

NEW FOREST NOTES FEBRUARY 2010

The decline of the New Forest keeper

“A strong staff of keepers – or whatever you like to call them – is a necessity to the New Forest, apart altogether from any questions of preservation of game or of sport. They are the custodians who do all the policing of the public property, and their duties are manifold.” These are the words of the Deputy Surveyor (chief officer of the New Forest), but not, it must be emphasized, of the present holder of that office, Mr. Mike Seddon. They come from the writings of an illustrious earlier holder of Mr. Seddon’s position, the Hon. Gerald Lascelles in his “Thirty Five Years in the New Forest”. In the view of much of the Forest’s community, they are as true today as when the book first appeared, almost a century ago. It is the conflict between Lascelles’s view and the evolving policies of the present-day Forestry Commission which is giving rise to a ground swell of discontent in the Forest and for once it has nothing to do with either of those perennial sources of irritation – national park administration or the management of stallions.

There are at present twelve New Forest keepers operating eleven “beats” or territories. Two of them are “head keepers”. Employment as a Forest keeper was, until very recently, something which was often passed down within families, sometimes for several generations. Knowledge and skills thus accumulated and handed down were immensely valuable and impossible to replace. Now the keepers believe that it is official policy to prevent the establishment of such dynasties, and as a consequence only about a quarter of the present force has long-established Forest roots.

The tasks of the keepers are very much what they have always been – at least since the Deer Removal Act. They manage the deer, control vermin, police delinquent behaviour by the public, inspect fences and other Forest infrastructure and generally do the thousand and one small tasks which a prudent landowner would undertake to protect his own property. They occupy comfortable (often remote) but tied cottages, usually with a paddock or two and some outbuildings and they are in many ways a cornerstone of New Forest society. It looks like an efficient and valued system, so what has caused the present row ?

The Forestry Commission, like other government departments, is under pressure to make savings and in the New Forest the employment of keepers seems to have been singled out as a potential area for what I suppose would these days fall under the jargon heading of rationalization. So far as I can see, there is no intention of sending out Liverpool style fleets of taxies from Queen’s House delivering redundancy notices to the keepers. Rather there is in prospect a subtle downgrading of status coupled with their replacement, as retirements occur, by a new breed of so-called rangers. The imminent retirement of three members of the force is said to have triggered this new policy. No doubt it seems to the Commission that a relatively cheap ranger is an attractive prospect for economy, when compared with the traditional, highly skilled, expensively equipped and housed keeper. I have nothing against rangers, except for their unwarranted usurping of an ancient forest-officer’s title to which their duties have no relevance. Over the years I have met several of them (they come in both paid and unpaid

varieties) and they seem unfailingly friendly people, keen to learn something of the Forest and to impart that knowledge to the visitors. They are to the New Forest what stewardesses are to an airliner, gently shepherding and encouraging the visitors, but they are not in any sense an adequate substitute for a Forest keeper. Of what use is a polite young lady based behind a desk in Queen's House when a gang of drunken youths is burning a car on the Forest on a Saturday night? That, and much else involving the increasingly rowdy and sometimes violent activities of visitors, is the business of the keeper in the first instance.

The keepers' responsibility is first and foremost to the landowner (once the Crown and now the state), but they are also invaluable to the Forest people. They are in one sense the Forest's "bobby on the beat" whose loss is so much lamented nationwide. I know perfectly well when I see the keeper with his gun in the woods that these days his weapon threatens nothing more objectionable than surplus deer and grey squirrels, but his presence is still comforting in an area becoming more and more threatened by outsiders. If I find motor cyclists cutting up a Forest lawn, it is the keeper I telephone. If I lose a cow in the Black Gutter area and the agister cannot help me, I ask the keeper to keep an eye open. Imagine trying to explain to a ranger in Queen's House who I am, where Black Gutter is and (quite probably) what a red Hereford is. I know exactly where to find the keeper – half a mile down the road in a neatly kept cottage with wood smoke coming from the chimney. That is the sort of thing that proper management of the New Forest has always been about.

