

A brief history of Brockenhurst



Brockenhurst, the watersplash.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BROCKENHURST

Very little is known of the early history of Brockenhurst although the forest nearby is dotted with tumuli which are Bronze Age burial mounds about 4000 years old. Such mounds are usually isolated from each other but there is an unusual situation at Latchmoor where the ditches surrounding two of them overlap, there is said to be only one other instance in England where tumuli are paired in this way.

Apart from this there are few signs of habitation before the end of the Saxon period and the arrival of the Normans. The New Forest was created by William the Conqueror about the year 1079 and the Domesday Book was compiled just a few years later; from this book we learn that there had been four small Saxon manors in the locality, their names were Hincheslea, Brochelié, Mapleham and Broceste. Mapleham is a lost name but Hincheslea still exists although it has never been much more than a small farm, Brochelié which gives us the modern name of Brookley was quite important in mediæval times having a regular weekly market and an annual fair which lasted for several days, it also had the rather unusual right of grazing sheep on the open forest although this privilege was restricted to the land lying between Wilverley and Sheep Lane which is better known nowadays as the Rhinefield Road. The principal house of the manor lay just south of Brookley Road near to the site of the Watersplash hotel.

Broceste (pronounced Brockerste) from which the village takes its name, lay east of the present main road and the old church on the hill lay within its boundaries although in those days it was probably no more than an outlying chapel of Christchurch Priory. The manor had several interesting features, it was held by the same Saxon family before and after the Conquest and one of them, called Aluric, was the only person to receive compensation for the losses he suffered as a result of the afforestation. There are various references to royal visitors and the Lord of the Manor had the curious duty of providing litter for the King's bed and hay for his palfrey whenever he should lie at Brockenhurst. Doubtless on such occasions the King and all his court would have attended services at the Church of St. Nicholas.

Certainly one visitor was King William II (William Rufus) for of the half dozen or so surviving writs issued by him two were issued from Brockenhurst just a few months before he was killed whilst hunting in the New Forest. These writs were witnessed by Randolph Flambard, the Bishop of Durham, who was William's chief minister but is better known locally as the man responsible for the rebuilding of Christchurch Priory.

In addition to the lands of these four manors there is a large area in the south and east of the parish which has been known as Roydon ever since the 13th century but originally seems to have been two separate manors, presumably these were the two manors of Bovre whose exact whereabouts is not clear from the Domesday Book. King Henry III granted all this land to Netley Abbey in 1250 and the Abbey, a daughter house of Beaulieu, held it until the Dissolution of the monasteries in Tudor times.

When William the Conqueror created the New Forest he completely changed the lives of local people by declaring that almost all the land within its boundaries would come under forest law. Deer, which are destructive animals were to be allowed free access to all this land and anyone harming them risked severe punishment, whilst the erection of hedges or fences was also forbidden so that it became very difficult to raise crops of any sort. What happened to families who were treated in this way is not always clear, sometimes Domesday Book bluntly says they are not there, but more often we have to be content with the ominous statement that their land is of no value. Nevertheless, it is clear that some people did remain, or else their land was re-colonized within a few generations, for not only have the Saxon place names survived but we also know the names of many people who were living in the parish about 200 years after the afforestation.

The pressure to remain, or at least return, must have been great for the Conquest was followed by a 250 year period of increasing population and the need for food could only be met by bringing more and more land into cultivation. Fortunately the difficulty of raising crops was offset by the so call 'forest rights' which allowed people to graze their cattle on the forest

and to pick up all the fuel they needed for their homes. These rights do not seem to have been formally granted, probably they were no more than a tacit admission that cattle will stray if fields are not fenced and that no one living in a forest is likely to buy firewood, but they were of great importance to people who normally lived at a bare subsistence level. Some of these rights still exist and that is why ponies and cattle are such a common sight on the open forest today.

The severity of forest laws moderated over the years until some people were willing to take the risk of breaking them. A court hearing venison offences in 1330 dealt with many cases, it imprisoned the uncle of the King's Steward of the Forest until the Steward offered to guarantee his uncle's good behaviour, it heard how the son of the Lord of the Manor of Brookley with his opposite number from Brockenhurst had organized a deer hunt at which the participants were caught red-handed, and also ordered the arrest of the Rector of Minstead for receiving venison. The theft of timber had also become widespread and people were enclosing land to grow corn for such long periods that one suspects they looked on the Court's fines as paying the rent.

