

New Forest Notes – December 1990

The Vanishing Airfield

This is not, as might be supposed, the theme for some spine-chilling novel, but, a reference to the massive operation now under way to remove much of the remaining scar on the Forest left by the old wartime aerodrome at Stoney Cross. Perhaps it is the early onset of Christmas goodwill but for the second month running I have to congratulate the Forestry Commission on a major achievement in seeking to restore the Forest's traditional character and appearance. Huge machines are tearing at the concrete roads and "frying pans" and breaking them like icing sugar. From Ocknell to North Bentley the eroded, ugly and often dangerous relics which have blighted the Forest for half a century are disappearing in large dumpers before being fed to a concrete crusher. From the crusher, the material goes in trucks to the road works at Picket Post, the lorries returning loaded with clean subsoil, which is being used to fill the space, vacated by the concrete. In due course, after levelling, topsoil will be applied. Of course the immediate stages of the work are untidy and unsightly, but this is to be expected. The last attempt to clear Stoney Cross (back in 1966) was, unlike similar work at Beaulieu, outstandingly successful. The runaways then broken up have merged back into the Forest and provide, by heathland standards, excellent grazing. At that time there was neither subsoil nor topsoil! to aid restoration, so that we may hope for even better this time.

In 1979 a survey of the open Forest showed the astonishing total of 62.5 acres of wartime concrete still remaining, of which almost half was at Stoney Cross, seven acres at Holmsley, six and a half at Leaden Hall and nineteen at Beaulieu. These figures excluded concrete areas used in permanent camp sites. There seemed every chance that this sterile and ugly legacy of the War would disfigure the Forest for centuries to come. Deputy Surveyor Arthur Cadman's valiant efforts at concrete removal in the 1960s had been met with great hostility from motorists who in those days regarded the New Forest as their special preserve. He persisted, however, and succeeded in clearing huge areas before the contractor's crusher wore out. Unfortunately, the work was not well done at Beaulieu where much loose concrete remains to this day, but the opportunities for remedial work there are still open. All this was in the days before car-free zones became an integral part of management, and today any objections are likely to be more muted.

Provided that crushed concrete remains competitive with other road base materials, we have an outstanding opportunity to rid the Forest of concrete once and for all. Amidst this year's endless and largely futile, chattering of committees dedicated to the preserving, running or altering of the New Forest, the Commission has quietly undertaken one of the most important single conservation operations for a decade.

Terry Jones

The Forest is still coming to terms with the sad death of agister Terry Jones last month. It is not surprising that such a conscientious and outwardly cheerful officer should have, been popular in his own community of the Commoners, so it is outside testimonials which perhaps carry greater weight. An agister's duties bring him into contact with the public under conditions of stress, problems with sick

or dying animals being the most common. Over the years I have often met people who know nothing of the New Forest, but who encountered, Terry Jones in his professional capacity. Few of them failed to remark on the courteous, efficient and caring way in which he undertook his duties. He will be greatly missed.

The Draft Hampshire Structure Plan

It is difficult to imagine, a more turgid and uninteresting document than the draft structure plan which has been doing the rounds of the Forest societies. Some of the less determined committees have retired hurt from the process of examining and commenting on the draft, while others which have struggled through it, have discovered some unpleasant potential threats deep in the official language. Unfortunately, it is not a document that any of us can afford to ignore as it will form the foundation from which developers will press their claims against the Forest in future years and equally the base on which the Forest will have to argue its defence. At the present time the New Forest effectively has its own structure plan (the South West Hampshire Plan), but under the new document the policies for the Forest will be lumped in with the rest of the county. Most Forest groups have taken exception to this and have asked for at least a separate Forest section in the plan which eventually emerges.

Reservoirs

Those who know the New Forest really well will be able to identify the three major covered reservoir sites which have, sometimes with very dubious legality, been constructed in the open heaths and woods. They are at Sway, Lyndhurst Hill and Pipers Wait. The first and last of these are unfenced with the public and grazing animals having access to their sides and roofs.

Careful land shaping and the establishment of natural grazed vegetation has allowed Pipers Wait to blend into the landscape, while even Sway Reservoir is not now too offensive. In both cases, firm undertakings were given to the Commoners that the sites would remain open for grazing for all time. Now, however, in the light of a recent government report recommending the exclusion of stock from such places to obviate any possible health risk, the operators are seeking to fence both sites. The potential villain it seems is an elusive and unpleasant organism called cryptosporidium which might just possibly find its way through minute cracks in the concrete roofs of such reservoirs. Of course the Verderers, having made the initial mistake of allowing such sites on the open Forest now have little option but to submit and allow the fencing, but not without the provision of adequate exchange land. That, however, will do nothing to overcome the landscape objections in both cases.

The lesson from this case and others like it is one that the Forest has been regrettably slow in learning. Development, however desirable and inoffensive it may seem initially, should always be located on private land outside the Forest where such private, land represents a practical alternative. In the case of both these reservoirs, such alternatives were readily available, if at greater construction and acquisition costs. The New Forest is not now so much at risk from great changes which would sweep it away at a stroke, as from a thousand pin pricks of development, many individually insignificant, but collectively disastrous.

Clearing Open Forest Paths

This autumn. Forest people to whom complaint often comes more naturally than compliment, have been heard to say that the clearance of tracks in the Open Forest woodland exceeds anything known in their lifetime. The Commoners Defence local meetings were told that a slump in the timber market has allowed the Forestry Commission to occupy staff on this work which has been neglected for half a century. Clearance commenced in the north of the Forest and is progressing southwards. No doubt those in Beaulieu are praying that there will be no revival of trade before they receive their share of these good things.

The problem of track clearance is an immense one with only a few of the main routes having been touched so far. This leaves ample scope for private enterprise and one such project is to be undertaken this month. On Saturday, December 15th at 11 a.m. the British Horse Society is, with the approval of the Forestry Commission, hoping to clear two tracks west of Fritham. The "meet" is at the Commission's Fritham car park near the Royal Oak and volunteers (walkers, riders, residents or anyone who loves the Forest) will be very welcome. Hand tools should be brought - not chain saws. Further details can be obtained from Mrs. F. Humphries (017251 2191). There is talk of free hot sausages and rolls for those who give advance notice of their intention to come.

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