

NEW FOREST NOTES FEBRUARY 2015

The price of the Forest's grazing grounds

The very best of the Forest's grazing grounds are the so-called "lawns" and most of these are in the valleys. Others are to be found around ponds and on the margins of villages. They are areas of sweet grass, nurtured by countless generations of pony and cattle grazing and dunging and by protection from waterlogging and scrub encroachment carried out by our predecessors. Their area, at about 2%, is small as a proportion of the Forest grazing as a whole, but their contribution to the animals' welfare is immense. From about 1850 to 1880 they were carefully maintained out of a large fund of money paid by the railway company as compensation for the construction of the Southampton and Dorchester line. Excess water was cleared away by open drains (which worked well) and by buried tile drains which were too small and which consequently choked up very quickly. After the New Forest Act of 1877 the Crown lost interest in the maintenance of the grazing and the half share of the remaining railway money in the hands of the Verderers was quickly exhausted. There followed thirty years or so of neglect until, after the First World War, a big drainage programme was instituted to restore the lawns and limit the expansion of bogs which had again begun to threaten the grazing throughout the Forest. Much of this work was carried out as part of an unemployment relief scheme. The capital cost was met by the government, while the Verderers had to guarantee an annual sum for future maintenance. Then the money ran out again and the maintenance funds were raised only with the greatest difficulty and in part by subscriptions from the commoners and landowners. After WW2 the Forest societies, commoners and Verderers pressed hard to have drainage put on a more stable basis, achieving a great victory in 1949 when the Forestry Commission was required by law to ensure that the Forest was "properly drained" and cleared of scrub – always with due regard to the amenities of the Forest. At last the lawns were being put back into good order, with the great champions of that work still fondly remembered to this day. Such men as Sir Berkeley Pigott, Gerald Forward, Eric Young, Archie Cleveland and Tim Moore worked tirelessly to ensure that the grazing was properly maintained. Unfortunately their enthusiasm for drainage occasionally got a little out of control, resulting in some rather disastrous deep cuttings in unsuitable areas, which achieved little and were aesthetically and ecologically damaging. However, such excesses were the exception and not the rule. The commoners owed a great debt to these men.

In recent years the drainage of the lawns has once again been abandoned (minor tinkering excepted), although it is difficult to understand exactly why. Certainly there has been great pressure from ecological interests, aided by European Union environmental funding, to return the Forest to what they perceive to be a state of primeval wilderness, irrespective of the consequences for grazing livestock, but this is not the whole story. There now seems to be a sort of lethargy amongst the commoners when it comes to Forest maintenance, or perhaps it would be more accurate to describe it as a state of despair. They take the Natural England subsidy money and tolerate the neglect of the Forest in a way which would have horrified their fathers and grandfathers.

Much of my time walking in the Forest is now concentrated in the winter months and this year I have been paying particular attention to the unhappy state of the lawns. The picture is the same throughout the Forest from Godshill to Norley and from Burley to Cadnam, but three examples illustrate the problem well enough. West of Brockenhurst was a large grass area called Trenley Lawn on modern maps, although the name seems to have been misplaced from further north by the Ordnance Survey. It was drained by a stream along its southern edge and by secondary drainage channels which have now all but disappeared. The stream is choked with bushes and debris and is silted up, so that the former lawn is now almost permanently saturated in winter. This is not the occasional flash flooding said to be a valuable source of nutrients, but a chronic state of neglect. The side drains to the passage which crosses the area are brimming over with water and this once prime grazing will, if nothing is done, become worthless.

On a larger scale there is the state of the Beaulieu River and its tributaries upstream of Ipley. This is in the most dreadful mess with fallen trees obstructing the channel and with water forced out onto the remnant lawns in such places as Pottern Ford. Upstream, near Matley Holms, a huge debris dam has sent water pouring through the woodland far from its proper course, while the lawns at Fulliford are frequently underwater.

A final, but much smaller example lies south of Burley at Burbush where, for want of proper ditch clearance, the once fine lawn area is reverting to swamp and is being invaded by scrub in full view of the tourist car park beside the old railway.