Corn was an essential part of the mediæval diet but a serious shortage of manure kept yields so low that farmers had to retain about 30 per cent of each harvest as seed corn for the following year, whereas a 19th century farmer would have managed with 10 or 15 per cent. Crops of course varied from season to season and sometimes even the seed corn might have to be eaten or sold so that there were years when as many as 10 per cent of the population seem to have died; an even greater disaster struck in 1348/9 when the Black Death killed a third of the population of England and happenings such as these may well explain the fact that Brookley, once so important, suddenly ceased to have a resident Lord of the Manor and almost disappeared from the written records.

Detailed written records of the parish, however, only go back to the 1600s by which time kings had lost their interest in hunting and the forest was being stripped of timber to build

ships for the Navy. More importantly the Reformation had swept away all the great religious houses and Brockenhurst was now in effect, a fully fledged parish although it shared its vicar with Boldre until late in the 19th century.

During the reign of Charles I the church registers list about 130 different family names, which is much the same number as in the early years of Queen Victoria, but during the 20 years of Civil War and Commonwealth Government more than half of these names disappeared and new families gradually took their place. No doubt there were many reasons for this and disease must have been one for in 1641, 1645 and again in 1653 the death rate virtually doubled with a large number dying within a few weeks, the same thing happened in 1669, when four people were buried on the same day, whilst 1671 was another bad year although in this case the register particularly mentions that one man was killed 'by his gun used on the Lord's Day'.

Apart from such natural problems families throughout the forest suffered considerably from wartime skirmishes and from pillaging by both Royalist and Parliamentary forces. The theft or deliberate destruction of entire village food supplies was commonplace and Royalist forces, for instance, having failed to take Christchurch retreated towards Lymington taking all the farmer's corn with them and it is said that many families had to leave their homes because of this.

After the return of Charles II efforts were made to restore some sort of order to forest affairs and one important move was to make the first official register of the traditional forest rights. These rights belong to houses and land, not to people, but are of course exercised by the occupier who is then described as a commoner. The 1964 list recognizes the rights to have turves or wood for fuel; to graze ponies, cattle, donkeys and, in a few cases, sheep on the open forest; to turn out pigs in the autumn when the acorns and beech mast fall and to take marl (a relatively alkaline clay) to improve the thin acid soils which abound in the locality.

During the next century, the 1700s, land use in Brockenhurst began to take on a pattern which continued almost to

the First World War and many of the older local family names appear at this time. There were several different communities then, the village centre with its inns, blacksmiths, a few shops and the school lay along the main Lymington to Lyndhurst Road which by the end of the century had become a turnpike and a recognized route for mail coaches, carrier's wagons and so on.

Nearer to the old church was a community of smallholders who represented the last vestiges of the original manor of Brockenhurst. There are records of some of their houses falling down and most of their land was eventually absorbed into the Lord of the Manor's private park or like that of John Attwood, whose house fell down in 1731, became a part of the churchyard. Over on the east of the parish, which stretches as far as Beaulieu heath, were the remnants of yet another old community which had survived since the 13th century when a saltway from the coast ran along the parish boundary. For hundreds of years salt had been produced along the Solent shores by evaporating sea water and then carried inland along tracks known as saltways, but the trade ceased early in the 1800s when the Cheshire salt mines were developed. Close to this particular track stood an inn which was a landmark as far back as 1330 but there is no trace of it today although it only closed late in the reign of Queen Victoria.

Finally, quite a number of villagers lived along the edge of the forest in cottages standing on ground which they had acquired by stealth. It is sometimes said that if anyone enclosed a piece of forest land, erected a house on it and got the fire going overnight it became their property; whilst this is not really true William Gilpin, who was Vicar of Brockenhurst and Boldre late in the 1700s, says in his book 'Remarks on Forest Scenery' that something very like it frequently happened. In his day it was a common practice to surreptitiously enclose small pieces of land and the keepers had orders to throw down any fences which they found; if however, there was already a house on the site they were required to obtain a Court Order first and sometimes there were difficulties in doing this so that the trespassers were left in possession. Gilpin goes on to say that he had known

a house built in a single night to exploit this weakness in the Keeper's powers.

