

Fire on the Forest – a commoner’s response

Single blade of grass ignites to destroy 16 acres of forest famed as Winnie the Pooh’s home.

According to *The Argus*, a camping stove was the latest culprit in a long history of fires on Ashdown Forest – not all accidental. The Byelaws of Ashdown Forest state that:

No person will light any fire or stove on the Forest, nor set alight any vegetation

However, fire can be beneficial. As the Ashdown Forest website says:

Burning was used by Commoners to reduce scrub and rejuvenate grass areas. The re-growth provides succulent ‘early-bite’ for sheep and cattle. Today, Rangers use burning on a very small scale both for fire control and to control gorse and scrub.

Needless to say, these burns are carried out under tight controls.

The Ashdown Forest is a precious, rare, lowland heath habitat, whose mix of pines, gorse, heather and bracken make it vulnerable to fire. This has always been a problem, as the Conservators’ Minutes regularly show. Over 100 years ago, in October 1908, the conservators set up the Maresfield Forest Fire Committee in an attempt to deal with the problem. Their tactic then was to use most of the £50 allowed them to cut rides and lanes, and assist Ranger Manners in his controlled burns of gorse, furze and heather.



Photo taken by Arthur Francis (probably from the A22 in Nutley) around 1900
Courtesy of Nutley Historical Society

Naturally occurring fires, which spread easily when no cutting back was done, were not the only problem. At a meeting in 1909, reference was made to steps taken to detect incendiaries, partly by employing an additional ranger. Private landowners were exhorted to organise their employees to help put out fires. However, an:

apprehension that a fire may be started at night when no one is on the alert, which with the aid of a favourable wind may overcome all precautions

led to a wish to employ:

constables or detectives in plain clothes to watch the Forest during the active incendiary season, which generally commences about April

and to prosecute:

for arson whenever clear evidence is forthcoming

The conservators came down hard on anyone starting fires. In 1909 the minutes note:

The Clerk reports that on the 12th inst., he received a telegram from the Chief Constable as follows: "Three boys aged 12, 11 and 8 years, caught setting fire to Forest on the 8th. Do you wish me to prosecute them for arson?"

Despite their youth, the Board did wish.

As there had long been tensions between the conservators, who were seen as 'establishment' and some of the 'humbler' commoners, it was felt that the motivation for deliberate setting of fires on the Forest was probably due to:

an impatience of any control on the part of the Foresters, and secondly to a desire on the part of some of them who are annoyed at the inability of the Conservators to admit them as Commoners to retaliate on those who are responsible for the administration and preservation of the Forest, and probably in a minor degree to a belief on the part of some of the smaller Commoners that the fires will by destroying all the coarse growth and underwood on the Forest improve the quality of the grazing in the immediate vicinity of their homesteads.

The problem didn't diminish; fires in 1917 were caused variously by traction engines, soldiers, deliberate incendiaries and children - wilfully or otherwise. In 1922, the chairman was authorised to employ no more than:

six suitable men with bicycles

to create fire breaks and help find incendiaries. The ranger was to be equipped with field glasses, and the local bus company was asked to impress on passengers the danger from cigarette butts. Despite these efforts, and the offer of a reward for information about incendiaries, in 1929:

the mass of fires commenced on the 2nd March and [had] since been continuous



Recent fire on the Forest
Courtesy of *The Ashdown Forest Centre*

In 1933, a reporter employed by the *Sussex County Herald* was sent to investigate. Many of his article's quotations were in a kind of 'Mummerset' probably unrecognisable to the locals:

Too much paper-talk, I reckon, this year. Too much of set-out of it they dew be makin. We've had fires years back, and we jest put un out, and naartun more said. Why, the fires we've had of late, they aren't naartun to what we bin having two-three year back.

This informant thought that fires were either the result of carelessness or boyish devilment.

A local vicar blamed a 'war' between Foresters and Conservators, although he could not see why there should be so much jealousy, hatred and revenge between two groups both native to the area. He hinted that local farmers might be responsible:

And one dawn a candle will be set, shielded from the wind by paper screens, and a great tract of bracken and birch would go raging forth in flames. And perhaps a farmstead.

Other interviewees blamed disputes over common rights and enclosures as well as visitors from elsewhere:

young clots from the towns...

or the need to bring on new grass for flocks.

A letter from one of the conservators two years later held a sense of despair:

It is almost impossible to catch the perpetrators.... they will not be stopped until local public opinion is really against them... there is a kind of traditional sympathy or at least tolerance...

and he recommended posters and leaflets be used to try and modify public opinion.



Fighting fire on the Forest
Courtesy of The Ashdown Forest Centre

Albert Joseph Ridley was born in 1865 at Forest Bank, Nutley, in the parish of Maresfield, the eldest of small farmer Joseph and Abigail Ridley's nine children. From at least 1887 until 1915 the father was a conservator appointed to represent the smaller holders. Albert started working life as a labourer, but in later years was an apiarian or bee keeper. He and his wife Annie raised 3 children at The Old Forge, Horney Common, Uckfield. He was not a conservator, though he and other members of the family were commoners, with rights on the Forest. Never a rich man, he left around £230 when he died in November 1935.

