

NEW FOREST NOTES JANUARY 2005

The disappearing Inclosures

Five years ago the Forestry Commission decided upon the most drastic alteration in the structure and distribution of the Forest's woodlands in nearly one and a half centuries. Firstly, as part of the government's commitment to restore heathland, it set about the phased removal of much of the Verderers Inclosures – 2,000 acres of mostly coniferous woodland made on heathland sites in the 1960s. Then it also decided to relinquish some of the most beautiful (and therefore difficult and controversial) woodland plantations which were still technically liable to ultimate felling and replanting. That proved not to be quite the clear-cut victory for amenity interests that it at first appeared. The temptation to get one more thinning – taking out the best trees – has in some cases proved irresistible. It is justified as “preparing” these old woods for their new role as part of the Open Forest. Still, the damage thus done will disappear in perhaps fifty years and the long-term trend remains favourable.

All these works of abandonment are having a profound effect on the appearance of the Forest – mostly beneficial, but sometimes (where important noise or visual screens are threatened) potentially damaging. On the other hand it has taken a while for the practical consequences of the work to become apparent and these consequences relate principally to the movements of grazing animals. Managing unbroken ponies in semi-natural conditions such as they enjoy in the New Forest requires that periodic round-ups (drifts) are held by the agisters and commoners. In the time of the old royal hunting forest, such drifts occurred on only a handful of days per year and huge numbers of stock were then driven to a few great pounds scattered about the Forest and now all but forgotten. They included such places as the green outside Keepers Cottage at Canterton, the Old Pound at Linwood and an area in the middle of Ipley Manor. Today things are very different. There is a large number of much smaller drifts taking place every few days from August to November. Stock is driven to dozens of small pounds comprising post and rail enclosures built against some secure boundary (often that of a forestry inclosure), preferably with a funnel approach which makes it difficult for the animals to escape. Until the 1990s there was a more or less fixed number of these pounds, although one or two might be added from time to time. In recent years, however, more than ever before have been built, reflecting the need for increased vigilance over matters of health and welfare and the desirability of avoiding conflict with traffic and the recreating public. Many of these pound sites were chosen or developed at exactly the same time the Commission was setting about its programme of withdrawal from the plantations. The pound at Amberwood is a good example. Here the wood will ultimately be returned to Open Forest status and the fence will be removed leaving the pound isolated and useless. The whole system of livestock driving is therefore going to have to be re-thought over the next few decades as more and more fences come down. In the interim, the Commission has agreed to retain isolated lengths of fence which are crucial for drifting purposes, even though they will no longer serve any silvicultural purpose. Moreover, they have undertaken to carry

out minor repairs during the remaining physical life of such fences, but not to replace them when that life comes to an end. Few fences last for more than twenty years and a good many have a lifespan of less than half that time. Altogether this seems an entirely reasonable policy for the Forestry Commission to adopt, but for those responsible for the drifts there will be increasing headaches in the years to come.

It may, of course, be that technology will eventually supersede the need for large scale drifts. At present micro-chip readers have an extremely limited range, but if a reader is ultimately developed which will operate at say fifty to one hundred metres, all the business of branding and tail-marking might be eliminated. The agisters would go round like parking wardens with push-button pads, checking numbers and recording non-payers. That would not remove the need to catch sick or poor animals and the annual crop of foals. The administration of medicine like wormers would also require catching, so that there is likely always to be a need for colt-hunting, if not for more formal drifts.

There is one other interesting aspect of the Inclosure abandonment plans. Those plantations (Verderers Inclosures excepted) are all surrounded by earth banks and ditches representing vast investments of time and effort at periods when labour was cheap and quality and permanence in public works was standard. The earliest of these earthworks date from about 1700, but they were still being built as late as the 1860s. So far as I know, no-one has ever calculated the total length of these banks, but with about one hundred Statutory Inclosures and allowing an average perimeter of perhaps two and a half miles, there must be enough bank to run continuously from London to Lands End.

