

## **New Forest Notes – December 1992**

### **Forest Road Troubles**

Problems for the Forest caused by the A31 road come in an unending procession, and have lately occupied a good deal of the Verderers time. One of these is the question of drainage from the new underpass and slip roads at Picket Post. It seems that when this major road scheme was built two years ago, the natural seepage of water through the gravel capping of the ridge was disrupted and flood water from the cutting was discharged to a soakaway on the Open Forest. This sump has now failed resulting in erosion and damage on the north side of the road. Consultants have been employed, no doubt at huge cost, to prepare a series of possible remedial schemes for dispersing the run off water to Picket Bottom. One of these, involving a complex system of perforated pipes, has been chosen and will be constructed either this winter or next.

From the Forests point of view, the Picket Post scheme has left a good deal to be desired. Not only are the drainage arrangements a shambles, but promised screen planting within the road reservation has not been carried out. Reinstatement of the working areas shows the usual low standard apparently considered by the Highways Authority as appropriate for the New Forest. Concrete and other building debris is everywhere in the "reseeding" and the land is infested with ragwort. If, as consultants claim in the latest Lyndhurst Bypass report, the reinstatement of heathland is a simple matter, the Department of Transport and its agents have singularly failed in this easy task. The Highway Authorities have long regarded the Forest as a source of cheap land where minimal reinstatement standards all that is required. National park proposals notwithstanding, it seems that little has changed.

A large and very frozen party of Verderers, Forestry Commission staff and others recently inspected the drainage problems and was then taken on an interesting excursion to an abandoned paddock in Picket Bottom. Here, it was though, some of the surplus water might be disposed of in obsolete filter beds and wells which once served Picket Post. Lord Lucas (the one time owner of Picket Post) evidently held economical views on land use, disposing of sewage and abstracting water within the cosy confines of the small plot. Today the stream through Picket Bottom again runs reasonably clear, so long as the petrol and oil interceptors on the A31 continue to function. This valley was once blessed with the charming, but quite inexplicable name of Potters Chair Bottom which appears on 19th Century maps, but which I have never heard even the older commoners use.

A little further east along the A31 there has recently occurred one of those occasional bouts of thoughtlessness which seem to characterize highway management in the New Forest. This noisy, ugly and obtrusive road had started to develop some very valuable natural screening within its fenced reservation as trees and shrubs regenerated naturally, protected by the fences from browsing animals. The authorities have recently destroyed much of this screening by wholesale swiping of the road margins. The road is once again revealed in its full beastliness. Of course I can see why road verges must be kept clear for safety reasons, but this frenzy of swiping has extended beyond the deep parallel ditches and up to the fence line in many parts. Not only is the Forest degraded, but the effect has no doubt been achieved at considerable public cost.

### **Squirrel versus Beech**

Anyone who visited the Forest in early November will have seen the finest display of autumn leaves for many years. It so often happens that the leaves are torn off before attaining their full beauty, but this year, despite the heavy rain, was an exception. For most purposes one must walk to see the full beauty of the Forest, but in the matter of autumn leaves I suspect that the motorist has the best of it as there is nothing to match the margins of the A337 between Lyndhurst and Cadnam.

Every deciduous tree contributes to the colouring at this time of year, but the beech is undoubtedly the most magnificent. I suppose it is almost inevitable, therefore that a great question mark should hang over its future in the New Forest. This arises not from the evil scheming of some rapacious forester but, as in the case of our vanished elms (of which there were virtually none on the Open Forest) from an entirely natural agency - the grey squirrel. These pests attack the bark of beech, particularly of young trees disfiguring, distorting and eventually killing them. The sight of formerly thriving groups of natural regeneration and planting in Mark Ash, for example, wiped out by squirrel damage, is heartbreaking. All through the Forest such damage occurs to a greater or lesser extent and I have frequently heard senior officers of the Forestry Commission question whether the tree has any future in the New Forest because of this damage.

Of course the obvious answer is to kill the squirrels, but how? Poison is effective, but there are fears of contaminated carcasses becoming food for birds of prey with the unpleasant consequences which would flow from that. There are also distribution problems in ensuring that the poison reaches only its intended target. Shooting and dray destruction are a help, but the scale of the problem is immense.