Subsidy money in return for turning a blind eye to drainage neglect may have its attractions in the short term, but the foundation of commoning is the Forest itself. Lawns and other grazing areas surrendered now in return for limited and probably transitory funding may in time come to be seen as a very short-sighted policy. The old and wise advice about not selling the family silver should be heeded before it is too late.

Sims and Saints

Twelve years ago I wrote about the two tiny railway cottages which once stood beside the abandoned line south of Burley. I had received an enquiry about them from a railway historian, but neither I, nor the readers of New Forest Notes, could then supply much information. A Burley resident told me that they had been demolished in the 1950s after a gipsy boy fell and was injured while climbing a chimney on one of the ruined cottages, but that was about all that was discoverable at the time. Last month, however, quite a lot more came to light when I was looking through some old papers of the Verderers' Court.

In November 1923 the Great Southern Railway Company sought permission of the Forestry Commission to close the level crossing immediately west of Greenberry Bridge where "a woman was in charge of the gate". The Commission agreed. The commoners and the Verderers on the other hand took exception to the proposal because, as the woman said, "the people from Burley used that way continually". It was a favoured route for the transport of fern (bracken) which in those days was

an important crop of the Forest. The crossing was then apparently known as "Saints" and one can only assume that this was after the name of an early crossing keeper. Saints was served by a bridge over the Holmsley Bog stream (the bridge is still an important access point), but at a second level crossing less than half a mile to the west and known as "Sims" there was then no bridge over the watercourse and it is difficult to imagine what purpose the level crossing could possibly have served. It was argued for the commoners that if Saints was closed, then Sims would have to be provided with a bridge over the stream and perhaps even a new bridge over the railway. Early the following year a protest meeting was held in Burley and a petition against the closure was signed by one hundred and twenty five commoners. The Crown withdrew its approval for the closure and the plan was dropped for a further seventeen years. Then, in July 1940, when the nation and the commoners had other things to worry about, a fresh application to close both Sims and Saints was quietly approved. The local agister reported that neither crossing had been used for some time and that there would be no disadvantage to the commoners. The crossings were gone and the little cottages followed shortly afterwards. Even the railway itself survived for only a few more years.

It is remarkable how many minor placenames survive in the New Forest without ever being recorded on maps. Some, like those of Sims and Saints, outlive their usefulness and simply disappear, while others seem to die for no obvious reason. Another name I have come across in recent weeks is "Blake's Water" which, from the context in which it appears, must be somewhere in the Crockford to Norley area. It has never appeared on published maps and I wonder if there are still some local residents or commoners who remember it in use or perhaps even use it to this day.

The end of the pylons?

The announcement in November that plans are under consideration for putting underground the power line across the north of the Forest is a rare piece of good news and it is particularly pleasing that it has been welcomed by both the national park and the Verderers. The Forestry Commission has been silent on the subject, but this is not surprising when one considers the history of the power line. None of it crosses Forestry Commission land because of a battle which took place in 1933 when the Commission, Verderers and New Forest Association combined forces to keep the line off the Crown lands. It was claimed as a notable achievement at the time, but was in fact a very hollow victory. All it succeeded in doing was to force the line a few yards outside the perambulation onto adjacent common land which later came into the ownership of the National Trust and which today is an integral part of the Forest's landscape. The pylons then erected were small and fairly inconspicuous, but in the 1960s they were replaced by the giant structures which we see today and which are visible for miles across the Forest to the south. The big main roads are undoubtedly the worst man-made intrusions on the Forest, but the pylon line follows close behind.

I don't understand the physics, but the argument against burying the power line has always been the cost of doing so bearing in mind the need for refrigeration. If the funds are now available, that is wonderful news and it is to be hoped that the whole Forest community will for once be able to pull in one direction to achieve a really valuable improvement in the landscape. Of course there will

be temporary disturbance while the work is done, but that is a small price to pay and the restoration techniques are far advanced on those used in the pipelines of the 1960s which took some years to recover.

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