At a recent meeting of the Open Forest Advisory Committee, one officer asked the logical question as to whether, on the abandonment of the Inclosures, the banks ought not to be levelled at the same time. I was rather relieved to find that the majority view was opposed to this. The banks are an integral part of the New Forest's history, recording the era when great plantations were made to supply oak for the Navy and later to enclose conifers in a desperate attempt to secure advantage for the Crown in advance of anticipated disafforestation. In centuries to come, if there remains anything of the New Forest, they will become as interesting to our successors as are the Bronze Age burial mounds and royal hunting lodge sites to the present generation.

The Design Forum – Round 2

The body which approved the changes to the Inclosures was called the Forest Design Forum – an application of national forestry policy to the New Forest. It appears that this body is to be re-constituted every five years to assess progress and to judge possible variations of local policy. It seems to me only yesterday that the first round of its work was concluded, yet we are now back in the Crown Hotel in Lyndhurst, hard at work on round two. Excellent as was the work of the first round, I cannot help feeling that a five year cycle is a bit excessive when dealing with a process (forestry) which is essentially extremely long term. Given that the ministerially determined life of a commercial oak tree in the New Forest is two hundred years, the fate of such a tree would, at this rate, be deliberated upon no less than forty times

between acorn and sawmill. Perhaps I don't really need to worry because history shows that even the most robust forestry policy seldom survives more than half a century in the New Forest – to say nothing of the anticipated ravages of global warming.

This time it looks as though the conclusions of the Design Forum are likely to be far less radical than before. There may be some minor tinkering with policies here and there, and there may be an opportunity to secure the future of a few fine woods which were consigned to commercial management by the first round. So far as I can see, the greatest change is likely to be a slow and subtle one. National forestry policy now dictates that in managing "ancient woodland" sites, whatever crops they may be growing, a return to native woodland trees will now be favoured. In some cases this will be a simple matter. Where the sites still contain a significant number of native trees, it will just be a question of the careful and steady removal of the conifer element over the years and an encouragement of natural regeneration. Less easy will be pure conifer stands. Here it is likely that small groups will be removed from time to time, allowing natural regeneration (perhaps aided by deer fencing and a little planting) to fill the gaps. A century or more might in some cases be necessary to achieve total conversion.

Anywhere but in the New Forest there might have been a good deal of difficulty in identifying ancient woodland sites and certainly considerable historical research would be necessary. There might be plenty of scope for argument. Here, however, we have a superb large scale map of 1787 (Richardson, King and Driver's Map) which records every copse and wood in the Forest just before the great wave of inclosure hit us in the first decade of the 19th Century. There is also an accompanying book which gives a brief written description of the contents and nature of each wood marked on the map. I understand that it is not the Commission's intention to stick slavishly to the dictates of Driver's Map. If there is an excellent reason for not converting back to broadleaves on an existing conifer site, then that will be accepted, just as broadleaves will be retained on non- ancient sites elsewhere. As a general guiding principle of management, this ancient woodland policy is a good one and our successors should begin to see the benefits within a few decades.

Camp site forces preparing for battle

Last month I noted the somewhat uncertain start made by the various Forest organisations in arriving at policies on the development proposals for Roundhill and Hollands Wood camps. Since then things have become a good deal clearer, although the divisions between supporters and opponents have moved only marginally. In the Forestry Commission's team seem to be the commercial interests – shopkeepers, service providers, some bike hire companies and so on. The camping organizations remain strangely silent, but no doubt they will eventually fall in behind the Commission's plans. They are, after all, claimed as the principal beneficiaries of the proposals. On the other hand, one or two individual campers have spoken out strongly against further upgrading, so there is still work for the Commission to do here.

In the opposite corner it is now clear that there are ranged against the Commission, the New Forest Association, the CPRE, the Commoners Defence, the Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society, the Hampshire Wildlife Trust and a number of individual naturalists and Forest people. After a good deal of wobbling, the New Forest Committee has joined the opposition, while English Nature has decided it needs more information (forty chapters-worth seemed fairly comprehensive to me) and has submitted a "holding objection". Altogether it looks like developing into quite a contest.

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