

NEW FOREST NOTES APRIL 2004

Neglect of the National Trust's Commons

In a Forest where hundreds of acres of overgrown heath seem crying out for more grazing pressure, one of the great tragedies of management arises from the opposite extreme. The National Trust's commons which stretch from Cadnam to Plaitford have, over the last thirty years, suffered steady decline and neglect. These commons were once among the most beautiful areas of the Forest – a sea of undulating purple heather in August, interspersed with patches of green and belts of natural woodland. Today that character is fast being eroded. Heather is being driven to extinction in almost all parts by intense grazing pressure, through enrichment by dung from excessive stock numbers and by supplementary feeding, through vehicular damage and poaching. It is a state of affairs which has been perfectly obvious for years but, as always in such cases, it needed official recognition to drive home to the public the seriousness of the neglect. That recognition came in January with the publication by a DEFRA survey team of its report "Overgrazing Appraisal and Baseline Surveillance Survey: Black Hill and Half Moon Commons". The report concludes that the two commons (the remainder of the Trust's property was not surveyed) are overgrazed. The high grazing pressure has "had a deleterious impact on the heathland vegetation that has resulted in its current unfavourable condition".

The DEFRA survey methods are complex and are designed to assess the deterioration or otherwise of the natural vegetation, but the unequivocal findings leave no shadow of an excuse behind which the National Trust can now shelter. Except in terms of the vegetation, the DEFRA survey is not directly concerned with the ecological value of the commons as a whole and an alternative measure of decline is adopted by English Nature. It classifies the land as being in either favourable or unfavourable condition and further qualifies these broad categories as improving, static or declining. In February 2003 it concluded that these two commons were in unfavourable condition, but improving. DEFRA suggests that this is probably an over-optimistic assessment and that "evidence of continued heavy grazing impact might indicate that an unfavourable no change or even declining classification may currently be appropriate".

So much for the dry jargon of the scientists, but for the man in the street or, more importantly, the average National Trust member, there is a simpler and readily understandable measure of the neglect of the commons: their natural beauty has been steadily degraded. Of course the Trust's properties in the New Forest are relatively obscure, dwarfed by the Crown lands. They lack the national popularity and renown of, for example, the Holnicote Estate on Exmoor or the Golden Cap Estate in West Dorset. If it had been otherwise, the neglect could hardly have persisted for so long. I am not for one moment suggesting that the Trust deliberately set out to destroy the landscape of its properties in the way that the Forestry Commission tried to eliminate broadleaved trees from the Inclosures in the immediate post war years. The Trust's sin is one of omission, albeit a very serious one.

It is too easy to rubbish even the most authoritative memories, so what is the hard evidence for this loss of natural beauty? Back in the early 1980s, a volunteer worker clearing rhododendron on Half Moon and Black Hill took a number of colour photographs of his work, incidentally illustrating the healthy and unbroken expanses of heather. Comparative photographs taken today illustrate almost bare ground with the last vestiges of heather bitten to destruction. Even earlier than that, a series of colour photographs taken on Plaitford Common in the 1960s showed fine heather moorland where today virtually nothing remains but moss or low grade grass. More tangible and immediately apparent evidence of management neglect is given by the refuse piles which disfigured the commons a decade ago and which remain to this day. Moreover, each autumn the village greens of Bramshaw are torn up by un-ringed pigs and the Trust does nothing effective.

I suppose the question inevitably arises as to why the Trust has permitted this decline to continue for so long. The answer is that reversing it will require a degree of firmness and determination which has been wholly lacking so far. The Trust is perfectly well aware of what is happening and indeed, in 2002, wrote of its desire to limit “damage due to excessive grazing, enrichment and poaching”. It then instituted a rather weak scheme of very dubious morality in which it sought to buy off some of those causing the damage in a small part of its lands. This pumping of a few buckets of water from a sinking ship must, I suppose, be beneficial, but the vessel continues to head for total wreck. Anyone in doubt about this need only take a walk over Plaitford Common.

I have long been curious as to where the responsibility lies for these unfortunate policies of the National Trust in this part of the New Forest. The temptation to lay the blame on a local management, sometimes said to be cowed by fear of unpopularity, is certainly unfair. Such a long term policy of neglect must have been determined or at least connived-at much higher in the Trust’s hierarchy. Management of the Trust’s newly acquired commons at Rockford and Ibsley and its older lands at Hightown and Hale has been adequate if seldom imaginative. Local officers have busied themselves with the relatively non-controversial work of cutting down trees all over the place – seen as an ecologically sound operation on heathland – as though it were somehow a substitute for getting to grips with the real problems of overgrazing, dumping and damage at Bramshaw. Following the DEFRA report, there remains nowhere for the Trust to hide.