By the end of the 1700s there were hundreds of such plots scattered around the forest although most of them were too small to sustain a family, and the occupants scraped a precarious living from their holdings and livestock supplemented by such work as carting gravel for the roads and selling turves for fuel. In 1801 the Crown regularized the position of these squatters by conceding that, for practical purposes, most of them were absolute owners of their properties.

During the 1700s two events occurred of particular importance to poorer people, one was the founding of a charity school and the other the setting up of a village poorhouse. In 1745 Henry Thurston, a coachman who had left the village to work in London, bequeathed a substantial sum of money to set up a school for the poor boys and girls of his native village; the children could join at any age from 6 to 12 and stay for up to four years, the standard of teaching seems to have been quite high and for nearly 70 years there were always 12 boys and 12 girls attending the school where they were taught by both a master and a mistress. In summer the hours were from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. and in winter from 8 a.m. until 4 p.m. in addition to which some pupils had a two mile walk to school.

The school records make fascinating reading; in 1794 Obadiah Sharp, aged 11, left to go to Newfoundland; the following year two boys and a girl, all aged 11, went into service whilst another girl was 'incapable of instruction'. In 1799 one boy was taken away from school to work, another went to sea and two girls went into service but a third boy and two more girls left after completing the full four year course at which time pupils were presented with a primer and a Testament. In 1819 it became the National School for the whole village and most pupils had to pay a few pence a week but the charity continued and some years later a widow was still able to have her son educated there even though she had become a pauper.

The Poorhouse was just one aspect of the system of parish relief which, at least in Brockenhurst, was far more humane than the notorious Union Workhouse system which replaced it

in Victorian times. Relief was financed by a parish rate and made available, either at home or in the Poorhouse, under the guidance of local men who dealt with a variety of problems very similar to those covered by today's Social Security Services. All the money needed for food, clothing and the like was spent with local tradesmen and it was only when a doctor was needed or some other difficulty arose that outsiders were called in.

Another big change in the village began in the 1760s when the Morant family began to buy up land in Brockenhurst. Eventually they owned nearly the whole parish and for almost 200 years were influential Lords of the Manor with a large house and extensive parkland whereas their immediate predecessors, who lived some distance away, seem to have taken a less active part in parish affairs.

In 1801 only 632 people were living in the parish but in 1901 the population was 1585 – an increase of almost 2½ times – whilst today it is approaching 4000. From 1813 onwards the parish registers often mention the men's occupations which in early years were the traditional country trades; if your family lived in Brockenhurst at this time there seems to have been a 50/50 chance that they were labourers and this is confirmed by the Census Returns for 1841 and 1851 which, however, were careful to distinguish between the 100 or so agricultural labourers and the 30 or so New Forest labourers. The latter were not labourers in the modern sense of the term they were the descendants of those villagers who had settled around the forest edge and continued to live the relatively independent life of their ancestors despite the fact that many 19th century writers poured scorn on them.

The census returns reveal a great deal about village people; the commonest occupation after the agricultural labourer was indoor servant, of them there were over 40, but many of these were young girls and a large proportion came from outside the district. In 1841 there was just one dressmaker but ten years later there were seven, there were also seven washerwomen, all of them living in homes where there was no male breadwinner, and there was a steady increase in the number of non-agricultural tradesmen such as shoemakers and carpenters. Two

interesting occupations occur in the 1851 census; although the union workhouses had long since taken over from the parish poorhouse two young women were being employed to look after elderly village paupers in their own homes and twelve men were already employed by the railway which had arrived only three years earlier.

The coming of the railway made the greatest change of all to this quiet village, cutting right through the centre where two level crossings were made within a hundred yards, one of these still remains but the other in North Road, is now just a foot-bridge. Another road, which had been the main road to Beaulieu, was closed completely and a new cut made alongside Ash Cottage, on the Lymington side of the crossing, to replace it. The line went so close to the old Bat and Ball inn that smoke went through the windows until it was eventually demolished and the present Morant Arms built further back.

