

NEW FOREST NOTES AUGUST 2016

The New Forest and Brexit

How the New Forest will be affected by Brexit was the subject of much speculation at the July Verderers' Court. The Forest comes under the aegis of DEFRA, but of all aspects of British life, agricultural and countryside policies are at present those most dominated by European objectives. They may thus be the most susceptible to change when policy is again decided in London. In the immediate future there seems general agreement that little will change. Money will continue to flood into the Forest for the next three and a half years under the HLS scheme, since the contract for those funds runs until February 2020. Thereafter things begin to look rather less certain. It remains to be seen whether an all-British agricultural policy will continue to regard as a priority the expenditure of up to half a million pounds per scheme, for filling Forest watercourses with gravel, in pursuit of ecological objectives. By that stage there may or may not be a government of a different political complexion, but I doubt if much will change in the local political scene, and we now know exactly what Sir Desmond Swayne MP thinks of at least one of these projects. Of the proposed work of filling up Latchmore Brook with 96,000 tonnes of gravel, he has written that it would comprise "state-sponsored vandalism". That is a refreshingly clear pronouncement and the more valuable since the MP has actually taken the trouble to walk the entire scheme and to see for himself the damage that would be done if the scheme goes ahead. It is difficult to believe that there will not be some radical re-thinking of such priorities once Britain controls its own countryside policies.

The HLS scheme is not the only area where the possibility of change is opened up by Brexit. The Basic Payment Scheme (subsidy to farmers) is leading the Forest towards ultimate disaster in paying large sums to encourage more and more animals to be grazed in the Forest. By July of this year the number of stock paid for had risen by over a thousand on this time last year and that follows on a similar (annual) increase in 2015. There is nothing wrong with the BPS scheme elsewhere than in the New Forest, but here a stupid imposition of rules applicable to well-regulated common rights in the remainder of the country, is made on our totally unregulated numbers. The more animals you turn out, the more money you will be given. The precise sums are not yet known, but are likely to run into several hundred pounds for each "livestock unit". Some people are getting very rich. The Verderers know that this could be the road to ruin for the Forest and so does the Commoners' Defence. It was a prime subject of discussion at the last AGM. These inflexible and damaging rules are an interpretation of present subsidy objectives, but with the Common Agricultural Policy about to be replaced, we have a golden opportunity to stop this nonsense once and for all.

There has been much wringing of hands in the Verderers' Court over the problem of rocketing stock numbers, and there is general agreement that somebody ought to do something, but we go on from month to month with no clear plan of action. Instead, the Forest should already be at the front of the queue to influence change in the post-Brexit subsidy schemes. Once new policies form and begin to harden in government, it will be too late. Rather than taking action, we worry about statistics, surveys and discussions. The Forest needs to be working now, through our local MPs, to arrange the

necessary meetings with government departments. When the original Single Payment Scheme subsidies were instituted (a sound system beneficial to the Forest), deputations of Verderers were constantly going up to London to ensure that our management of the Forest was not undermined. It is very different this time.

Drones

I can remember that in 1987 a member of the New Forest Review Group, with experience of the north of England, enquired whether we had any problem with mountain bikes in the Forest. Several of us replied that we did not even know what mountain bikes were – after all, we had no mountains! From then on the problem of bike trespass mushroomed in the Forest and the authorities failed to get an early grip upon it, just as they have failed ever since. Today it is established as a principal scourge of the district. Now it seems that exactly the same could occur with drones.

The flying of any aircraft, glider, hot air balloon or model aircraft on the Crown Land is an offence under the Forestry Commission's byelaws. Long ago the Commission took a firm line on model aircraft and they are now confined (under permission) to part of Beaulieu Aerodrome. Powered and other hang gliders the Commission has, to its credit, acted against, but it now needs to stop this latest illegal use of the Forest from developing. One of my colleagues on the Verderers' Court observed a drone being operated illegally at Lyndhurst and right across towards the Forest's eastern boundary. He subsequently discovered that the offender had had the cheek to post film of his misdeeds on the internet, complete with name and address.