Exactly how the restoration of the Trust’s lands is to be achieved is not clear. DEFRA suggests that more drastic measures may be required than those so far adopted by the Trust. Restoration options under agri-environmental and other management schemes may be necessary. I am not aware that such work has hitherto been undertaken in the New Forest and I certainly have no experience of it myself. There are, however, some useful examples of natural heather recovery. Partial recolonisation has been achieved in abandoned mineral workings at Rockford, under light grazing pressure, after a period of forty years. At Gorley Hill, however, where the grazing pressure is heavier, half a century has failed to achieve very much. Heather destroyed by enrichment, comparable to much of Plaitford, Penn and some of

Furzley Commons, seems to re-establish after forty to sixty years to judge from the Forest's reseeded areas. In short, even if the Trust acts firmly and at once, it will be many years before the former glory of its New Forest properties shows significant signs of recovery.

Minister's visit to the Forest

I suppose it is a rather rare event for any government minister to visit a Conservative constituency and be told that his department has done an outstanding job and that the local community is very grateful. Such was the good fortune of Mr. Elliot Morley, DEFRA minister, when he attended the launch of the Verderers' Countryside Stewardship scheme on 15th March. All those involved heaped compliments on each other and the minister seemed happy to tarry in the pouring rain at Boltons Bench, chatting to commoners arranged around a rather artificial pen full of hay-eating Forest ponies. Indeed he chatted for so long that some of us less hardy Verderers began to feel extremely sodden, while the attendant police officers had probably begun, without any political bias, to wish that the minister would pack up and go back to London. Altogether it was a very satisfactory afternoon, not disrupted either by a well-attended pro-hunting demonstration or a one man anti-commoner and Verderer protest. The New Forest is sometimes rather good at setting aside party politics when its own welfare is at issue. It has been well served by Conservative MPs for generations, but almost all modern Forest legislation has been passed under Labour governments. The stewardship agreement under this government undoubtedly represents the most significant subsidy ever made available to New Forest commoners. Mr. Morley probably went back to his office with a satisfied inner glow.

As to the progress of the Stewardship Scheme itself, I understand that enough commoners have now entered, committing enough animals, to satisfy DEFRA. As at the date of the March Court, 220 commoners had signed up, representing a total of approximately 3000 animals in the correct proportions as to species. This falls short of the announced target, but the Verderers remain confident that late entries will boost the figures. At the moment there seem to be two main sticking points. The first is the uncertain land tenure from which some commoners derive their rights. Temporary use of a field upon an informal basis is an example. There is not much that can be done about this, but the other inevitable problem – the complexity of the application form – will be tackled by assistance from agisters, Verderers, the Clerk and the Commoners Defence Association. The Official Verderer pointed out at the Court that a high entry in the first year of the scheme is essential to secure maximum payments for everyone in later years. Meanwhile, the Verderers are preparing to interview applicants for the post of manager of the scheme at the rather attractive salary of £29,000 pa.

Environment Agency Consultation

At the March Court the Verderers received a complaint against the Environment Agency for its failure to consult properly over its stream blocking and impeding works, planned for the Forest under the Life III project. It was a complaint with which I certainly sympathised in the early stages of the Life work. Whether intended or not, commoners and

Verderers were kept very much in the dark. Only after a sometimes heated meeting of all parties at the Queen's House did information begin to flow. All relevant groups now receive details of proposed works and are able to attend site meetings. There was a rumour that the Forestry Commission would go ahead with works, whether the Verderers opposed them or not, after the Court vetoed a damaging scheme in Holmsley Bog earlier this year. That rumour the Deputy Surveyor has firmly denied in writing. A more recent visit to Ocknell Sling (on Highland Water) resulted in general agreement on the work to be undertaken, while another scheme in Slufers was approved after some negotiation. All in all, I am now satisfied with the level of consultation.

Whether the complainant (Mr.Cooper), is correct in his more fundamental objection that the Environment Agency has committed itself to Europe to deliver works which it cannot deliver without local consent and whether it has (improperly) proceeded with works in the absence of an Environmental Impact Assessment, remains to be seen.

Anthony Pasmore