

THE NEW FOREST

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The New Forest by C. J. Cornish

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C. J. CORNISH

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New Forest from near Castle Malwood.

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By

C. J. CORNISH

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THE NEW FOREST

CHAPTER I

THE CENTRAL FOREST AND ITS CAPITAL

The wholly foreign character of its creation—Its vast extent—The alleged cruelty in its afforesting—Modern views—The nature of forest laws—The forest preserved by their survival—Lyndhurst the centre and capital of the Forest—The Verderers' Hall and Court—The pilgrimage to Mark Ash—Swan Green—The wild and open forest—The Lymington stream—The bush of the forest—The progressive splendour of the trees—The wealth of ornament in the old woods—The charcoal-burner's hut—Voices of the forest—Alone in the sanctuary.

THE historical link which the New Forest has with the associations in every English mind is fixed to the era of the Normans. It was the foreign Norman and Angevin Kings of England who made and used the forest. It lay in the same county, and within a ride of their palace and capital at Winchester; and they took their sport from Malwood on their way to Rouen, riding down after a few days' deer-shooting to Beaulieu or Lymington, where the galleys waited to take them across the Channel, much as the royal yachts wait to take Her Majesty Queen Victoria across the Solent to Osborne.

But the subsequent part played by the forest as a hunting ground for kings, and a district exempt from the general law of the land, and at the absolute disposal of the sovereign, is entirely eclipsed by the picturesque and dramatic incidents which tradition has assigned to its violent creation by the first Norman monarch, and its requital, not only by the violent death of the second, but by those of two other children

of the Conqueror in this fatal precinct. His son, Richard, who was supposed to be in his disposition the special image of his father, when not yet of an age to be girded with the belt of knighthood, was the first victim. He is said to have been fatally injured by the branch of a tree when riding after a stag; and there is a record in Domesday Book of lands restored by his father to their rightful owner as an offering for Richard's soul.¹ The second son of the Conqueror who died in the forest was another Richard, an illegitimate child, whose death seems to have been forgotten in the greater catastrophes of the death of the elder Richard and of Rufus, which preceded and followed it.

Whatever belief is to be given to the tale of cruelty in its afforesting, the size and character of the district, which the Conqueror devoted to his use as a "single and mighty Nimrod," by the simple act of putting it under forest law, is a measure of the scope of that imperial mind. The area was as large as that of the Isle of Wight. It was bounded on the north by the line from the river Avon to the river Ouse, separating Hampshire from Wiltshire; by the river Avon on the west, down to Christchurch. By the sea from Christchurch to Calshot Castle; by the Southampton Water, and by the river Ouse. Within these boundaries are about 224 square miles, containing 143,360 acres of land, of which even now 90,000 acres are still within the boundary of the forest. Its natural features were such as to make it a hunter's paradise. From the swirling salmon river at Christchurch, to the wide lagoon of Southampton Water, it exhibited and still contains, almost every natural feature which made the forests, "*regum penetralia et eorum maximæ deliciæ*," "the chief delight of kings, and their secret and secure retreat." Fronted by the sheltered waters of an inland sea, and pierced by the four wide, beautiful, and commodious estuaries of Christchurch, Lyminster, Beaulieu, and Southampton Water, its heaths, pools, wastes, thickets and bogs, studded and interlaced with good ground, producing deep and ancient woods, made it a natural and unrivalled sanctuary for game.

The charge against the Conqueror of "wasting" this district appears in its most violent form in the pages of Lingard. "Though the king possessed sixty-eight forests, besides parks and chases, in different parts of England, he was not satisfied, but for the occasional accommodation of

¹ Freeman, *Norman Conquest*, Vol. iv. p. 609.

his court, afforested an extensive tract of country lying between Winchester and the sea-coast. The inhabitants were expelled; the cottages and churches were burnt; and more than thirty square miles of a rich and populous district were withdrawn from cultivation and converted into a wilderness, to afford sufficient range for the deer, and ample space for the royal diversion." "Many populous towns and villages and thirty-six parish churches," is the more circumstantial estimate of others. Voltaire first questioned this tradition on grounds of general historical criticism. Cobbett easily detected its improbability, from a mere examination of the *soil* of the forest. It could never have been a "rich and populous district" simply because, for the greater part, the soil is among the poorest in the south of England. Thirty thousand acres were in 1849 reported unfit either for agriculture, the growth of trees, or pasturage. The test of figures also throws a doubt on the destruction of the villages. In the original area of the forest there still remain eleven parish churches on sites where churches were in existence before the time of the Conqueror. "If he destroyed thirty-six parish churches, what a populous country this must have been!" writes Cobbett. "There must have been forty-seven parish churches; so that there was over this whole district, one parish church to every four-and-three-quarter square miles."

The modern inference from these criticisms goes to the extreme of considering, that in making the forest, William confined himself to enforcing the forest law within its boundaries, thereby reserving the exclusive right of sporting for himself, while "men retained possession of their lands, their woods, mills, or other property, just as before, save for the stringent regulations of the forest law."¹

Even so the interference with liberty and property, due to this extraordinary Norman provision for the amusement of the monarch is almost incredible to modern ideas.

"Forest law" made of the area to which it might at any moment be applied, a kind of "proclaimed district," where the law of the land at once ceased to run, and the rights of property only existed under conditions which were *mainly*, but not entirely, directed to the preservation of game. Its excuse was that it was a convenient method of placing wild

¹ *Arboriculture of the New Forest*, by the Hon. G. Lascelles, Deputy Surveyor, New Forest.