

## **NEW FOREST NOTES FEBRUARY 2001**

### **Nonsense at Ashley Lodge**

Two miles west of Fritham there is a sort of green oasis surrounded by woodland and heath. This grassy area, beloved of ponies, bird watchers and walkers from the B3078 car parks, comprises the remains of a little farm which was abandoned to the Forest over sixty years ago. It was once centred on a substantial keeper's lodge surrounded by thatched barns and pigsties and it was made up of small grass and arable fields sandwiched between Pitts Wood and Lodge Hill. Ashley Lodge, as it was known, was a far larger and more impressive building than today's keepers' cottages and it was also a good deal older.

On the establishment of the Ashley Walk Bombing Range in 1940, the occupants were moved out and, as the RAF bombed and rocketed a variety of targets on the surrounding hills over the next six years, the house was reduced to a ruin. After the war its remains were cleared away and the grounds opened up to Forest livestock. The fields were then exchanged piece by piece for development land (part of the Forest) sold off elsewhere by the Forestry Commission. Thereafter the Lodge site changed little apart from some invasion of scrub. The old field boundary banks and hedgerow trees can still be traced, as can the keeper's garden fruit trees and an occasional daffodil in spring. The fields remained largely a smooth green turf grazed by ponies and in all senses an asset to the Forest. From time to time the Forestry Commission maintained the boundary ditch, just as had the keeper's spade for two centuries at least before the abandonment of the Lodge and perhaps, on the evidence of one authority, for much longer.

In the autumn of 1999, the fields produced a bumper crop of mushrooms, but over a significant part of them and within a few weeks, everything was to change. Late that year, the old boundary ditch (last dredged, I think, in the 1960s) collapsed. Water poured down from Lodge Hill reducing the smooth velvet turf to a disgusting swamp within a few weeks. An important Forest access route between two bridges (one reconstructed only months earlier) was completely blocked.

The whole process and the damage it caused was very irritating, but it seemed only a question of waiting for repair until the job worked its way up the Forestry Commission's list of priorities. It was at this stage that English Nature is reported to have intervened with one of the most extraordinary and perverse decisions I have known made in the New Forest. The evil swamp, we were told, had been classified as of wildlife significance and the repairs could on no account be carried out! That, at least, is how the story reached the Verderers.

The commoners have for years complained about the obstructive attitude of "conservationists" when it comes to managing the Forest's grazing. One minute they (the conservationists) say that the grazing livestock is a crucial element in the Forest's survival and

the next they block any attempt to maintain the quality of the grazing – that is the conventional wisdom of the Forest. However, until the Ashley Lodge problem arose, there had seemed to be a growing understanding between the two sides of the land-use divide, with a good deal more give and take by both parties over recent years. I think that most commoners have genuinely tried to understand (they will never share it) the ecologists' delight in the long-established bogs of the New Forest. To attempt their draining would now be unthinkable to all parties, quite apart from being illegal, but if the report of the decision on Ashley Lodge was accurate, it marked a return to the worst aspects of the old fashioned obstructionism of the conservation lobby.

As always in the Forest, it pays to enquire into both sides of such arguments. The English Nature officer responsible for the decision tells an entirely different story. According to her, there is no objection to preventing the flooding of the fields, but the methods employed must not prejudice the "original" bog on the upper slopes of Lodge Hill, by allowing it to slump into a newly restored drain. She claims that an embankment along the field side of the boundary with a partial cleaning of the ditch is acceptable. That, no doubt, would be an expensive and troublesome procedure and the likely money involved may well have given rise to the "English Nature won't have it" reports. In this instance, I think that they are being a good deal over cautious and that careful mechanical maintenance of the ditch would not produce the dreadful consequences they predict. It has certainly not done so on previous cleanings.

Somehow, a mechanism has to be found to prevent such stupid disputes over detail from developing into full-scale New Forest battles and I doubt if this is going to be achieved by yet more high level committees – but a committee seems to be all that is on offer so far. Meanwhile, after fifteen months of talk and delay, the fields of Ashley Lodge remain flooded and an important track blocked for want of an hour's work with a digger.

### **What to do about Stallions**

The Commoners' Defence Association has asked the Verderers to reduce the number of stallions on the Forest so as to cut the production of unwanted foals. It is an interesting suggestion which the Court is following up, but it falls short of the more radical idea of complete removal of stallions for a period of time. Such a removal scheme, it is argued, would have the dual benefits of preventing all foaling and at the same time giving the mares a chance to build up condition in a way that they are unlikely to do within a continuous cycle of breeding. It is an idea with considerable merit, but also some severe disadvantages which are not immediately obvious.

The first of these disadvantages is that stallions are a dreadful nuisance to have on one's holding and that if they are to be removed from the Forest it is unlikely that the commoners will be prepared to keep them for the planned withdrawal period. They will be gelded and/or sold. Such a policy could lead to an eventual shortage of stallions and there are other more technical

breeding disadvantages. On the other hand, I have no doubt that sufficient subsidy money put into the project could induce owners to retain stallions off the Forest for the desired period. Silly payments like £10 per head would not do it, but perhaps £150 - £200 per head per annum might be a different matter. At some stage, the public is going to have to accept that if the New Forest is to be maintained as it has been, they are actually going to have to pay for it.

The second problem with a removal scheme is this. New Forest mares foal, on average, every second year. With a rested, fit and consequently extremely fertile population of mares and stallions after a two year break, a bumper crop of foals may be expected in the third year. That, it is claimed, is definitely not wanted. It is a good point, but I am far from convinced that any local tinkering with the foal supply will have a material effect on the nationally depressed state of the pony market. Long term reduction in mare numbers, particularly if it could be achieved in other native pony populations as well and at the same time, might be another matter.

As to the CDA's proposals, the detail has yet to be examined. Reduction in stallion numbers appears, at first sight, to be a half way solution with rather uncertain consequences. Since ponies are territorial and something over one hundred stallions is needed to cover the Forest, a significant drop in numbers may do no more than produce geographical inequalities in foal production and a fall in the totals. Aside from this, higher standards in the retained stallions would be an advantage in the long term.

### **Auction of Forest History**

Jude James of the New Forest Museum tells me of a remarkable piece of Forest history which is to be auctioned later this month. A vessel described as "an antique silver parcel-gilt Estonian covered beaker" has come to light, bearing the following inscription:

Presented to E.H.Pember, Q.C.  
by the Verderers of the New Forest  
in grateful recognition  
of the eminent and able services  
voluntarily rendered by him  
in defence of the New Forest  
1892

The inscription refers to a desperate battle to protect the New Forest, which might be regarded as the "Lyndhurst Bypass conflict" of the 19th Century.

In 1891, a clause had been inserted in the Ranges Act which would have allowed the War Office to override the New Forest's protection and secure eight hundred acres (Black Down) near Beaulieu Road Station, for the construction of a rifle range. A national campaign was mounted, eventually leading to a public enquiry into the Black Down plan and then to an amendment of the Ranges Act to restore the Forest's protection. At the enquiry, Mr.Pember represented the Verderers and the New Forest Association – refusing to accept payment

because, he said, he “could not take the New Forest’s money”. The rifle range plan was defeated and the hitherto unrecorded presentation to the barrister evidently followed.

It would be nice if some wealthy benefactor could secure the beaker for the Forest – not least as an example to present-day lawyers as we approach the Forest’s first big public enquiry of the 21st Century – that into the national park plan !

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