This railway line was just a single track which meandered from Southampton through Brockenhurst and Ringwood to Dorchester and was dubbed Mr Castleman's corkscrew from the day it opened, but it quickly changed the whole forest from a relatively backward agricultural district into a popular holiday and residential area. Within a few years the track had been doubled and a branch opened to Lymington though it was not until the 1880s that the present main line was laid through Christchurch to Bournemouth for, incredible though it may seem today, Bournemouth was only half the size of Brockenhurst when the first line was built and the vast new town-to-be simply didn't enter into anyone's calculations. The original Ringwood line was closed in the 1960s but the route can still be traced quite easily.

The London and South Western Railway Company soon became the most important employer in the village – a photograph taken about 1880 shows the station staff of twenty two men – London could be reached in less than four hours and it is said that you could post a letter in Brockenhurst one morning and receive a reply from London the following morning.

From this time onwards property development was more profitable than agriculture, especially as agriculture itself was

entering a period of depression, and a good deal of land that had once been arable was allowed to become permanent pasture or rough woodland which could provide cover for game. By the end of the century a new village school had been built, as had a good many large houses and of course a substantial number of smaller ones, whilst an entirely new shopping area was beginning to appear in Brookley Road. The pace of this development has certainly not slackened in the 20th century and some of the larger houses have already been demolished to make way for new, smaller ones.

Nearly all of the building took place within easy walking distance of the station, but the Morant family used their influence as the largest local landowners to ensure that it was all on the northern side of the railway thus preserving the rural nature of the remainder of the parish. The 20th century local authorities have seen the wisdom of this policy and that is why almost everyone today lives in the northern portion of the parish; indeed, although old houses have been demolished in the southern portion and new ones built its total population has changed very little in 150 years.

Places marked on the sketch map

1. *Church Lane*

Described in documents from the 14th to the 18th century as the Great or the King's Highway to Brockenhurst, it continued down the east side of the church where there is now just a gravel track. The present main road down Tilebarn Hill is part of the Lymington to Rumbridge turnpike.

2. *The footpath*

This public footpath soon crosses a fine avenue of lime trees known as the Gallops; the flat land on the east side was formerly the south field of the manor of Brockenhurst. The path then enters the Roydon Woods Nature Reserve which extends to almost 1000 acres and is owned by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Naturalists' Trust. By following the footpath far enough it is possible to either:-

- (a) Turn right when you meet the gravel road and come out on the main road at Setley near to the Filly Inn.
- (b) Turn left along the gravel road and then left again through the gate near an orange topped marker post when Roydon House can be seen. The Naturalist W.H. Hudson often stayed here and his book Hampshire Days contains many observations of wild life in the area. The path continues over the river in an easterly direction and passes Dilton Farm on its way to the parish boundary and forest edge at Beaulieu Heath. It was along this boundary that the saltway ran.
- (c) Instead of turning left at the bridleway continue in a southerly direction to the Red Lion at Boldre.

3. *Brockenhurst House*

The present house was built in the 1960s after the demolition of the old mansion of the Morant family which stood on the same site.

4. *The Mill*

For many years the site of a corn mill but in the mid 19th century it was converted to a sawmill. It is now a private house.

5. *Thurstons*

This 19th century cottage stands on the site of the farmhouse where Henry Thurston was born. In his will of 1745 he requests that his body be taken back to Brockenhurst from London and 'carried up to the church by eight labouring people from the elm tree which I planted opposite the house where my late father lived and that each of them have for their trouble 2s. 6d. with hatbands and gloves'. The elm tree unfortunately had to be felled a few years ago as it was infected with Dutch elm disease.

6. *The Footbridge*

This replaced No. 7 Level crossing gates. Crossings on the Southampton to Dorchester railway were numbered from the Southampton end. The playing fields seen from the bridge were formerly the north field of Brockenhurst Manor, hence the lane is called North Road.

7. *Gravel Road*

This is the short section of the mainroad to Beaulieu which was closed and replaced by the present cut alongside Ash Cottage when the railway was built.

8. *Level Crossing*

This was No. 8 crossing and the number can still be seen on the wall of the crossing keeper's cottage.

