

New Forest Notes – April 1996

Mountain bikers' Forest victory

During the six years in which I have been commenting on the Forest's management through these notes, I hope I have not failed to give due credit to the Verderers' Court and the Forestry Commission when either has devised or carried through some policy which has benefited the Forest. There is sadly, another side to this coin and the Forest must now face the cost of a thoroughly bad decision made at the March meeting of the Court

In what must certainly be the most rapid and ignominious retreat in their entire 120 years history, the Verderers were last month frightened into tearing up their new agreement with the Forestry Commission on cycle routes. It will be remembered that this allowed for ten formal routes on gravel tracks. These, together with bridleways, byways, unclassified and minor roads, would have allowed for a network of over two hundred miles of cycle routes within the so-called Heritage Area. In January the Court and the Commission had jointly issued a press release explaining their statutory duties to protect the New Forest and the need to control cycle disturbance. The routes and the accompanying agreement were, it was said, aimed at achieving this. They were designed to make good part of the damage done to the Forests' wilderness character by virtually uncontrolled cycling. Only six weeks later, the Court has abandoned all the gains then made and effectively returned the Forest to the chaos which has degraded it for several years past. How has this astonishing volte face come about? Firstly there was the entirely predictable pressure from mountain bikers and especially those who have set up businesses in the hire and supply of bikes for use on the Forest. As a connoisseur of campaigns, I can admire a skilful assault such as has been launched over the last few weeks and which has culminated in the Court's credibility as protector of the Forest being left in tatters. The great sadness is that the ultimate victim is not the Verderers, but the Forest itself. However, after due acknowledgement of the success of the campaign, I doubt if it would have made much progress without the intervention of the New Forest Committee which, on its first major excursion into influencing Forest management, must be well satisfied with the result. It is the solitude and peace of the woods that will now pay the price of that intervention.

So what has been left from the wreckage of the Verderers' policy? So far as I can see, the Commission has little guidance as to how to run mountain biking this year, beyond some general statements by the Verderers. These are to the effect that there should be no biking on the Open Forest except for gravel tracks not exceeding 100 metres giving access to Inclosures. The Commission has therefore decided to ignore the Verderers altogether and to permit cycling to continue just as before. As a management policy this is both damaging to the Forest and illegal, but as an exasperated response to the vacillations of the Court, I suppose it is understandable, it has, after all, had the ground cut away from under its feet within weeks of starting to enforce the new agreed routes.

A rather woolly attempt at face-saving was made by the Court on March 19th in a statement which completely ignored the dumped agreement and claimed (without any justification, as the Commission's subsequent actions showed, that the Forest would still have "some protection". The Verderers' Court cannot have it both ways. If its agreement with the Forestry Commission in January was a necessary conservation measure, as it was then stated to be, then it follows that to withdraw that measure in the face of opposition is a straightforward sacrifice of the Forest to demanded recreational pressures. So often the pundits have warned that this is a recipe for disaster in managing the ... in the Forest, but it seems that nothing has been learned. There will be a lot of talk about reviews, discussions and so on, but the blunt fact is that the Court has surrendered without a shot being fired.

Strangles in New Forest Ponies

In October last year, several pony drifts were cancelled because of an outbreak of strangles. I suppose all of us expected that, as usually happens, the disease would disappear after a few weeks and that the number of animals infected would be small. In fact the reverse happened. Over the months there has been a steady flow of reported cases with a marked increase last month. In at least one part of the Forest, perhaps a quarter of the ponies are or have been infected. The distressing visible symptoms have, I am told, led to an increasing number of calls to the Verderers' staff and, in some cases, where blood is visible, to incorrect assumptions by members of the public that the affected animal has been involved in a road accident. Finally, as the disease has begun to affect riding ponies in paddocks adjoining the Forest, other horse owners have become concerned. It is therefore worth considering the nature of the disease, the way in which the Verderers manage infected stock and the precautions which can be taken by riding horse owners adjoining the Forest.

