

New Forest Notes – December 1991

FIREWOOD FROM THE FOREST

The approach of Christmas prompts romantic visions of roaring log fires and carefree cottagers returning from the Forest on carts piled high with fuel wood. The reality of late twentieth century log collecting is rather different and today's cottager will need a chain saw in one hand and a rule book in the other. The Forest does, of course, contain vast reserves of windfall fuel and it is quite possible to acquire it from the Forestry Commission in small quantities and for a modest charge, but there are problems. Prospective purchasers must first of all locate a suitable fallen tree in the Open Forest woodland, but only from certain woods can sales be made. The others have been classified as "inviolable" and within them only dangerous trees are cut, while fallen timber is allowed to rot to provide homes and nourishment for those creatures which the scientists describe as "invertebrate fauna" and the Commoners disdainfully call "bugs and beetles". A surprisingly large part of the Forest now falls within the inviolable category so the beetles are very well fed.

Assuming that your chosen tree is not within an inviolable area (and this includes many fragments of ancient woodland within the Inclosure), the next step is to approach your local keeper who is authorised to make small sales. He will mark your tree and instruct you on the portions which must be left lying in the Forest as beetle food. Those portions will amount to not less than 20% of the whole (even beetles outside inviolable areas must eat) and it is customary to leave the thickest and most knotted parts of the tree. You may be restricted as to the time of year of removal to avoid the nesting season or problems with extraction damage. You will probably be required to remove the wood within a fixed time and along a fixed route. You will have to comply with health and safety requirements and, if you work a six day week there is really little point in applying as you may not use a chain saw on Sundays.

If you have overcome all these early difficulties, the mechanics of cutting up your tree and its removal must be considered. Unless you are particularly fortunate in locating a tree with good hard access, you will need a tractor and trailer or similar equipment and the immense physical effort of cutting and hauling timber should not be underestimated. Finally, unless you wish to coat the inside of your flues with wood tar, the logs should be split and stored under cover for two years or so before use. Altogether, the average householder will find it easier, quicker and, probably not much more expensive to place an order with his local log merchant.

There remains the one question which I am most often asked when speaking on the Forest — "May I pick up and take home dead wood which I find in the Forest?" The official reply to this is peculiar to say the least. My copy of the appropriate Forestry Commission instructions says that the occupiers of houses within the Forest's perambulation, built before 1858, may collect and carry away dead wood by hand only for use within their own homes. They may not take wood with a greater diameter than 15 cm and they may not use any cutting tools. Why those living on the Forest's borders should be excluded is not clear and there seems no logic to the cut off date which has no greater significance than being the time of publication of the register of claims to common rights. However, a gap in the

rule book has been filled. Those who can remember the Forest of 40 years ago will recall the old people who regularly used to collect dead wood from the Forest using rickety perambulators for transport. Sadly all of them are now gone, but perhaps this is as well as their vehicles would undoubtedly have infringed today's regulations.

After being thoroughly discouraging about the whole process of log collecting, I have to admit that my own woodstove has been fuelled by Forest beech for many years and the three season's supply drying in my wood shed is a comforting insurance against disgruntled power workers, storms and snow.

Point to Point Races

Post Christmas entertainment (exertion in the case of competitors) is provided in the Forest by the Boxing Day point to point races organised by the New Forest Pony Breeding and Cattle Society. This is not the tame racing which you might see at Larkhill or elsewhere, but a genuine point to point race across the Forest over a course kept secret until the race starts. Only the finish is known in advance and even the meeting place is not disclosed until Christmas Day. The races are or should be, as much a test of the competitors' knowledge of the Forest as of the endurance and speed of their ponies. Unfortunately the course-setting does not always display a degree of imagination which would do justice to the opportunities. The last time I risked my neck in the point to point, there was only one possible route and two-thirds of that was along the edge of a road! The really skilful course setter should choose a starting point where the competitors must make an early decision between two or more equally attractive routes. A race in which riders finish from several directions is a sure indication of a well thought out course.

This year the races will finish near Bramshaw Telegraph and this offers opportunities for setting a really challenging course. It always surprises me that the Forest point to point attracts such large numbers of the public since, by their nature, the Forest races are more of a participants' than spectators' sport. Perhaps the absence of any entrance charge has something to do with it.