Now I know it is often said that in recent times the keepers have become too soft on Forest abusers. Years ago, for example, a builder who dumped a heap of aggregate on the Forest outside a house received a sharp rebuke from the keeper, followed immediately by a letter from the land agent. That seldom happens now and there is also a perceived lack of enthusiasm for tackling trespassing mountain bikers and other vandals. My assessment of these problems is that they have their roots not in a lack of willingness on the part of the keepers, but in an almost total absence of back-up and leadership from the office staff further up the hierarchy. Why bother challenging someone destroying turf if you know there will be no action taken by the office?

The fate of the Forest keepers seems now to hang in the balance. Perhaps, as official attitudes suggest, the office really is now just an expensive anachronism to be phased out as quickly as possible and replaced by visitor-friendly park wardens. That is not how I see it. To my mind such a course would leave the Forest immeasurably poorer and vulnerable to even more abuse than it suffers at present.

Bovine tuberculosis in the Forest

The spectre of a widespread infection of Forest cattle with bovine tuberculosis seems to be drawing ever closer as the disease spreads from the West Country. There farmers believe that the problem will never be resolved so long as there is a large reservoir of disease in wildlife. Already reactors have been found in several herds in and around the New Forest and many of our commoners have now been moved from a four year testing cycle to two years. My own notification of this change arrived at Christmas. Those in directly affected zones (chiefly a band across the north of the Forest) have been put onto one year tests. Such

periodic tests are paid-for by DEFRA, but farmers must also test at their own expense before moving cattle off farms to other holdings. That is a very heavy burden.

Part of the problem is that cattle on the Forest range from prized herds where livestock is never bought-in, to scraggy specimens which may be turned out by dealers who have picked them up cheaply in infected parts of the West Country with no questions asked. These may then be turned out on the common land to mix widely with other stock. When infected cattle are found by the periodic testing, the herd in question will be confined to the commoner's holding for sixty days or until there has been a clear test, but by that stage the damage may have been done. Spread to neighbouring clean herds may have occurred. There is also the problem that many commoners would have little or no chance of accommodating their Forest herds upon their enclosed land.

At the moment the south east of the Forest is still on a four year testing cycle, but of course cattle there remain at risk from infected imports as a commoner may turn out at will on any part of the common land.

Last month the Verderers met with animal health and DEFRA officials so that the latter can plan a comprehensive tuberculosis management strategy covering all Forest commoners. DEFRA's decision will be communicated to the Verderers shortly and will then be circulated by the Court to all those turning out cattle on the Forest. I asked if there is yet any evidence of widespread infection in New Forest wildlife, but was told that there is none. On the other hand, DEFRA has not actually done any recent testing (for example on badger carcasses) because it is deemed too expensive. On the whole it seems that the import of infected animals to the common constitutes the principal danger. The Verderers have, at present, no powers to prevent this unsatisfactory state of affairs.

A 338 closure stopped

Wiltshire County Council, with a flagrant disregard of the special conditions prevailing in the New Forest, recently announced that it would close the A 338 south of Downton for long-term roadworks. Notices announcing the closure had already been erected. This would have flooded every lane and B class road in the north of the Forest with rat-runners seeking alternative routes to and from Southampton, Bournemouth and Salisbury. The disruption would have been appalling and might well have led to increased animal accidents as motorists unfamiliar with Forest conditions took to the unfenced roads during the darkest part of the year.

Protests against Wiltshire's idea were long and loud, mostly from the parishes likely to have been affected, so that in the end the council was forced to back down. Now the road will remain open, but there will be traffic controls and long delays. The danger is therefore reduced but not eliminated. In the last week, the north of the Forest has been strewn with huge signs showing a running pony and bearing the somewhat inappropriate wording "wild animals in road". I don't suppose it will prevent additional killing, but the excuse that the driver did not know animals were present will certainly not be available. How much damage will be done to already ice-cracked and potholed lanes by frantic commuter drivers remains to be seen.

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