

ASHDOWN FOREST IN A TIME OF CHANGE

The 19th century was a time of dramatic economic, social, and cultural change in Britain. What impact did this have on the rural communities surrounding Ashdown Forest? The Ashdown Forest Research Group, a group of enthusiasts who meet periodically to share research undertaken about the Forest, has been looking at this.

The group took two contrasting rural communities on the northern side of Ashdown Forest, Forest Row and Hartfield, and looked at how they - and their relationship with the Forest – altered during the 19th century, starting with an analysis of census data for 1851 and 1881.

1851 was a turning point for Victorian Britain. The Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park celebrated a country at the peak of its industrial and technological powers. London was the capital of a rapidly industrialising nation and the financial and mercantile hub of the world's largest empire.

Yet the communities surrounding Ashdown Forest, despite lying only some 30-40 miles from London, were still seemingly little changed from centuries earlier and relatively untouched by the changes occurring elsewhere in Britain.

The 1851 census reveals that in both Forest Row and Hartfield people were still predominantly engaged in the range of rural occupations traditionally associated with Ashdown Forest. In Forest Row almost half the working population were unskilled agricultural labourers, one of the most poorly paid occupational groups. Others making a living from the forest's resources included sawyers and stone masons and other in occupations that are now long forgotten such as hoop benders and lath cleavers.

But things were soon to change. By 1881 the traditional rural occupations were in decline. There were far fewer agricultural labourers recorded in the census, a result of mechanisation and agricultural depression driven by competition from low-cost producers overseas.

But new opportunities were emerging for local people. A major factor was the coming of the railways, reaching East Grinstead in 1855, Uckfield in 1858, Forest Row, Hartfield and Withyham in 1866, and Crowborough in 1868. The railways brought dramatically improved transport connections for both people and goods to and from the rest of the country, particularly to and from London but also other parts of the country.



The hitherto rather isolated parishes around Ashdown Forest were opening up. A local population whose geographic horizons had been very parochial now became much more mobile. Places of birth changed dramatically: earlier in the century people tended to be born, brought up and to die around their home villages. Later on there were arrivals in Hartfield from as far afield as Cornwall, Derbyshire , Scotland, Malta and St Helena.

The newly prosperous metropolitan middle-classes began to visit the area for leisure and recreation. It became an increasingly popular destination for the retired well-to-do of late Victorian England, drawn by a Forest wilderness (promoted by local developers as a veritable “Scotland in Sussex”) and healthy climate that lay only a short distance from London. In 1888 Royal Ashdown golf course was opened on Forest land, with the Lord of the Manor, the Earl de la Warr, honoured as the club’s first president. Special trains were laid on to bring in visiting golfing parties to Forest Row.

So we see new occupations emerging in the Census: golf course greenkeepers, railway platelayers and porters, and operators of steam thrashers. And a vast increase in numbers of servants being employed.

The Forest communities were changing.

In future articles we will look in more detail at how Forest communities changed during the second half of the 19th century.

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