Hill forts in the New Forest

I have always been fascinated by the pictures of a pre-New Forest landscape and society which archaeologists are able to conjure up. At the moment a national survey of hill forts is being carried out and, contributing to this, local archaeologist Chris Read has been making a thorough reassessment of such sites in the Forest area. The first phase of his work was published by the New Forest History and Archaeology Group earlier this year.

Hill forts date chiefly from the Iron Age (the period of several centuries immediately before the Roman invasion). Their precise purpose is a little unclear and probably varied from site to site, although defence provided by massive earthworks is clearly a key element. There are only four or five such forts on the Crown land of the Forest, together with a few lesser defensive enclosures. In the immediate surroundings, however, there are more massive examples like Buckland Rings, Frankenbury near Fordingbridge and Tatchbury near Totton. All the Forest sites are small compared to the vast enclosures on the surrounding chalk downland. The most accessible example in the Forest is Castle Hill at Burley, where a gravel road on the edge of the village runs through the centre of the site. Local housing development and gravel digging has severely damaged this fort, but it is still an imposing structure and well worth a visit. The views over the surrounding country to the west are particularly fine.

The most recently discovered hill fort is at Stubby Copse, recorded in the 1980s by the late David Stagg, who was one of our leading Mediaeval historians. That discovery was made thirty years ago, long before lidar was available and by what I regard as good old-fashioned fieldwork on foot. Thereafter it seemed that apart from reassessment of the type being undertaken by Chris Read, and possibly excavation, research into New Forest hill forts was at an end. Such massive earthworks could hardly have escaped notice in an increasingly well studied area. It was therefore remarkable news last month that archaeologists preparing a report on the Dibden Inclosure area had discovered a possible hill fort which previous workers had overlooked. Indeed, it seemed too good to be true and that has since proved to be the case.

Dibden Inclosure is one of the so-called "Verderers' Inclosures", planted with conifer in the 1960s and designed to provide screening of the Waterside development from the Forest. In achieving this end it has been remarkably successful. It is also beloved of Waterside residents as a well-sheltered dog walking area in an otherwise very exposed part of the Forest. On its western side is a very steep hill which projects out onto the heathland beyond and with commanding views across the central and eastern parts of the Forest. At first sight it looks like an ideal defensive position, given the requirements of a hill fort. Sadly, the ramparts which surround it turned out to be entirely natural in origin with, on the north and west, a geomorphological feature called a "seepage step". Such steps are very common across the Forest and comprise localized land movement where water oozing out of a spring line around a steep slope creates unstable conditions. In the Dibden case, part of the original water source has been removed, making the origin of the scarp less immediately recognisable. On the south side of the hill there have probably been more drastic land movements in the form of successive landslips which give the appearance of parallel terraces. Dibden will not therefore become the latest addition to Chris Read's detailed and informative survey. Still, the archaeologists who "found" the Dibden fort are not alone in being misled by such natural features. One hundred and fifty years ago the renowned writer on the Forest, John Wise, described a "fine Roman camp" on the north side of Eyeworth Wood and possessing well preserved earthworks. Here, as at Dibden, the "camp" is entirely natural, comprising a series of ancient landslips.

Where can you put up a fence ?

The Forestry Commission has issued a very useful leaflet explaining where a householder adjoining the Forest may or may not erect a fence. This is not so obvious as might at first appear, as the answer is "not always on the outer edge of your ownership". Most fields and gardens adjoining the Forest are bounded by an ancient ditch with a bank surmounted by a hedge on its inside. The ditch, although owned by the householder, has been open to grazing by Forest animals "time out of mind". It has thus become subject to grazing rights and must not be enclosed by erecting a fence on the outer edge of the ditch.

The New Forest Land Advice Service is at present administering grants for the restoration of traditional hedges within the Forest area. This is a very worthwhile project in protecting the Forest's landscape, but it does raise some difficult questions about fencing to protect the new hedge plants.

A recent meeting attended by members of the interested authorities, including the Verderers, concluded that so long as the new planting is within the footprint of the decayed hedge, fencing of the outer slope of the bank (but not enclosing the ditch) will normally be acceptable. This is a general rule and unfortunately there will always be exceptions dictated by particular circumstances.

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