Why squirrels attack trees, especially beech, seems to be a matter of uncertainty. Some theorists suggest that the damage is done by pregnant females in search of special nutrients, while others blame marauding gangs of young males intent on apparently mindless damage. For the moment it seems that there is little prospect of any major breakthrough in squirrel control and we should make the most of our beech trees while we still can.

### **Continuing Debate on the Forests Future**

Last month saw an intensification of the debate on the future administration of the New Forest. Perhaps the most important event was the overwhelming rejection of the Government's proposals for a quasi-national park by a general meeting of the New Forest Commoners Defence Association. In a meeting which packed Lyndhurst Community Centre's large hall to capacity and spilled into the passage outside it, the Association rejected statutory powers and status for the New Forest Committee by a vote of almost three to one. Even I, who have long had reservations about the park, was surprised at the depth of feeling among Forest people against the Government's suggestions. Apart from those of the intelligentsia with a political commitment to national park style administration as an end in itself and others who don't really know the arguments for or against but assume that, like the National Health Service, a national park must be "a good thing", there seems to be very widespread distrust of the proposals.

The Commoners, of course, were fortunate in having the opportunity of expressing a corporate view at a special general meeting. It remains to be seen whether a similar chance will be afforded to members of the New Forest Association, which is at present offering support to the park

on the tenuous basis of a one vote majority in a thinly attended committee meeting . I suspect that this is a stance which would not commend itself to the membership as a whole, especially since perhaps the most convincing opponent of the park has been the Associations long time Hon. Secretary, Mrs. Lesley Errington, speaking in an entirely personal capacity. Mrs. Errington has served the Forest over many years, but also has a wide knowledge of local government obtained from the inside. Her clearly expressed fears add great weight to the more instinctive dislike voiced by the commoners.

### **Rifle Range Centenary**

This year has almost expired without any public recognition of the fact that it marks an important centenary for the Forest. In 1892 there took place a public local enquiry into the first major scheme to acquire Forest land for public development. The War Office, allegedly in league with the Office of Woods, sought to appropriate 800 acres (Black Down) between Beaulieu Road Station and Beaulieu for the construction of a rifle range. The proposal sent shock waves through the Open Spaces movement nationally and a massive campaign was organized in support of the Forest and under the leadership of the Verderers. The history of the rifle range proposals and the Forests subsequent victory is quite well known, but it is the evidence given before the commissioner, Mr. Pelham, which has been forgotten and which throws a fascinating light on the Forest of one hundred years ago and the similarities and contrast of the present day.

Today we are used to recreational surveys and the pressures on the Forest which they demonstrate, usually measured in hundreds of thousands of visitors per month. In 1892, Lord Montagu undertook his own pioneering research into recreational use of the Forest which would have been disrupted by the range. He discovered that, on the North Gate Road into Beaulieu from Marchwood (then a principle access to the Forest) no less than one hundred and twenty carriages and cars passed along the road in a week "and of course in the summer time it would be very much more numerous - sometimes between twenty and thirty a day". He also revealed that Mr. Wallace of Southampton who had a char-a-banc brought in no less than 1,700 persons, chiefly ladies, along that road during the summer. I suppose today that on a fine Sunday, more than that figure would pour through Beaulieu in an hour.

On a more pastoral note, the enquiry heard from several professional; turf cutters who were then still cutting between fifty and seventy thousand turves each, most of it in the Black Down area. They reported that the demand for turf had been boosted by the recent high cost of coal. It would be interesting to know how soon after this last turf was cut on Black Down.

One element of the evidence which had been mirrored in every enquiry since, including Lyndhurst Bypass and Stony Cross, was the valiant efforts of the commoners to explain the mysteries of animal movements and habits to city barristers for whom the ways of the Forest were evidently as obscure as the back of the moon. In the words of Briscoe Eyre, a leading Verderer, also in evidence to the enquiry, the Forest "is a peculiar district. It is well known to the people who live in it , but exceedingly difficult for strangers to understand". Some things at least do not change.

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