

## **New Forest Notes – August 1997**

### **Five million pound Forest overhaul**

Back in April I complained of the secrecy surrounding the so-called "Life Bid" — an application for huge sums of European money to be spent in the New Forest. I now understand that the application has been approved and only awaits a signature from the County Council for work to commence. A friend who possesses more influence than I do (or perhaps a more effective network of moles) has come up with an unexpurgated copy of the bid so that it is now possible to see exactly how much will be spent, by whom and on what.

The total sum to be laid out is five-and-a-quarter million pounds, half of which is European money and half provided by the ten partners in the scheme. Of these, the Wiltshire Wildlife trust, the RSPB and the Ninth Centenary Trust account for less than half a percent of the total. The big players are the Forestry Commission (30%) and the National Trust (nearly 10%). The latter is planning substantial land purchases, the details of which are best left obscure, together with some maintenance on its existing land. The Commission's work on the other hand is largely in the management of the Crown lands, with expenditure in all those areas which are traditionally short of funds. To start with, there will be endless planning, monitoring. To start with, there will be endless planning, monitoring and publicity, all of which is probably necessary in so large a project. The practical work by the Commission and others will include clearing rhododendron and other exotics from 227 acres of beech woods, 300 acres of oak woods and 35 acres of heath. Conifers are to be cleared from the Verderers' Inclosures (commercial plantations which destroyed heathland in the 1980s) to the extent of about 333 acres during the four year life of the programme. The plan also says for the first time that the whole 2,000 acres of these plantations will be cleared, although it gives no indication of the timing of this work.

On the Open Forest, a further 2,000 acres of heathland is to be "enhanced" by the removal of birch and pine, while 1,600 acres of bracken will receive an application of chemical spray to reduce or eliminate the plant. The spraying does not appear in the summary of the work to be undertaken but is buried in the body of the bid. This is a programme far in excess of anything that has been seen in the Forest before. Perhaps even more controversial this time, so far as the commoners are concerned, is the plan to restore 1,400 acres of bog, apparently to be achieved by filling-in unsuitable drains to prevent erosion.

Recreation damage is to be repaired, especially by the County Council on the pieces of common land which it has recently purchased on the west side of the Forest. This is urgent and long overdue work. The Crown lands were protected twenty-five years ago and Hyde and Gorley Commons are now in a very poor state because nothing effective was ever done there. The Commission will, on its land, attempt to restore damage throughout nearly 2,000 acres, after trials and consultations lasting a year.

Other lesser works include pollarding, pond restoration, pony subsidies and habitat enhancement for particular species. Various private nature reserves belonging to conservation societies will be improved.

The scale of the work proposed is immense and while most of it is very worthwhile in the long term, it may not be easy to sell to the public. Tracts of rhododendron whose purple flowers are beloved of the pleasure driver in the spring will disappear. Many seas of golden bracken in the autumn will, if the scheme succeeds, become a thing of the past.

These difficulties presumably account for the immense sums to be expended on paperwork and publicity. For example, the Forestry Commission alone will spend a third of a million pounds preparing a plan and £120,000 on "public awareness and dissemination of results." The New Forest Committee will spend £27,000 doing the same thing and the National Trust £5,700. Altogether, the unbelievable sum of nearly £200,000 — about 4% of the entire programme — will be devoted to this purpose. Education now is evidently a very big business.

## Hunting

This subject seems destined to dominate New Forest politics for months to come. The date of the last Verderers' Court, by which we had been promised a government decision on hunting in the New Forest has come and gone with no announcement. Now the Court has been told that a statement in Parliament may be expected by the end July and the Forestry Commission is meanwhile remaining tight-lipped. Those who know more about the subject than I do seem convinced that the new government is back tracking as fast as it can on the alleged commitment to end hunting in the New Forest and, presumably, on other Forestry Commission and Ministry of Defence land. Interestingly, this seems to be an assessment of the situation which is shared by both pro- and anti-hunting lobbies.

At the Court on the 21st July it was the turn of those who support hunting to plead with the Verderers to allow it to continue, just as the opponents had sought an opposite decision in May. Neither side seems in the least concerned that the Verderers have no power to grant permission and probably none to prevent its grant! That "probably" is, however, significant. The Verderers do have to approve the provision of facilities for recreational and sporting facilities in the Forest, although the Forestry Commission has generally seen fit to ignore the provisions of the Countryside Act and the New Forest Act, 1970 which required the Verderers' consent. In a great many years on the Court, I cannot remember when the Commission last asked the Verderers to approve a sporting event, although large numbers are held every year. Only when the New Forest Association took counsel's opinion on this subject did the Verderers insist on their right to determine the mountain biking question. Hunting is a different matter. The Acts do not appear to operate retrospectively and hunting licences have been issued regularly since before both statutes were passed — almost certainly since before the Court was established in 1877. It would therefore seem that the Verderers have neither a positive nor a negative say in the matter and that the decision rests wholly with the Forestry Commission under government directive. If the licences are to be renewed (and cub-hunting starts in August) I hardly

expect the Deputy Surveyor to make a presentment in the September Court seeking the approval of the Verderers, followed by presentments for and against in November with a decision made after that!

The Verderers have steadfastly held to their neutral view of the moral question and have simply forwarded copies of all the presentments, for and against, to the appropriate department. At the same time they have expressed concern as to what, if anything, will replace the present collection service for dead farm animals if the hunts are closed down. The hunts evidently appreciate that this is one of their strongest cards, and I have yet to hear an effective counter to it from their opponents.

### **Chalk**

The geology of the New Forest is made up of poor sands, clays and gravels. There is no chalk, although the ring of chalk hills which surrounds the Hampshire Basin comes to within a mile or so of the perambulation at Downton. The Forest is thus a very acid place, but on the old Ashley bombing range chalk was imported in large quantities to whiten the targets. After fifty years, some of this importation has grown over, but certain targets and stock heaps, notably at Cockley Hill and Hampton Ridge, remain. At certain times and particularly this spring, these whitened areas attract ponies. They are not grazing vegetation growing on the chalk, but literally eating the soil. I have watched a number of mares doing this and the quantities of chalk consumed are apparently far larger than necessary to make good a minor mineral deficiency. Before the bracken came up, it was common to find white dung piles scattered about the heath near to the sources of chalk which, on careful examination, revealed innumerable small lumps of undigested chalk.

I assume that all animals in the Forest, domestic and otherwise, recognise this need for calcium. Considering the number of deer in the Forest, it is surprisingly rare to find cast antlers. When they are found, they are frequently reduced in size by gnawing — presumably by mice. Perhaps this also accounts for the rapid disappearance of skeletons, although in this case the fox is probably responsible.

### **Aerial update**

Last month I drew attention to the aerial which has been erected at Woodfidley. It is now clear that this greatly exceeds the 15m allowed to telephone companies without planning permission: it is over 100 feet high. Unfortunately, the New Forest Planning Department tells me that the railway companies can put up an aerial of any height they choose without permission, so long as it is used for railway purposes only. The Verderers have since been asked to approve a portion of underground BT cable which will connect to the mast, raising the inevitable question as to whether this is a back door method of obtaining a commercial transmitting site. The Court has asked for assurances that this is not the case before deciding the application.