

NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2002

Picket Post past and present

There can be few more unpleasant parts of the New Forest than Picket Post. This tiny settlement north of Burley was once a delightful place, surrounded by the Forest over which it commanded sweeping views to the Isle of Wight and the Purbecks. An occasional cart rumbled through on the old toll road across the Forest and cows lounged on the green outside the Copper Kettle tearooms. It was a model of pastoral tranquillity.

Today Picket Post is bisected by a great dual carriageway and its accompanying flyover serving Burley. The noise is shattering, penetrating the Forest in every direction and testifying to the thoughtlessness and stupidity of the road planners of the 1960s. With a minimum of earth banking, the effects of the road could have been drastically reduced. On the north side of Picket Post, once occupied by gracious houses and the immaculate gardens of the tearooms, there are now commercial premises serving the road – a garage and a fast food emporium. From the grounds of these premises and from the road itself, litter spews into the Forest – litter which no-one now bothers to collect. The surroundings are so degraded, that litter collection no doubt seems quite pointless. This picture of desolation is completed by a sports club building surrounded by rusting machinery and debris.

Just recently I have been seeing a good deal more of Picket Post than I like. This is because the fencing of the various premises on the north side of the road is in an advanced state of deterioration and no-one seems inclined to do anything about it. One or two loose strands of wire supported on a series of rotten posts at one point and a decaying length of post and rail elsewhere, is all that separates cars travelling at perhaps 90 mph from the ponies and cattle. If the fancy took them, the stock could, in a matter of moments, push through onto the carriageways in the middle of the night. The prospect is quite appalling.

Exactly who is responsible for this fencing is very far from clear. It is not the Forestry Commission (it is not their fence), it is not the commoners (they cannot touch private fencing or erect fencing on the Forest) and it is not the highway authority (because it is not part of the road fence, but rather the fencing of private land open to the road). The occupiers of the commercial premises may be perfectly innocent of any responsibility for all I know. There are evidently some other, so far unidentified landowners involved. No doubt all these points will be made forcibly at a coroner's inquest if the worst should happen, for it is hard to believe that fatalities (perhaps multiple) would not be the result of cattle gaining access to that terrible road. Back in October an inspection revealed that at one point only a single rail 18" above ground level was all that was holding back the stock. The Verderers complained loudly and some temporary patching was undertaken by or on behalf of the highway authority, with the promise of more work to follow. So far nothing more has happened. It may not be defective points below a passenger train, but it is potentially quite as dangerous.

After several visits to this extraordinarily disagreeable bit of the Forest, I looked up Felicite Hardcastle's "Records of Burley", because that invaluable book contains a detailed

history of the site, together with numerous photographs. Picket Post seems to have been encroached from the Forest in the last quarter of the 18th Century and to have had a colourful history thereafter. It was an extra parochial place and at one stage illegitimate babies were taken in and cared for there – beyond the jurisdiction of the parish system which might have resulted in “paupers” being moved on. An inn was established, but its licence was revoked in 1890 and a tearoom was afterwards opened in its place. Two vicars of Burley chose to live at Picket Post and a fine large house was erected with the curious name “Dilamgerbendi Insula”. Later on, most of the enclave was acquired by Auberon Herbert of Old House (the philanthropist and authority on the Forest’s old woods). The site was then redeveloped by his son, Lord Lucas, with a large but very ugly mansion. Lord Lucas was a famous breeder of New Forest ponies. He lost a leg in the Boer War, but remained a talented horseman, despite his disability. He was eventually killed in the Royal Flying Corps in the First World War. Meanwhile, his tenant, Forest agister Jesse Taylor and his family, ran the famous Kettle tearooms. The family eventually left in 1967, two years before demolition and consumption of the site by the road. After Lord Lucas’s death, the big house passed through several hands, becoming a school and then a hotel. According to “Records of Burley”, it was “deliberately burnt down by an ailing hotelier on Boxing Day 1960” ! The same night, the nearby Burley Manor Hotel also caught fire, but fortunately survived.

Cattle Marking

Keepers of small numbers of cattle continue to face difficulties in getting their stock freeze branded to turn out on the Forest. For one or two animals (perhaps all that is added to the herd each year), the costs are prohibitive. The agisters who formerly undertook this branding are not now able to do it for health and safety reasons. Anti-foot and mouth precautions now make it impossible for farmers to bring together a number of cattle at a central collecting farm for branding. The Verderers have therefore been seeking a way to overcome this difficulty. The Court is now to purchase a special stock of large ear tags which can be clearly marked with the owner’s brand and which will be inserted by the agister when the ordinary Verderers’ tag is applied, at the time of payment of the marking fee. The charge for these special tags will be a nominal £1 per head. The system has been tested by one farmer this year and found to work satisfactorily. Tags will be available from the start of the 2003 season.

Orienteering

At the November Verderers’ Court, Mike Cooper made a presentment highlighting the problems caused by orienteering in the Forest. Due to confusion between the Forestry Commission and the Verderers’ staff, a very large orienteering event at Brockenhurst clashed with a pony drift. That was unfortunate, but no more than an administrative mix up which should be avoided in future. The real problem is the absolute unsuitability of the Forest for this sort of event, with over 1000 people taking part, numerous tents, generators, sales of goods, tapes across the Forest and so on. I was not present at the Brockenhurst meeting, but I have witnessed similar events on a number of occasions in the past. They can only be

described as saturation disturbance of a large area of Forest. No part of the affected zone escapes. People come crashing through the trees off the tracks, over (and through) bogs and over drains, from every direction. Mike Cooper reported the evident distress of the deer being driven back and forth, and that is exactly my experience of what happens. In Islands Thorns I have watched fallow deer in a state of complete panic during one event. It is surely time that the Forestry Commission accepted that quiet informal recreation may be appropriate in the New Forest, but that massive organised events such as this should have no place in an area whose primary purpose is supposed to be conservation and protection of a quiet and beautiful environment. Tinkering with the details of future permissions is simply not good enough.

A Century of Killing

This month marks a notable anniversary for the New Forest. We have just completed the first century of killing on the Forest's roads and seem set to do an even better job of it over the years to come. The first New Forest pony was killed on the roads in 1903 and, in 1977, I calculated that six thousand of the commoners' stock had followed that first insignificant colt. Since then, I suppose that a further thousand or so has been added to the appalling total. But the figures really mean nothing: it is the agony of the dying animal, the loss of years of careful breeding and the sheer waste that matter.

Human deaths in accidents are now, mercifully, extremely rare. Improved car design and the use of seat belts have no doubt helped. The problem is that this greater safety simply inspires more confidence in those who are stupid (or callous) enough to speed across the Forest. Their attitude seems to be: "If I kill a pony, so what? I may dent the car a bit, but the insurance will pay, so why should I crawl home from work rather than drive at my comfortable 50 mph – just for the sake of a few scraggy horses?" I doubt if anyone would put these thoughts into words, but the behaviour of many motorists can only be explained by such reasoning. There are accidents in which the motorist is entirely blameless, but they are very rare. As an example, I once saw a buck leap the fences of the A 337 during the rut and land directly in the path of an oncoming car. Mostly it is just sheer speed and stupidity and the horror and suffering seem of no importance to many drivers.

Last month I drove to a meeting in Minstead just after the evening rush hour. On Longcross Plain a pony had been killed. Its head was virtually cut off and it had bled profusely so that the already wet road had become a red lake, sprayed up by the wheels of other cars rushing to get past the carnage. It was a horrible sight, but there seems neither the will nor the interest in doing anything about it. The New Forest 40 mph speed limit has now become an almost universal joke.

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