9. *Brookley Manor*

The site of the old principal house of Brookley Manor.

10. *Ash Cottage*

This was Thurston's Charity School for more than 100 years. Miss Ash was the school mistress for about 50 years and the cottage is named after her.

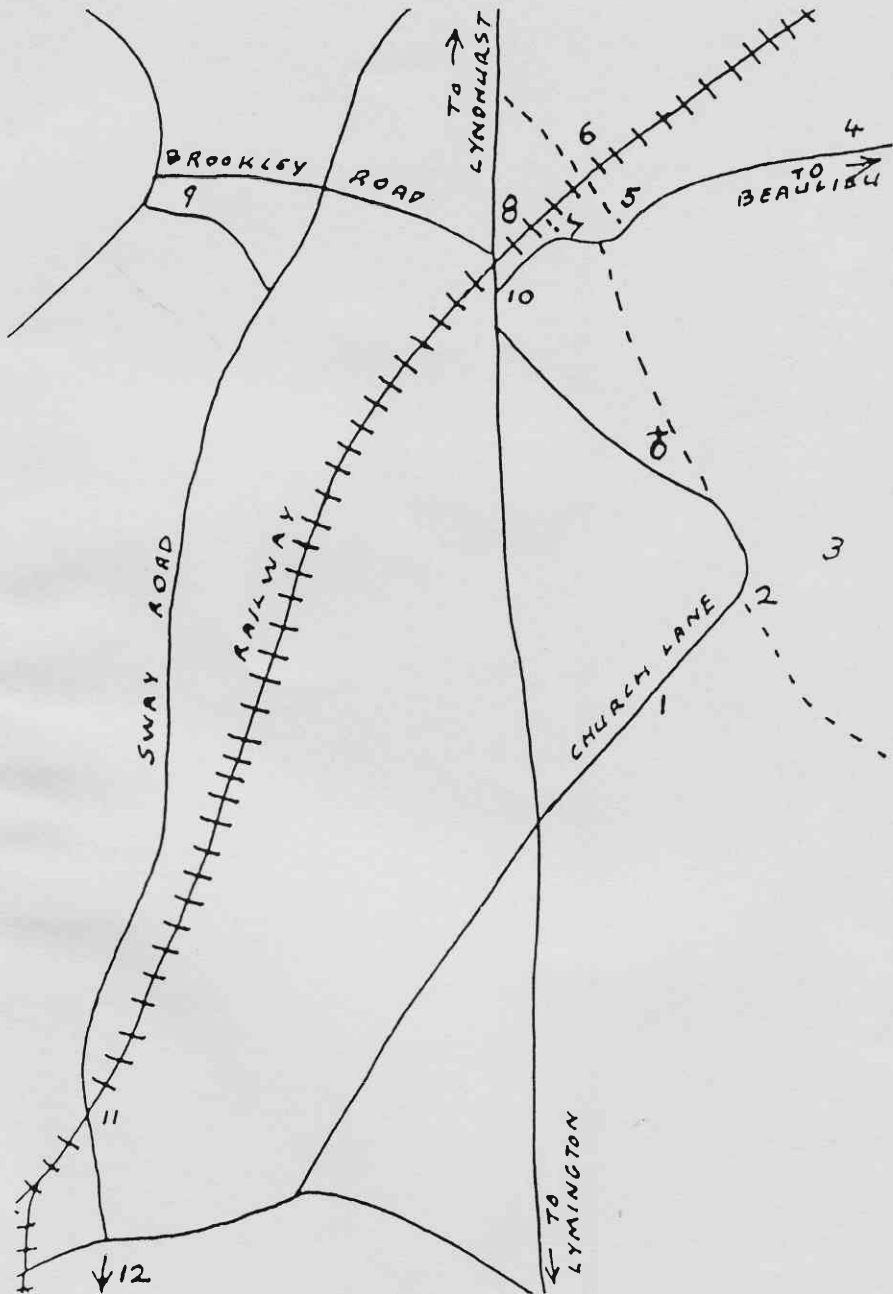
11. *Sway Road Bridge*

Built about 1890 to replace No. 9 level crossing.

12. *Twin Tumuli*

These are on the open forest almost due south from the end of Sway Road.

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