

# NEW FOREST NOTES DECEMBER 2018

## Pony drifts and declining Forest skills

Last month provided one of those times when ordinary members of the New Forest Commoners' Defence Association have an opportunity of learning about the association's work over the previous nine months. This is through the medium of the "mid-term meeting" held at Bramshaw Village Hall. It is a well-attended event, but successive chairmen have found the temptation to tinker with its format quite irresistible. A few years ago it was a highly structured meeting in which committee members with particular duties delivered accounts of their work one after the other. Those meetings dragged on interminably and there was little opportunity for comment or questions from the membership. Then there was a change to a mixture of reports and of members' participation, which I personally thought a good deal better. This year, at the other extreme to the original format, almost the whole thing was turned over to the members to discuss their particular interests and we were told little of the hard work which I know the committee undertakes. The resulting free-for-all, with people talking over each other and with the notoriously bad acoustics of the hall made it particularly difficult for the 50% of us who might be kindly described as senior citizens - some with declining hearing. It is not as though the Commoners' Defence now has a website to which one can refer for information, or at least I have not been able to find it. On the other hand its annual report remains outstanding and is a primary source for anyone researching the recent past of the Forest.

This year the meeting was preceded by a brief talk given by representatives of National Grid, in which they explained the measures they intend to take to protect livestock if they are given planning permission to "underground" the 400kv power line that crosses the north of the Forest. Thereafter several subjects were discussed, including some, like the attempts to reduce road accidents involving the commoners' animals, which might have been taken from the minutes of a Bramshaw meeting at any time over the last sixty years. The same arguments and complaints may be heard year after year, but still the killing goes on.

A rather more unexpected discussion then arose on the subject of pony drifts. The drifts are the annual round-ups in which ponies are driven in from the Forest to be inspected and "marked" by the agisters. The marking (cutting patterns in the tail hairs of the ponies) shows that the relevant fees have been paid to the Verderers. Until recent years it was a crucial way of limiting evasion of payment, but now that the subsidies available on most animals amount to many times the marking fee and those subsidies can only be collected on production of a marking fee receipt, the marking of ponies really begins to seem a rather pointless exercise. Still, this is a matter for the Verderers and the Commoners' Defence members are not much worried about it. On the other hand a great deal of concern was expressed about the shortage of efficient and knowledgeable commoners attending the drifts, especially in the north of the Forest. The CDA members' interests in the drifts are chiefly centred on the assistance the round-ups give to owners in the management of their animals. They

can save the need for private colt hunting to catch foals. They allow for the provision of road-safety collars and they give an opportunity for the administration of medicines – or at least those medicines which Natural England does not ban from use on the Forest. All of this is quite reasonable so long as pony owners turn up and assist. While I am sure that the agisters would be the last people to complain of elderly commoners whose riding days are past and who need the help of the drifts to assist them in their declining years, it is a very different matter with fit young people who cannot be bothered to attend and help either on horseback or on foot. One retired agister told the meeting of commoners who expect to be notified by telephone if their animals are brought in and then expect the organizers to follow instructions on how those animals should be dealt with.

The discussion then moved on to the lack of experienced (in drifting) riders and how this compares with the “old days”. Too many people who attend on horseback don’t know the Forest well enough and don’t have an understanding of the ponies they are driving. They are not prepared to take the risks (to horse and rider) which successful work on a drift involves. The Forest is a dangerous place. If you are to outpace a herd of ponies desperate to escape by any means, it is no good worrying too much about where the next rabbit hole is or where there may be a broken bottle or a concealed tree stump. You can do your best to avoid obvious large dangers, but too heavy a concentration on safety simply means that the quarry escapes.

It was one of those Forest discussions which seem to go round in circles and where the risks, including intensified public interference with the proper management of stock, health and safety demands and changed attitudes among local commoners are chewed over repeatedly with no very worthwhile results.

### **Fencing of Forest camps and car parks**

Back in October the Verderers commenced a discussion on whether or not certain car parks and campsites should be fenced in order to separate visitors from grazing livestock. The grazing animals have access to such land by right, while the car parks and camps exist through permission of the Verderers. The possibility of fencing, other than at Holmsley, would have been unthinkable fifty years ago when these facilities were first authorized. Now, with visitor numbers constantly increasing and expected to rise to over 20 million day visits per annum in the coming years, together with livestock numbers having risen to not far short of double over the last decade, the conflict between human and animal users of the Forest is becoming acute. I have written several times about the defensive measures taken by cattle to protect their calves from dog attacks, actual or anticipated, and I think the issues are fairly well known locally. The question for management, both Forestry Commission and Verderers, is what (if anything) can be done to alleviate the problems.

The whole of the Open Forest (the unfenced common land as opposed to the Inclosures or timber plantations) is subject to rights of grazing possessed by local farmers. The Inclosures too become subject to those rights when the fences are removed. Without the grazing animals the Forest

would quickly be destroyed by expanding areas of scrub. It has long been recognized that piecemeal erosion of the grazing area by enclosures is something to be considered only as a last resort. That is why fencing of any car parks or camp sites has always been strongly resisted. There may not be much grass in a camp site stamped flat by visitors, but it is a matter of principle where the commoners are concerned. Fence one site and more will inevitably follow.

On the surface there would not seem to be much of an argument in favour of fencing. If visitors choose to come to the Forest they should accept it as they find it. If a tree branch falls and injures someone, or if a visitor contracts Lyme disease as a result of a tick bite, or if a child petting a pony is kicked by it, these are all natural hazards and must be accepted, just as the risks of the seaside or of a path through mountains have to be accepted. That has long been the view of the commoners and it seems a thoroughly sensible one. These are dangers as common to the countryside as traffic, pollution and street violence are in towns, but this is not an easy idea to sell to a visitor from Southampton who has been injured and is determined to find someone to blame. There comes into play the great theory of national parks: "That because they are national the public thinks they own everything in them and because they are parks visitors believe they are entitled to do as they please in them." Why should the farmers' beastly cattle interfere with visitors' harmless dog walking, on the excuse of some "mediaeval" rights that are difficult to understand and really ought to be done away-with ?

Somehow management must steer a course between the conflicting demands on the Forest. In a world where litigation is likely to be the first rather than the last resort of an aggrieved visitor, it is not surprising that there are some nervous birds in the Queen's House at Lyndhurst.

No concrete proposals for fencing have yet come forward, but the idea is that certain intensively used car parks on the Open Forest, but near to Inclosures, might be fenced so that anxious visitors might be directed into the plantations where (in theory) there are no animals. Users who then continue to walk on the Open Forest would be warned of the "dangers" of doing so and would be deemed to have consented to the risks. The problem with this is to know where it would stop – one car park or fifty ? Similarly, camp sites much frequented by ponies in search of visitors keen on feeding them might be enclosed to keep campers and livestock apart.

I have to say that I find the whole idea of such fencing repugnant, but I can well understand the worries of Forestry Commission officers who fear that they might one day be faced with a fatality resulting from this clash of urban and rural values. In the long term I think that the relocation of camp sites out of the common lands of the Forest is the best, but expensive, solution. Day visitors are far more difficult to manage, especially as the "selling" of the national park and its values continues unabated.

### **The non-election of Verderers**

Despite all the excitement about a forthcoming election, the contest last month failed to materialize. I understand that two potential candidates (I don't know their names) had intended to stand, but for differing reasons chose not to do so at the last minute. Accordingly the two retiring Verderers – Dave Readhead and Dionis Macnair – were returned unopposed. Since both of these are long-serving and hard-working members of the Court, I don't suppose too many people will be disappointed in the result.

Anthony Pasmore