

NEW FOREST NOTES - APRIL 2001

Foot & Mouth and the Forest

The Forest has now been under the threat of Foot and Mouth disease for more than a month and the dreadful business of checking stock twice daily for signs of infection has become almost routine. The smell of disinfectant in the yard, vehicles and even in the house, which had at first seemed so overpowering, is now almost unnoticed. Two disinfectant mats protect the private road to the farm (there are three separate owners of cloven-footed stock adjoining) and the public path which follows the road is closed. In thirty years of keeping cattle, this is quite the most frightening time I have known. Like everyone else, I had to remove the cows from the Forest and they were then trapped by the movement restrictions in a totally unsuitable field, almost drowning in mud. Eventually, after much telephoning (including calls to civil servants hard at work in their offices on a Sunday *and* answering the telephone), the MAFF local movement licence arrived permitting transport of the unfortunate beasts to more suitable quarters. That is permitted only after a rigorous and no doubt expensive veterinary inspection. Amid all this gloom, and despite having had his fingers nearly bitten off by cows who resented having their tongues pulled, my vet had a few words of encouragement. He was reasonably optimistic that the New Forest could escape the disease – subject to an important proviso. That condition is that the access restrictions are not lifted too soon, allowing some visitor from outside to import the virus. His words are being echoed in the prayers of everyone who has the welfare of the Forest and its animals at heart, but there is also growing tension over the restrictions and even the threat of open conflict. Some elements of recreation and tourism are exerting fierce pressure on the Forestry Commission to throw open the Forest and on the County Council to abandon its footpath closures. “After all” they say, “there are no cattle left on the Forest and there is no disease here, so it must be perfectly safe”. The dwindling incomes from tourism and the frustration of the recreation seekers and dog walkers are daily being weighed in the balance in the Queen’s House, against the probable utter disaster to the Forest should the disease arrive here. Things are moving quickly and by the time these notes appear the scales may have tipped firmly one way or the other.

Are the arguments for throwing the Forest open justified? On the face of it, the absence of both disease and cows to catch it suggests that they are. What possible harm could it do – just a few thousand local walkers and their dogs, together with properly disinfected hotel guests and no disease nearer than north east Wiltshire? Such claims demonstrate a complete lack of understanding of how the Forest works and of the appalling consequences of an outbreak here. If Foot and Mouth comes to the New Forest, we could quickly become a second Cumbria.

The problem is this. On the evidence of the Forestry Commission’s new recreation plan (quoting Portsmouth University research), the New Forest attracts eighteen million day visits a year – a figure that includes use by locals. That averages almost fifty thousand visits

per day, although of course far more over the rapidly approaching Easter Holiday peak and far less on a cold January day. Those fifty thousand people (and their potential carrier dogs) tramp across land populated by an often unseen several thousand deer. Deer are cloven footed and can catch Foot and Mouth. These deer graze not only the Forest, but thousands of acres of adjoining farmland (deer are no respecters of fences), mixing with the beef and dairy herds thereon which never themselves visit the Forest. In addition, there are now dozens of holdings packed with cattle recently taken off the common grazings, through all of which the deer move freely. It is a potentially explosive mixture of carriers and susceptible stock. If the disease comes here, it is not unreasonable to fear the extinction of all small cattle farms around and within the perambulation.

It may, of course, be argued that "local people could do no harm" or that disinfected hotel guests might be let out or that a segment of the Forest might be opened. That, as the Forestry Commission well knows, is nonsense. How do you distinguish an authorized Lyndhurst dog walker from an unauthorized one from Portsmouth – or worse still, from east Wiltshire? The Commission knows that if it drills even a small hole, the dyke will collapse within days. In my (northern) part of the Forest there are some thoroughly responsible dog walkers who are taking their dogs daily to the beach almost twenty miles away. The Forest's boundary is only twenty five miles from the nearest restricted area of Wiltshire and if the Forest's defences are lowered while Wiltshire Council maintains its footpath ban, we could quickly become a target for irresponsible dog walkers in the infected areas. It is little greater journey than that from Fordingbridge to the sea.