Strangles is a bacterial infection which attacks principally the horse's respiratory system. Visible symptoms are distressing to both victim and observer. There is a thick nasal discharge and a large abscess usually forms under the jaw. As this presses on the throat it can impede the animal's ability to eat. When the abscess bursts, infected material and sometimes blood is discharged and may continue to drip for some days, although after the burst the animal usually begins to feel better and will re-commence eating. An unpleasant raw scar may remain for some time. Strangles is spread by close contact between animals, by coughing and by infected material from the nose and abscesses. There is no doubt that the sight of a pony suffering from Strangles is unpleasant, but death from this cause alone is unusual. Sometimes complications occur in which abscesses form in other parts of the body and in these cases the policy followed by the Verderers, on veterinary advice, is to leave affected animals alone so far as possible. By keeping them quiet and unstressed, they are given the best chance of speedy recovery. The spread of the disease is also limited by avoiding removal of infected animals, perhaps to holdings in an entirely different part of the Forest. Only when the animal is in poor condition or there are obvious complications is its removal ordered.

Horses which have once suffered from strangles are usually immune for the remainder of their lives, so it may be some years before there is another serious outbreak such as we are

experiencing at present. In the meantime, what can worried owners of riding horses in and around the Forest do to reduce the risk to their stock? Clearly the most important thing is to avoid close contact with infected animals, if possible by removing stock from fields adjoining the Forest. Where this cannot be done, I am advised that a good buffer zone created by electric fencing around the Forest boundary of a paddock may help. When horses [missing] should be kept well clear of the ponies, especially any groups known to be infected. They should not be permitted to graze, browse or drink — especially from water troughs — so as to avoid possible contact with infected material from nose or abscess.

The degenerating Commons

For the second year running, large sums of English Nature money are being made available for heathland restoration on the Adjacent Commons of the New Forest. At Bramshaw, birch clearance is being undertaken, while on Hale Purlieu over two weeks' work by a massive tracked excavator has gone far towards eliminating the remaining rhododendron infestation. Follow-up weeding operations on the re-growth from last year's operations are about to start. Both these areas are National Trust property, but for the first time the programme is also being extended to privately owned commons. At Rockford there has been extensive birch clearance and the cutting of old gorse adjoining Whitemoor Bottom. Some burning has been carried out at Bramshaw at Hale Purlieu gorse has been burnt for the first time in over twenty years. However, the absence of a carefully planned rotational burning programme on the remaining commons is a matter of great concern. It must be very obvious to anyone who examines the Forest at this time of year that gorse and holly are the mainstay of the ponies' diet. Without regular burning the gorse dies out and part of a vital feed source is lost. In the old RMC gravel pit at Rockford the gorse is already showing signs of decay, but could be saved if action is taken without further delay.

With one or two exceptions, the Adjacent Commons of the New Forest present a dismal picture of decay and mismanagement, despite the fact that they contain much of the Forest's most beautiful scenery. Agricultural junk and waste materials have been dumped outside some of the holdings, pigs have ruined large areas of grassland, anti-car protection measures lie broken and abandoned. Places such as Moyles Court Oak, once one of the renowned beauty spots of the Forest are dirty and degraded through over use and lack of management. Here the remaining fragments of grass are being wiped out by uncontrolled vehicular access. It is perfectly obvious what needs to be done. Examples can be seen in a hundred recreation sites throughout the Crown Forest — but there is no one with the inclination and money to tackle the problem. The Adjacent Commons are of course outside the control of the Forestry Commission. Maligned as the Commission is for exercising restrictions on its own land, one has only to look at the Commons to see what a sad state the whole Forest would be in without that control, who, then, is responsible for this state of affairs on the largely privately owned commons? There are a large number of individual landowners who derive little or no profit from their common land and who see no point in spending money to protect it. Even the National Trust seems to find it impossible to prevent abuse in places. All these difficulties were

considered by the New Forest Review in 1987 when it was recommended that the proposed Heritage Area Committee (later the New Forest Committee) should take action. However, the best part of a decade has now passed and things are worse than ever. Only the New Forest Association, with the aid of a small grant from the County Council, continues to do its best to protect some of the finest areas of heathland on the west side of the Forest. The new English Nature money is most welcome from the grazing maintenance point of view, but it does nothing to solve the. root problems of mismanagement and abuse. Only a tiny fraction of the Lottery money to be spent on a Southampton swimming pool would secure the future of several thousand acres of the New Forest.

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