

New Forest Notes – February 1997

The New Forest Association

The next time any of us goes for a walk in the Forest, we might do well to reflect that we are there by courtesy of the New Forest Association. But for the Association's untiring work during the decade after 1867, there would now be no New Forest. A sea of bungalows and other urban clutter would probably stretch unbroken from Bursledon to Poole.

In those days it was intention of the Office of Woods first of all to cover the Forest in coniferous timber to destroy the Commoners' rights, and then to inclose and sell it off piecemeal for building or any other profitable use. That was how they had successfully destroyed many of the other royal forests, and they were well on the way to achieve the same results here. However, by the end of the decade and due to Association's work, the Office of Woods was beaten and the future of the Forest was secured by the New Forest Act of 1877. This was an Act which the leading members of the Association took a large part in drafting. It also governed (and still does) the way by which the Forest's woods are to be managed.

The Association continued its work until about the end of the century, successfully fighting, in particular, Dartmoor-style military use of the Forest. There then followed a long period of inactivity until the felling policies of the Forestry Commission in the 1920s again threatened the survival of the broadleaved plantations. The Association was then revived and fought the Commission to a rather messy compromise, but at least the worse official excesses had been contained.

Shortly afterwards, wartime exigencies allowed the Commission virtually free rein. Undertakings to protect the Forest were broken wholesale and the NFA entered another long period of decline, culminating in a proposed dissolution in 1957. Once again it was saved and for the next ten years staggered on, too weak and too indolent to achieve anything for consequence.

Then came the attempt to eliminate oak and beech from the Forest's plantations, embarked upon by the Forestry Commission in the late 1960s. It was fought, not by the NFA, but by an action group of enthusiastic and dedicated local people who were sickened by the inactivity of the Association. They watched in disbelief as it sat on its hands throughout the conflict, disgracing its proud record of a century earlier. However, as victory over the Commission neared, the action group planned and launched a coup which effectively took over the NFA at its 1970 annual meeting.

The following year it consolidated its position by securing the election of more members to the committee.

The next job was to dispose of the president who had publicly opposed the campaign to save the Forest's Woods and who had tried to secure an outer route for the Lyndhurst bypass in defiance of the Association's policy. His removal was successfully achieved at the 1973 general meeting. After this there followed twenty years of constructive and largely successful campaigning. The Forestry Commission, chastened by its recent defeat, made no moves against the Forest's woodlands during most of this period, and the NFA was able to concentrate on other battles. Chief amongst these was the text book campaign to prevent the building of an outer Lyndhurst bypass.

Unfortunately history has an unpleasant habit of repeating itself in the New Forest. By the mid 1990s, the Forestry Commission was again allowing commercial considerations to dominate its

management of the Inclosures in defiance of the Ministerial directives and assurances secured in 1970.

Fellings in clear violation of the 1877 Act were again taking place and the marking of timber for future work threatened worse to come. This time, however the Association was ready and took immediate action to publicise what was being done.

The new policies were stopped, or at least softened, before they could get out of control. However, there is still a long way to go and we must be under no illusions as to the intense pressures within the Forestry Commission to increase income from the Forest.

There is a sad sequel to this latest battle in that the Association's president, Major Peter Bailie is, like one of his predecessors, at odds with the committee over its firm stand in support of the Forest's Woods. He believes that, even if the law has been broken by the Commission, it is better not to say so in public.

He objects to the photographic record of the Commission's fellings of ancient beech trees, put on display by the Association at the New Forest Show. His views, no doubt coloured by ten years loyal service to the Forestry Commission as their appointed Verderer, are perhaps inevitable. Those highly experienced members of many amenity groups who make up the committee believe that he is wrong and the dispute culminated in an overwhelming vote of no confidence in the president at the meeting on the 8th of January. The committee believes that only by negotiating from a position of strength and by making the public fully aware of the threats to the Forest can they reach an acceptable accommodation with the Commission.

Anyhow, despite the vote, the president has refused to resign and the chairman has accordingly called a special general meeting on the 26th February to seek his removal. It is unfortunate row, but with the committee determined to follow its present policy, it is clearly impossible to continue with a president pulling in the opposite direction.

The Water Wizard

The January freeze which caused enough problems for town dwellers, was a even worse nightmare for those with livestock to manage. It was one those occasions when animals on the Forest were far better off for water and shelter than those on the fields. For a few days during the lowest temperatures, I was carrying water to six different fields scattered through three villages . To judge from the number of plastic cans I saw being transported by the road , I was certainly not alone in this task.

Farmers have come to rely so much upon piped water supplies that it is difficult to imagine life without them.. Fields with their own natural water must once have been invaluable. Years ago, when I brought some of my own land adjoining the Forest, I was curious as to a large concrete slab in the corner of one paddock. I assumed that it was a manhole relating to piped water supply, but on rising it I found a beautifully constructed brick-lined well, 14ft deep and 4ft in diameter. There had never been a house on the site and the well must certainly have been built to serve the fields in which it lies. The land had been enclosed from Hale Purliou some time after 1808 and the sinking of such elaborated well must have required greater investment and skill than was likely to be provided by the average cottager who no doubt comprised the early tenants. Very probably the owners of the Hale Park Estate

(whose land it was) had a hand in its building . The concrete cover and surround were evidently more modern protective measures.

Unfortunately, all the estates records, with one important exception, have been lost. That exception is topographical and historical description of Hale, in several volumes, written by Gerald Gough in about the last decade of the 19th century. He was heir to the estate, but was killed in the Boer War before he could inherit the property which he evidently loved so much. He recounts how, in 1888, Hale was visited by a " water wizard" whose services were enlisted to discover a fresh source of water for the laundry and dairy at the Home Farm. His successful divining of a site on which to sink a new well was regarded by the farm workers as uncanny.

The wizard, a Mr. Berrow of Street Farm, Stalbridge, was used elsewhere on the estate, sometimes with less success, but whether or nor he was responsible for the siting of my well, I do not know. Anyhow, magic or not, it proved invaluable in watering a small herd of cows throughout the frost.

On occasions such as this, cows seem to have blotting paper linings and supplying them is very different to carrying small quantities for horses. The open mouth of the well smoked liked a boiling cauldron throughout the through filling as the warm underground water vapour met the freezing outside air. Now it is again sealed, perhaps for another twenty or thirty years.

Pony killers?

Among the New Forest's many societies is one called the New Forest Pony Enthusiasts Club. Last year it produced a very attractive pictorial record of the Forest pony breed and copies have since been ordered from all parts of the world. However, the somewhat cumbersome title of the society evidently proved too much for one recent purchaser from Finland. His order was addressed to the "New Forest pony enthusiast s Club"- but then they say that each man kills the things he loves.