Of course tourism is suffering and it is hard for those concerned. Part of my own income is from tourism (although not in this area) and I know perfectly well how it feels to see one booking after another cancelled, but even a small element of risk to the New Forest is unacceptable. When people start talking about "minimal risk", I always have horrid visions of Mr. Gummer and his daughter's beefburger. The Forest deserves better treatment than that.

It will be for the vets to advise when risk to the Forest is passed – presumably at least two maximum incubation periods after the disease has ceased to spread. It is difficult to see how that could be in advance of the Easter holiday and its potential camping bonanza. That event, I am sure, cannot be far from the minds of the Forestry Commission's accountants, although how much pressure they will put on local management remains to be seen.

A tale of Foot & Mouth in the 1890s

Many years ago, in a house in Southampton, I came across an old veterinary book entitled "The Half Crown Key to Farriery". In its time it was probably an expensive volume as the gilt page edges and embossed cover testify. The book had belonged to Major Heathcote who, at the end of the 19th Century, was tenant of the then Crown Freehold of Broomy Lodge (near Linwood). The major was a cow keeper, grazing his stock on the Forest, and evidently taking a keen interest in veterinary matters. His book is filled with red underlinings and marginal notes.

On the 23rd March 1891, he went to an auction of stock for a Mr. Strange, held at Cuffnells in Lyndhurst. There he bought a Kerry cow in calf which he later turned out on the Forest. He notes that the Forest was very short of water that spring and that the cow was not accustomed to the rough grazing. She fell ill and died on the 7th May. The major then wrote to the author of the "Key to Fariery" and received a courteous but non-committal reply from its vet author. Long distance veterinary diagnosis is an imprecise business! Anyhow, the major's ominous superscript to the letter reads "Looked like mouth disease as it was sore and swollen".

After this, one might have expected that the Forest would be in a state of uproar, but opinions and values were then evidently very different from those of today. The "Key's" section on Foot & Mouth disease starts off in confident tone: "This is a troublesome affection, but usually yields to proper treatment". Isolation, good bedding and medication are recommended, followed by disinfection of stables and utensils. The fact that Major Heathcote was evidently familiar with the symptoms suggests that the disease was then accepted as routine and regarded much as today's farmers would look on mastitis.

Antique maps of the New Forest

I have a friend who is an authority on computers and the internet and from time to time he sends me interesting pieces of information relevant to the Forest. Two recent discoveries of his concern New Forest maps. A private website prepared by Jean and Martin Norgate has published a large collection of old Hampshire maps, available entirely free to users and reproduced in colour to a very high standard. Many of the earlier ones are small scale and decorative only, but there are several later maps – notably Milne's map of 1791 and Greenwood's 1826 which are much larger and really useful from a local history point of view. Users will be able to look at the New Forest of two hundred years ago and see what it was like before most of the timber inclosures were made. Such maps are extremely rare and valuable in their original form, quite apart from being difficult to handle. This site makes them available in convenient form and at the cost of no more than a little patience because they take a while to download. They can be found at <http://www.geog.port.ac.uk/webmap/hantsmap/hantsmap.htm> .

The second site is a commercial one dealing in early editions of the Ordnance Survey. Most of the large scales (25" and 6" to the mile) are available, although at a significant cost. Users are permitted to view (but not print) a sample early 6" map of the late 19th Century. Unless I failed to use it correctly, it is not immediately apparent that there is this wide choice, until one reaches the later stages of making a purchase. Earlier versions, to which there is a link from the site, do allow free printing of a small area of 6" map and I used that for a recent project at Woodlands. The site is <http://www.old-maps.co.uk/>

From a Forest perspective, the really useful addition to these facilities would be the publication of Richardson, King and Driver's large scale survey of the Forest of 1787. Perhaps someone will be able to persuade the Norgates to expand their public-spirited publication, or perhaps that might be a project for the New Forest Museum.

The returning goblet

In February I described an 1892 presentation goblet which had marked the services of barrister E.H.Pember in defending the Forest against a proposed rifle range at Beaulieu Road. It was subsequently sold by auction and shortly afterwards I received a call from the delighted curator of the New Forest Museum – Jude James. It appears that the goblet was purchased by an anonymous benefactor of the Museum and will presumably be on display there in due course.

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