

NEW FOREST NOTES - APRIL 1992

A Question of Breeding

The last few weeks have seen an unusual public confrontation between two giants of the New Forest establishment - the New Forest Pony Breeding and Cattle Society and the New Forest Commoners Defence Association. These two organisations, which are more usually allies, are at odds over the recommended extension of public subsidies from registered New Forest mares only to all mares running on the Forest whether registered or not, provided they are in acceptable bodily condition. To the uninitiated of course, one New Forest pony looks much like another. Picture postcards, guidebooks and at one time even the New Forest Tourist Centre display pretty photographs of piebald and skewbald (otherwise coloured ponies) along with bays and greys, all captioned "New Forest Ponies". To the purist, this is sacrilege. A true New Forest pony conforms to strict standards and, indeed, must have registered parents before finding a place in the hallowed stud book. Coloured ponies for example are definitely out and have been so for a very long time. The Pony Breeding Society, therefore is anxious to preserve the leading position of registered stock on the Forest and sees any attempt to offer equal advantages to non registered ponies as putting in jeopardy much of its painstaking work over the years. It accepts that the Commoners are entitled to turn out whatever mares they like, but it does not agree that unregistered stock should be subsidised. The Society also fears a drop in income from registration fees if Commoners see less financial incentive to registration.

The Commoners Defence Association argues that it would be inequitable for the Verderers (administrators of the subsidy) to discriminate against perfectly good stock and their owners by withholding subsidy for unregistered stock. They claim that the chief purpose of the subsidy will be to support will be to support the Commoners and the service they provide for the public in maintaining the Forest. This service is provided by the jaws of the ponies and unregistered jaws are quite as effective as registered ones. It is not, they claim, the business of the Verderers to dictate breeding policies to the Commoners, although they fully accept that all stallions must continue to be registered New Forest ponies. The use of any other sort of stallion would prejudice those breeders who run pure herds on the Forest and they are certainly in a majority.

This row over equine class distinction may seem rather petty to outsiders, but in Forest circles feelings run very high on the subject of pony breeding, while equally forceful views are held on the freedom of Commoners to exercise their rights as they see fit and without discrimination against particular animals. Such questions as the study of bloodlines are meat and drink to the enthusiast, but may be less appealing to the working Commoner trying to farm the Forest against considerable odds.

In an attempt to reconcile these two opposing points of view, the Verderers are holding discussions with representatives of both societies before reaching a decision as to how the subsidy should be allocated. All parties are in fact making considerable assumptions about the availability of money for future payments to Commoners. The present English Nature subsidy finishes this year and the government has not yet responded to the recommendations of the Illingworth Committee that further central funds should be made available.

How to buy part of the New Forest

Have you ever thought how useful it would be to possess that unwanted piece of Forest land adjoining your boundary? Cleared of scrub, litter and picnic parties, it would make an excellent pony paddock, site for a second garage or just a delightful amenity area adding ten thousand pounds to the value of your home. I suspect that few people realise that, at least in theory, such acquisitions are perfectly possible through a little known power of the Verderers to authorise exchanges of land. Once the agreement of the Forestry Commission has been obtained in principle, all that is necessary for you to find is a piece of land to give in exchange, obtain the approval of the Verderers and then convey your "exchange" to the Minister of Agriculture. He will then open it to the Forest and allow you to enclose your coveted parcel free from common rights. Whether or not he will want a cash sweetener as well is a matter between you and the Commission.

Such is the theory of land exchange, but in practice it is not likely to be nearly so simple. Years ago exchanges were carried out for the convenience of the local landowners with little regard to their effect on the Forest. One of the best known and least damaging examples can be seen at Ipley Manor where a large open field on the south west corner was given in exchange for part of the Forest nearer the house. At least one other large exchange in post war years was certainly detrimental to the Forest and of very dubious validity, but the power is now used very sparingly indeed.