In May 1933 he penned 19 impassioned pages on the subject of fires, and a glance at the opening paragraphs shows a mix of belligerence and sheer frustration :

Born at Forest Bank, Nutley, nearly 67 years ago, and having lived since 1879 on the southern edge of the Forest, I should be in a

position to know something about it, especially as my Father was one of the four or five extra Conservators appointed to represent the smaller holders.... [but] many of his proposals were very seldom other than outvoted.

The present attitude of many inhabitants, as well as the Board of Conservators, towards what they consider to be hooligans and incendiaries, ... render it very dangerous for people to be seen near while it is dry enough to burn. Though I have never taken any part in the firing myself, ... I appreciate the work of those that do see to the periodical singeing.

He suggests that incoming landowners only have themselves to blame for not keeping rides and breaks near their properties cleared.

He rehearses briefly the Ashdown Forest Dispute which led to set up of the Board of Conservators, but feels they have overstepped their rights by making it difficult for 'natives' to take litter without a licence, leading - in his opinion - to land which is less suitable for cattle pasture.

Consequently, there is much now over 50 years old of robust growth only needing to get dry enough for the very ground to burn

whereas in times past:

The Forest for years was cleared by fire, including an occasional fire in the privately owned rubbish of those rich people loudest in their protestations against the rights and freedoms of others.

Life, he felt, had been better for the locals under Earl de la Warr:

I never heard of any harsh treatment of poor folk by De la Warrs [sic].

He regretted the attitudes of incomers, who, unfamiliar with Forest practice, complained about bells attached to horses turned out to graze on the Forest:

... people needing quiet should have homes in woods, not where so many Commoners have rights of grazing with bells on everyone if they wish

The next few pages are a diatribe against the perceived high-handed actions of the Conservators who, frequently, he says, behave in a way detrimental to ordinary local people with Forest rights. The resentment caused is, in his view, the root cause of so many incendiary attacks:

... something must be done. Secret spies, threats of punishment, denouncing and treating with suspicion only stirs up feelings of hate and mischief; ... to my knowledge...county police have spent their time trying to get up the case against somebody, no matter how innocent.... the unlucky victim suffers and the feeling of hate and revenge never dies.

Ridley believed the Forest should be cut and cleared to make it harder for fires to take hold. Appreciating that the Conservators didn't have unlimited funds for the task, he advised raising money through the imposition of parking charges for cars, and astonishingly, light aircraft. He also thought that amenities for visitors would help:

A few swimming bathing pools, a few fish in streams would probably be appreciated, provisions for shooting and other pastime sports.

He suggests that fewer sheep and cattle were grazed due to a combination of complaints about encroachment and the maze of tarmac roads crossing the area, traffic being a danger to livestock. He comments on lack of compensation from road builders for loss of pasture, the disappearance of funds acquired from both builders of the golf course, and the army during World War I training. He speculates that money has been appropriated by conservators and rangers, rather than being used to clear the Forest.

Ridley's parting shot is that the Conservators should disband, leaving management to De la Warr or the Land Commissioners. Only with them gone, he believes, would the fire menace be stopped. It must be inferred that the Conservators disagreed with him, and there is no reference to this document in the minutes, and no offer to disband.

In 1914 the conservators' minutes had recorded:

Alfred Moon, Roy Ridley Fires.

As regards the 2 fires on 18th November, P.C. Terry of Fairwarp reported that he was about 20 yards from the fire when it started and he saw Alfred Moon aged 9, the son of Frank Moon of Fairwarp, and Roy Ridley aged 9, the son of Albert Ridley of Old Forge, Horney Common coming towards him, and he heard Roy Ridley ask Moon how many more matches he had, and Moon replied "not many more, only 2 or 3" and he afterwards saw both boys stoop together and Alfred Moon light the second fire, and he then took the matches away from him. The Clerk wrote to the father of each boy stating that, having regard to his boy's age, the Conservators are unwilling to prosecute, if he would caution his boy and obtain a promise from him

not to set fire to the Forest again and report such promise to the Clerk. Ridley's father replied that he is opposed to firing the Forest and that his boy denies having lit any fire. On the 14th inst. the Clerk received a letter which appears to have been written by the boy Alfred Moon saying "I am sorry that I set the Forest alight, and I won't play with matches any more."

Is it significant that a similar letter doesn't seem to have been received from Albert Ridley's son?

Information for this article came from the *Historical Minute Books* of the Ashdown Forest Conservators <http://www.ashdownforest.org/enjoy/history/HistoricalMinuteBooks.php> and a series of documents deposited at the Ashdown Forest Centre in 2015 by Lawrence Hardy, whose father was a Conservator. My thanks to him for preserving them.