Forest of Dean

BACAS Excursion to the Forest of Dean on July 13th 2013

Les Hayes

The Forest of Dean lies cradled between the rivers Severn and Wye. It forms a plateau rising to 200m and is thickly forested with 50% deciduous trees (mainly ash and oak) and the remainder is coniferous. In all, there are approximately 20 million trees managed by the Forestry Commission.

Although designated as a Royal Hunting Forest in late Saxon times, it was William the Conqueror, a great follower of the chase, who laid down the system of Forest Law to protect the Monarch's rights to the Royal Forests as hunting preserves. In early Norman times, the Forest of Dean was the second largest Royal Forest in England when nearly a third the country was Crown Forest. Offences against Forest Law were divided into two categories: trespass against the vert (the vegetation) and against the venison (game). The creatures protected by law included red deer, boar, hare and wolf, and this was later extended to fallow and roe deer, fox, marten, coney (rabbits), pheasant and partridge. It was William Rufus who drastically increased the penalties for transgressions, which embraced maiming (blinding or chopping off hands) or hanging. The gallows stood on the opposite side of the road to Speech House and hanging can still be carried out, provided execution is carried out on these gallows but they appear to have decayed to oblivion. Although the Royal Forests were theoretically the exclusive preserves of Monarchs, they rapidly discovered that they could make substantial revenues by granting licences to nobles for hunting as well as licenses for mining.

The excursion group took lunch at the Verderers' Court in the Speech House Hotel. This was constructed on the site of the medieval court house in 1669 specifically to facilitate the keeping and holding of forest courts, which in effect governed the Forest. The Verderers' Court still functions and should meet every 40 days. That has now reduced to 4 sessions per year. Nowadays, although prestigious, it acts more as a pressure group to discuss and influence Forest affairs.

Over time, the Forest declined due to charcoal burning to smelt iron. Indeed, the reductions of the reserves of oak for shipbuilding provoked Nelson to visit around 1802 and make protestations to

Figure 1
The group standing on the Geological map.

the Government. During the 19th Century, coal and iron mining, smelting and quarrying for stone became major industries.

The effects of these industries were clear at several sites we visited. Among these were a Free Miners coal mining adit, the horizontal entrance to a mine; a working stone quarry and large stone cutting factory; the Scowles, which are collapsed caverns associated with iron extraction; and the site of a former major iron/steel plant at Dark Hill where the Musket father and son made practical the production of steel and developed durable steel alloys. Most impressive was a large scale geological map of the Forest laid out on the ground using the appropriate types of stone to reflect the geology, and showing the underlying coat seams. Every significant coal and iron mine and stone quarry was indicated and indexed by name. The Forest became a large industrial preserve during the 19th Century and the last major coal mine only closed in 1965. Only in the 20th Century did the Forest begin to revert to a form which the Normans would largely recognise and appreciate.

A final word on the uniqueness of the Forest. Anyone who is born and bred in the Hundred of St Brevials (a Forester) and who has worked underground for a year and a day can apply to become a Free Miner. This privilege was granted by Edward I in the 13th Century to reward the services of Foresters who undermined castle walls during his Scottish campaigns. However, a major obstacle has arisen to the continuance to the existence of Free Miners, as there is no longer a maternity hospital or ward in the Forest. Whether the naming of a ward outside the Forest, 'The Forest of Dean' will overcome this legal quibble is not known. It is one of the unique customs which make the Forest so unusual and enhance its character.

Many thanks to our guides, John Bosley and Geoff Davis, (a Forester) for a superb day and we all appreciated the in-depth research they conducted to suit our particular requirements.

Roman Bath

A whistle stop tour of Roman Bath with Marek Lewcun

Jackie Thompson

We met Marek outside the Podium opposite the Saracens Head pub for a walk around the ordinary part of Roman Bath, as distinct from the high status buildings of the Temple complex within the city walls. Our starting point was at the very bottom of Walcot Street, just outside the old North Gate.

Heading North, our attention was drawn to points along the way, where pottery, skeletons, coins, and still standing walls and columns - the usual remains of Roman settlement - had been found. A detour towards the river brought us past the burial ground in Walcot Gate, adjacent to the Walcot Mortuary Chapel, near to which Roman burials had been found in the 19th Century, and finally to the rear of TR Hayes warehouse where, incorporated into a retaining wall, there is the base of a Roman column. Excavations prior to building the warehouse in the 1990s, had revealed evidence of three buildings, a worn threshold and colonnades, and a blacksmith's workshop to the rear of one of the houses. Many small finds and a fairly complete Samian dish from the excavation are on display in the cafe in TR Hayes' shop.

At the end of Walcot Street we again detoured, this time into the yard of what used to be the notorious Hat and Feather public house, now Hudson Steakhouse, where the first century onwards Roman road from London, incorporating the Fosse Way at this point, runs parallel to the present day road; from this, in the first century, another road ran eastwards towards the river and Bathwick. Nearby, excavations were recorded by a J Cranch in 1816 ('An account of the monuments and remains of ancient arts collected in and near the city of Bath'), when the Sainsbury's and Acres' brewery was being constructed, revealing finds between 4 and 10 feet below ground level. These included stone coffins, a first century military diploma, half a pint of ancient coins from Augustus' reign, Samian ware, urns, amphorae and 40 glass fragments. When Cranch made his records he was looking at two other sites at the time: Upper Camden Street and the Methodist church, which backs onto the location of the brewery. Many finds were uncovered all over this area of Walcot,