The Verderers of today will need to be satisfied that the proposed exchange is at least as good for the Forest as for the purchaser. In other words, the exchange will have to be on a value for value basis (or better) not area for area. If half an acre is taken from the Forest adding say £10,000 to the value of a house, the Court may well expect two or three acres in exchange which must also be of appropriate quality and character and in a suitable location. Of course the Forest is very large and the half acre taken at Burley might be replaced with exchange land at Blackfield if the Verderers agreed. Finally, if you have succeeded in obtaining the agreement of the Forestry Commission and Verderers and you have been able to track down suitable exchange land, there may still be one more hurdle to overcome. Since most of the Forest is an area of special scientific interest, English Nature may well want a say in your proposed new use.

In recent years the Verderers have extended the exchange principle to cover acquisitions by public authorities. Such transactions formerly resulted only in monetary compensation, but the Court is now determined that the overall area of the Forest should not be further diminished. At one time the Forestry Commission maintained a "land bank" of Crown Freehold property which was available to prospective exchangers (no doubt at a good price) who wanted bits of the Forest, but had nothing to offer in their place. This comprised the old Ashley Lodge Farm, but it is now exhausted. Southern water on the other hand has prudently provided itself with a bank of excellent land at Fritham and the County Council holds some rather inferior land for the same purpose at Emery Down.

During the last few weeks, a curious problem arising out of an exchange has come to light. About ten years ago the Court agreed to allow the enclosure of a car park at Balmer Lawn in exchange for an area of Crown Freehold at Ashurst Lodge. The car park was duly taken but, apparently due to an oversight, the exchange land was never thrown open to the Forest. The Verderers have now asked that it be thrown open as soon as possible. It has also been suggested that some rent payment for the loss of three acres over ten years might be appropriate.

April Fools?

Members of the drainage working group of the Open Forest advisory Committee must have suspected an early April fool trick last month. They were solemnly informed that the scientific community had prohibited clearance of flood borne debris blocking the Beaulieu River on the grounds that these obstructions and their consequences are valuable natural phenomena and worthy of study. Members of the Committee received copies of a learned paper entitled "Coarse Woody Debris in Stream Channels in Relation to River Channel Management in Woodland Areas". This purported to prove the value of obstructions in Forest rivers and streams. I hope that I am not unduly intolerant of scientific delving into the New Forest. I have tried hard to understand ancient landslides, stream channel erosion and gravel terrace formation, but some of the more remote frontiers of geomorphology are very hard to take seriously. This is certainly the case with woody debris. The issue is quite as serious as it is comical because of public and animal safety, grazing and the well being of the woods along the Beaulieu River are all threatened by this obscure branch of scientific research. There must surely be enough remote river systems in Northern Canada which could be used for this type of study without inflicting it on an overcrowded and over used fragment of Southern England.

I understand that as a special concession, the scientists have agreed to large blockages being reduced (not removed) so that they will for a time comprise little blockages. No doubt in time nature will restore them to their former glory by the addition of fresh flood debris. Whether or not the dams claim the lives of further Forest animals or perhaps even a child playing in the river does not seem to be a primary consideration. I am sure the scientists

would be as horrified as anyone else if a tragedy were to occur, but with the intense visitor pressure on Beaulieu River, the risk cannot be regarded as very remote.

Mountain Bikes Again

Since in the past I have criticised the Forestry Commission for its inaction on the subject of mountain bike damage. I must now welcome the first signs of a change in policy. Notices have appeared at the entrances to the Forest making it clear that cycling is permitted on roads only and in some car parks "no cycling" signs have been erected. The latter may at first sight, seem peculiar. Why should cyclists chose to use the car parks when the whole Forest is apparently open to them? In fact the Commission is quite right to target the parks. Increasing numbers of mountain bikes are brought in by van or on special roof racks on cars. I cannot say that there is, so far, much evidence of a reduction in the number of bikes to be seen on the Forest, but at least a start has been made. Much will depend upon the support (or lack of it) which the keepers receive from higher authority in dealing with the problem. My conversations with members of the Commission field staff over the last year suggest they are fully aware of the damage being done, but have until now lacked the backing of their superiors.

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