the age of 13 died in mining accidents in England in the same year.



In 1851, the year the Great Exhibition was held to celebrate the works of industry of all nations, local interests were more parochial. Lord Gage (Lord of the Manor of Maresfield) provided land for a primary

school at Forest Row. As he was a member of the establishment, the school was firmly based in the Anglican tradition, and the school is still a Church of England establishment today.

The first 'inter-city' railway, from Liverpool to Manchester, was opened by the Duke of Wellington in 1830; in contrast, East Grinstead had to wait until 1855 before a branch line from Three Bridges connected it to the route to London, and others lines in the area didn't open until even later.



The 1860s saw the first indications of what would swell into the Ashdown Forest Dispute as several Ashdown Forest residents were brought to trial for cutting litter (bracken, gorse etc.) on the Forest. Trouble was afoot elsewhere, as this decade saw America descend into Civil War between the Yankee north and the slave states of the south. A brighter note was the

abolition of serfdom – itself a form of slavery – in Russia. At home, the dangers posed by heavy steam traction engines brought a new piece of legislation – the Red Flag Act – which, as well as insisting that someone with a red flag walk ahead of all horseless vehicles, imposed speed limits of 2 mph in towns and 4 mph in the country.

Agricultural Depression nationally in the last quarter of the century was perhaps reflected locally by the need for a shoe club in Hartfield, with local gentry providing the wherewithal for interest on money saved. Needless to say, only attendees at Sunday School were entitled to join. The Ashdown Forest Dispute came to an end in 1882 and a Board of Conservators was established three years later. In the interim, the Representation of the People's Act was passed, giving the vote to two out of every three men, although women – of course – were still excluded!

The event which touched everyone's lives was, of course, the First World War – the first truly global conflict in history. Locally, Freshfield Hall in Forest Row was turned over to army use, an army camp was created at Crowborough and practice trenches were dug. Life would never be quite the same again.



Pam Griffiths