

NEW FOREST NOTES AUGUST 2014

A Forest anniversary

Everyone has been so preoccupied with the commemoration of the great international events of a century ago, that a more recent anniversary of immense importance to the New Forest has been in danger of slipping by quite unnoticed. This week, (31st July to be precise), marks fifty years since the New Forest Act of 1964 came into force. It transformed the modern history of the Forest and, with the possible exception of the defeat of the Lyndhurst Bypass Bill, was the most important achievement of the Verderers Court in the 20th century.

The Act dealt with a series of very pressing problems of animal welfare and management. Before it, Forest livestock was free to wander out of the common grazing lands, along the roads and into the suburban areas around the boundaries, wrecking gardens, damaging farmland and with many ponies and cattle killed on roads far from the Forest itself. In those days it was quite usual to find herds of ponies on the outskirts of Romsey, happily grazing the verges of the A 31, or in Highcliffe or as far north as Salisbury. The Act re-drew the Forest's boundary or perambulation and allowed for the installation of cattle grids and fencing along the new line. Today we are so used to driving over grids that they have become just part of the normal street furniture of Hampshire. In 1964, they were highly controversial and their provision was bitterly contested. It was said that they would not work. Ponies would learn to walk over them, jump them or roll across them. In any case, why should ratepayers have to finance the work which would simply benefit the commoners' ponies and cattle? Were not the commoners all rich farmers making a fortune out of public property and from inflated insurance claims against motorists? The result was that the Bill was challenged by petitions in both houses of parliament, and these had to be fought one by one.

The realignment of the boundary made it essential that various commons surrounding the "Crown" Forest were brought under the same administrative rules as the centre and this meant that the commoners there had, for the first time, to pay for the services of the agisters which they had been accustomed to receiving free of charge and at the expense of the Forest as a whole. That also caused resentment and yet more opposition, eventually resulting in a messy compromise whereby reduced marking fees for the commons were agreed and will persist until 2025 when full fees will become payable. This gives rise to the ridiculous anachronism whereby if I turn out a cow on my local common, I pay an annual fee equal to the cost of a box of breakfast cereal. In return for this, the agister may be called out at any time of the day or night to attend my cow if it is knocked over by a car or if it becomes sick.

Next there was the question of the A 35 road, then still unfenced and on which over 80 animals a year were being killed and injured. The Act allowed that to be fenced and the actual work followed on very quickly, saving countless pony and cattle lives and probably at least some human ones as well, although even this measure was unpopular at the time.

Further opposition to the Bill came from the big gravel companies who were digging up and destroying the commons on the west side of the Forest. They feared that an extended boundary taking in their quarrying areas would lead to more protective planning policies. Theoretically their claims were groundless, because the 1964 Act had no planning consequences, but in fact it proved a turning point which did indeed see the Forest better protected and managed until the last ten years or so.

Finally there were all sorts of tidying-up measures to improve the efficiency of management. The autumn pannage season was made moveable to match the actual fall of acorns, rather than being based on arbitrary dates. Permission for the creation of camp sites could be granted or withheld by the Verderers. New ornamental woods could be created with the consent of the Court and the Forestry Commission was given greater power to manage the ancient woodland – a power which led to serious battles in the years that followed.

In summary, the 1964 Act put the Forest into a state where it could face the challenges of the 20th century and beyond. It was not quite the end of the story because six years later, after an attempt to set aside the Verderers' veto on recreational development, a further Act was required to put things right. At the same time, the opportunity was taken to fence the A337 road as well. Since then, this type of local legislation has become increasingly rare and I don't suppose another New Forest Act is likely in the foreseeable future, despite the growing number of problems for which there are no real solutions under existing law. Still, we must be thankful that so much was achieved in 1964 and 1970 so that the worst excesses of demands on the Forest remain to this day firmly under the control of the Verderers' Court.

Razors in the heather

A few years ago, the pernicious practice arose in the New Forest of throwing down waste sheets and offcuts of corrugated iron all over the heaths to provide shelter and warmth for snakes. It was never really explained how snakes had managed to survive in the Forest for millennia without such accommodation and I think it had more to do with the convenience of those studying them than with any pressing need for conservation. Anyhow, the consequences were potentially lethal for livestock and for ridden horses. If you want to experience a really nasty self-inflicted injury, try careless handling of a newly cut sheet of corrugated iron. It has an edge like an extremely ragged razor and this was the material that was being hidden deep within the heather across the Forest. It takes little imagination to picture the damage which such an edge could inflict upon the leg of a galloping pony. The Verderers at the time protested and, eventually after much procrastination, the Forestry Commission agreed to ban the practice, allowing instead the use of bitumastic and fibre sheet material imported from France. It was still not satisfactory, but the potential for life-threatening injury was removed.

That should have been the end of the story, but the snake-observers seem to be reverting to their old anti-social habits. Last month I recovered a clearly recent iron offcut buried in the heather of Hale Purlieu and bearing the number "51" in white paint. The

implication of this is that there are likely to be at least another fifty in use, presumably with the consent of (or perpetrated by) the National Trust which owns the land. I removed the offending sheet and while doing so I struck its edge against a birch sapling. It left a gash half an inch deep and this could just as easily have been in the leg of a foal.

Park chairman

The choice of Oliver Crosthwaite Eyre as the new chairman of the national park has been widely welcomed in the Forest, but it does not necessarily follow that the park leopard is about to change its spots. A knowledgeable and respected chairman may give wise guidance to his committee, but he cannot change the way its members think and vote.

There are two fundamental problems with the park which no change of leadership is likely to overcome. Firstly the membership is dominated by councillors - worthy and diligent people no doubt - who give us invaluable service in their local authorities, but who are largely unsuited to the sensitive business of participating in managing the Forest. Promotion of tourism and development, the creation of jobs, the building of transport systems and housing and the provision of public services are crucial to our modern way of life. All these are the responsibility of councillors, but they can be in major conflict with the proper management of the New Forest, as the record of the park over the last few years has demonstrated. It remains to be seen if plans for elected park members will have much effect in changing things. I suspect it is unlikely. Democracy requires that the urban vote will swamp local (indigenous Forest) opinion and will ensure business as usual for the authority. The pity of it is that the law is perfectly clear on the subject and where secondary purposes of national parks (development etc) are in conflict with the need for protection, the latter should prevail. Here, and probably in other parks as well, the priorities have been turned on their heads by the constitution of the authority.

Secondly, national park officers build their careers on marketing their park, usually cloaked in green disguise and called "sustainable tourism", "green transport" or "education". An official whose CV shows that he brought in a further twenty thousand inner city visitors or who established trendy recreational opportunities (preferably with a catchy title like "Go wild in the Forest" or "Forest kids' Cycle Blaster") will go much further than one who successfully prevents some unsuitable use or who promotes an unpopular measure which benefits the Forest in the long term. The latter will have served the Forest well, but he is unlikely to end up as chief executive of a national park in the mould of a chief officer of the Lake District who said he wanted his park to become the "adventure capital of Britain".

The new chairman may be able to rub off a few sharp edges from park policies, but to make the park an asset to the New Forest (rather than the liability which many Forest people believe it to be), may require more than human effort.

Anthony Pasmore