Verderers' Rewards

Last month's threatened Verderers' election was not contested and the three retiring members of the Court will serve for a further six years. The lack of a contest is something of a blessing to the Court, since the expense of an election would have worsened an already near disastrous financial situation. Similarly, the candidates have been spared the not inconsiderable cost of fighting to retain their seats. In these days of fat attendance allowances and expenses for local councillors, many people are surprised to learn that the elected Verderers receive no payment and no expenses. It was not always so. One hundred and fifty years ago when the office of Verderer was the prerogative of the local gentry, members of the Court received a "fee buck and fee doe" annually. In addition, the Crown gave an annual dinner for the Verderers costing over £30 and this at a time when a labourer's annual salary might amount to £25. The dinner was given on 13th September rather than at Christmas and a similar feast was provided for the other Forest officers.

Today, the sole perquisite of the Verderers' office is the receipt of a haunch of venison at Christmas. I know nothing of the origin of this custom, although it is evidently not of any antiquity and I suspect it probably dates from after 1914 when the Verderer-hating Deputy Surveyor Gerald Lascelles retired.

The Forest's Future

As 1992 approaches, the debate over making the Forest into a national park has taken a significant turn. The New Forest Association which has worked intermittently for the protection of the Forest over the last 125 years has come out against the establishment of a national park authority or the granting of quasi national park powers to the New Forest Committee. It does, however, believe that the Forest should have equivalent status to the parks without the administrative trappings and title which would be so dangerous. The decision caused much heart searching because the Association's committee is deeply divided between pro and anti park opinion — hence an obscure and convoluted wording for the new policy. Perhaps the most important point is opposition to the granting of new powers to the New Forest Committee, a safeguard which had been wisely insisted upon by the New Forest Review Group which set up that committee.

Whether or not the policy will be vigorously pursued by the New Forest Association remains to be seen. It is faced with the alternatives of remaining an ineffective bystander as it did in the early stages of the battle against conversion to conifers in the 1960s or of adopting the leading role which earned it so much credit over the Lyndhurst bypass.

Holly

The Forestry Commission has traditionally sold holly at Christmas time to contractors who supply the market for decorations. The public, of course, may not cut holly in the Forest. This apparently random hacking of bushes and trees in pursuit of berries has often been condemned as ugly and damaging. Disfiguring it may be, at least in the short term, but there is some evidence that "pollarding" may actually prolong the life of a tree and pollarding or coppicing of holly has a lengthy history in the New Forest. In the days when the welfare of deer was a primary object of management, special labourers called browzers were employed by the keepers to cut holly and other feed for the deer. Around the old lodge sites it is possible to find groves of ancient coppiced holly, Hive Garn Bottom near Ashley Lodge being a good example. During the great freeze of 1963, holly was cut for Forest ponies (it is always one of their most important winter foods) and this year the Commission is to pollard a number of areas for the benefit of the animals. For some reason, the ponies find the leaves much easier to eat once the branches have been cut down. Pollarding involves cutting off the main stem of the tree at a height of 5 or 6 ft. from the ground, while coppicing comprises complete felling. The tree is then expected to produce new shoots from the level of the cut. Some pilot schemes have been carried out in the last few years and one treated plot, in Great Wood at Bramshaw, shows rather mixed results. This is a pollarded area and re-growth has been generally weak. Some stems appear to have died. In many cases it seems that the larger hollies have responded better than the small trees. I rather suspect that coppicing might be more successful and it would be interesting to see some carefully monitored trials comparing the results of the two processes. In the meantime the trucks and vans of

the berry hunters will be a familiar sight over the next few weeks and little fragments of the New Forest will help to celebrate Christmas in a good many urban households as a result.

National Trust Christmas Trees

In 1979 the National Trust purchased a part of the New Forest called Half Moon Common and inherited a legacy of self-sown Scots Pine which, twelve years later, it is still striving to clear. The objective is to restore rare and valuable heathland. At Christmas the Trust makes a virtue out of this expensive necessity by selling Scots Pine Christmas trees at a price under half that often charged by commercial growers of spruce. This year their sale, will take place on December 14th and 15th between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. at the Black Hill car park just off the A36 at West Wellow. Not only will purchasers be helping to finance the Trust and support an important conservation measure, but free mince pies and mulled wine will be dispensed with each sale. Father Christmas, in the form of warden Philip Marshall, will also be in attendance.

Anthony Pasmore.