

# The New Forest snake-catcher

Dick Henrywood features *Brusher Mills*  
(1840-1905)

Anyone hunting through the topographical sections in postcard dealers' stocks will have come across cards showing local characters. Typical examples which I have encountered regularly are T.C. Mortimore, the Town Crier of Sidmouth in Devon, and Charles Parsons, an Indian Mutiny veteran of West-on-super-Mare, but some of the most striking show *Brusher Mills*, a snake-catcher from the New Forest.

Henry (or Harry) Mills was born at Emery Down, near Lyndhurst, on 19 March 1840, one of a large family of eight or nine children. In his earlier years he worked as a labourer, but for the last two decades of his life he made a living catching snakes. Born with a cleft palate, he became a bit of a recluse and lived in an old

which are still to be found in the forest. He is supposed to have been paid a shilling for every snake he caught by Lord Londesborough of Bolderwood. He supplied dead snakes and adders' venom to various research institutes and also London Zoo, which needed snakes to feed their birds of prey. He certainly made various



FGO Stuart postcard number 797 - also titled "*Brusher Mills, New Forest, Snake Catcher*" but showing his hut.

almost an institution in his locality. Stories about him abound, but it is thought that he caught nearly 30,000 snakes in his lifetime. Most anecdotes revolve around the snakes, including throwing an adder at gipsy children to stop their taunting and even emptying his bag of snakes (mostly harmless) onto the floor in the pub to clear his way to the bar!

Photographs of him usually show a cheerful bearded old man, clutching a handful of snakes and holding the forked stick which he used to trap adders. A large tin with holes in its lid and a canvas bag are often visible, both used to hold the snakes.

His local pub was the "Railway Inn" at Brockenhurst, where he loved the odd glass of rum. He died tragically on 1 July 1905, collapsing just behind the pub where he had called for a pint of beer. His body was found in an outhouse and although the local doctor diagnosed a heart attack, tradition has it that he died of a broken heart. His turf hut had been destroyed by vandals, some say on the orders of the local council who were concerned that he had lived there for nearly twenty years and would soon qualify for ownership of the land through ancient Forest laws, a version of squatter's rights.

*Brusher Mills* was buried in Brockenhurst churchyard and his grave was later marked by a fine marble stone, erected by local people in his memory, and inscribed:

*'This stone marks the grave of Harry Mills, [better*

*known as "Brusher Mills"], who for a long number of years followed the occupation of Snake Catcher, in the New Forest, His pursuit and the primitive way in which he lived, caused him to be an object of interest to many. He died suddenly July 1st 1905, aged 65 years.'*

"The Railway Inn" has now been renamed "The Snake Catcher", and there is a model of him in the New Forest Museum and Visitor Centre at Lyndhurst. He was well enough known to appear on postcards, many thousands of which remained on sale long after his death. The three examples shown here were all published by F.G.O. Stuart of Southampton, although others can also be found.



FGO Stuart postcard number 398 - "*Brusher Mills, New Forest, Snake Catcher*".

charcoal burner's hut near Brockenhurst. The origins of his nickname 'Brusher' are a bit obscure but seem to revolve around him sweeping leaves, either before matches from the cricket pitch at Balmer Lawn, or from ice on the lake at Foxlease.

He developed an affinity with wildlife, and became well-known for trapping the grass snakes and adders

ointments and potions, and helped local people by tending their sick animals.

He could often be found at country fairs, selling knick-knacks such as walking sticks to earn a few pennies, and demonstrating his skills with the reptiles which he would carry around in a black bag. Despite his rough lifestyle, he was scrupulously clean and honest, and became



FGO Stuart postcard number 1210 - "*Brusher Mills, Tombstone, Brockenhurst*".

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