

ROUND AND ABOUT IN THE PARISH.....

A local 'Forest' character was Darry Weller - who came from a respected family but who decided to live a nomadic life on the Forest and surrounding villages. He was instantly recognisable as he was an imposing man, over 6ft tall, slightly built and stooping. He had an unkempt appearance but his most distinguishing feature was the hook on the end of his arm!

There are several stories which circulate as to how he lost his arm - he was cleaning a gun and it went off; he crawled under a hedge to get away from a gamekeeper and the gun went off and another one from about 1910 when he was testing a rusty gun, offered to him by another man and when he pulled the trigger it exploded and blew off his hand. A report from Eric Byford said that the gypsies who lived on the Forest at this time nursed him back to health and probably saved his life, but not his hand.

Darry's appearance frightened children but their parents were never afraid of him and would stop and talk, and indeed they often helped him. What rather upset children was that Darry would suddenly loom out of nowhere swinging a dead rabbit on the end of his hook. As food was then fairly scarce and with not much money to spend, a rabbit was a welcome addition to the table.

The late Ron Wenham said *"Darry would call at my parents' house from time to time and when we were on school holidays with Mum out working we were left at home to do our own thing. It was o.k. to do that in those days and no-one was worried that you would come to any harm. What a different situation now! If we saw this man with the hook coming our way we would run indoors, put a big wooden bar in place behind the door, and lay very still and quiet until he had gone."*

Whilst the locals didn't mind Darry, it was an entirely different matter as far as the Board of Conservator was concerned and they did everything in their power to evict him from the Forest. Darry was also in trouble with the Courts on numerous occasions.

The earliest record I can trace is that Darry who was described as a lad with two other friends, was Summoned in December 1887 for trespassing on land in the occupation of John Chatterton of Chelwood Gate. He was again Summoned in 1892 for a similar offence, and in 1900 he was charged with not having a gun licence. He was also charged with offences including poaching, keeping a dog without a licence and stealing a hen. He got into trouble at Chelwood Beacon, at Twyford and at Pippingford Park where he was trespassing in the day-time in search of game. Darry describes himself as a Labourer, mostly at Danehill, but no address is given. In November 1932 Darry says 'he lives in a hovel at Chelwood Gate'. [Goodness, that's getting a bit close to home].

The Board wanted Darry prosecuted and off the Forest. In 1927 a Ranger reports Darry has killed another deer and offered the meat for sale. The Board wanted Lord de la Warr's solicitors to prosecute Darry as they said he was a danger to the local inhabitants. There is no evidence to suggest Lord de la Warr did take any action.

In 1928 Darry was described as a vagrant harbouring under bushes at night and roaming with a gun and it was reported he had been found on the Forest in a shack with a loaded gun. The gun was handed to the police and when Darry

called to claim it, it appears the police just gave Darry a severe warning. The Board called Darry "a homeless and half witted vagabond" - terms which I don't think would be allowed today.

Darry's further problems with the Board seem to have arisen in 1934 as he makes an alleged encroachment at Hospital Farm where he put up 2 tents and started a vegetable garden with a fence around it. Darry was asked to leave but refused, although in October Ranger Hatchett removed 15 gypsies, 13 horses, 12 caravans and 6 campers from the Forest. Darry would not go.

By 1940 Darry had a stone hut at Cripps Corner (near Hospital Farm) and Major Darwin of Cripps Cottage gave permission for Darry to live in an old stone and thatched building on the forest edge of Goat Farm, beside the smallholding owned by Liza James and George Philcox. In February 1941 the Board again contacted Lord de la Warr's solicitors with a view to prosecuting Darry but the Lord's response was 'it has been decided in the special circumstances to permit the encroachment during the lives of the two persons concerned (another man was also involved). Mrs Darwin was involved with the Danehill and Horsted Keynes Nursing Association in about 1938 and it seems as if she may have had some sympathy for Darry's predicament.

I have trudged over the Forest to where Darry had his hut and where there was a convenient stream for him nearby. The weather was dreadful and it was cold and wet, but when I reached the exact spot where Darry was reputed to live, the weather cleared and it was a lovely glade, suddenly there was a warmth to the area. Darry chose his spot very well. It was eerie.

Towards the end of Darry's life it is said he would commit a deed which would bring him a short prison sentence so that he could spend winter in the warmth and comfort of Lewes Prison. Mrs Veal at Cripps Manor looked after his valuables during his 'holiday'. Dr/Mrs? Thornton had a good connection with Darry as she visited him at any time he needed her attention. She was able to help him in many ways during his last years.

This photo is of the 9th Earl de la Warr (1900-1976) and it was suggested to me that he was a 'thoroughly good thing' and was a Socialist Cabinet Minister, which may explain his benevolent attitude to Darry. (At the time the photo was taken Earl de la Warr was Mayor of Bexhill). Lady Anne De La Warr however told me she didn't agree with this theory as he changed to Conservative anyway. She thought it was simply he had a normal decent attitude to those perhaps less fortunate than others, as running an Estate with many and varied people living on it does lead to a tolerant attitude.

Darry died in December 1952 and his shack was demolished and everything burnt very quickly. I have been unable to trace a photo of Darry, but he is still remembered by many people.

My thanks to Anne Drewery of the Danehill Parish Historical Society for the photo of Lord de la Warr, and to Lady Anne de la Warr, and the late Ron Wenham.

Jill Rolfe 740446

