

## **NEW FOREST NOTES JANUARY 2009**

### **Killing ponies and cattle on the Forest's roads**

On 21<sup>st</sup> of this month we will be given the figures for ponies, cattle and other livestock killed or injured on New Forest roads during 2008. Unless there has been a particularly bad rash of killing over Christmas, the toll for last year is likely to show a small but welcome reduction. That, however, follows the 2007 figure which was the highest for ten years. Every accident saved is a success for those who work so hard in the various road-safety campaigns, but the blunt fact remains that over the last decade the figures have remained stubbornly constant, falling a few one year and then rising again the next. The ritual of the Verderers' Clerk announcing the figures at every Court has become so commonplace that it takes a conscious effort to remember that each of these accidents involves horrible suffering and usually death for its victim. It is now abundantly clear that all the road-safety efforts – collars, public education, verge trimming, sign boards and so on – are at best just tinkering with the problem. Of course they must continue, but they are never going to make a substantial and lasting impression on the killing rate.

All of this was neatly summed-up at a recent Commoners Defence meeting, when a leading commoner from the south of the Forest, Dave Readhead, commented that while he knew some members would not welcome what he said, the only way to make a real cut in accidents is to fence the worst roads. That means (although it was not spelled out), the B 3078 Cadnam to Fordingbridge road and the B 3054 Dibden Purlieu to Lymington road. Why should such a straightforward statement of the obvious be in any way controversial? If you separate animals and cars on fast main roads, you remove the risk to both and the accidents cease. The evidence for this is overwhelming and results from the fencing of the A 31, the A 337 and the A 35. It is the fencing itself which is the problem.

I suppose few speeding motorists in the Forest make a deliberate assessment of the risks, but their subconscious reasoning is probably something like this. "My chances of hitting a pony are small, but if I do, the risk of injury to me is even less. If my car is damaged, the insurance company will pay. The likelihood of my getting caught by the police for speeding is infinitesimal as the limit is hardly enforced at all. I am only putting at risk horses and cows which don't really matter – its not like threatening people. It is a great bore to have to crawl through the Forest like a learner driver, so in the light of all the above, I will continue to drive in the way I find convenient. I just wish this devil in front, driving at 38mph, would get out of my way!" There will always be the occasional accident which is unavoidable, even by the most careful driver, but they are few.

That brings us back to fencing as a potential solution. There are several reasons why fencing has traditionally been resisted in the New Forest and the first and most important was the concern, seldom openly voiced, that it would interfere with hunting. Foxes and deer used to be pursued across roads and both hounds and riders would be impeded by road fences. Nowadays, of course, this no longer applies. Scent trails are laid by man and laying a trail

across a fast main road would be nothing short of gross negligence. I suppose there is still a widespread expectation that on a change in government, hunting of live quarry will be restored. Still, it is rather difficult to see that the interminable parliamentary battles which that would involve will be a priority for any incoming administration, faced as it might be with the country's economic difficulties. Moreover, even if "real" hunting is revived in remote areas or in big estate country, I am not sure how anxious any government will be to promote yet another row in the new National Park of the Forest. Perhaps the effect on hunting is less pressing than it once was.

Next there is the appearance of fencing. Undoubtedly the Forest looks better without it and if the traffic could be removed, nothing would please most people more than to see every road in the Forest opened up. But we live in a real world in which motorists will continue to speed and ponies will continue to die in agony. It has to be a question of balance. As I drive along the A 35 today and compare it with forty years ago, it certainly looks less attractive, but equally unattractive was the sight of a mare lying on the verge at Markway with her broken leg hanging at right angles to her body which I once photographed there.

Finally there is the question of public access. If you fence fast main roads, the public cannot ramble at will on any line it chooses. That argument is a little difficult to understand. I walk as much as anyone in the Forest and if I come to a fenced road, I use the stiles, gates or underpasses provided. I don't start wailing about my right to roam as being more important than the slaughter of livestock. The more liberal provision of underpasses would in any case be an essential prerequisite of any future fencing.

There are a few subsidiary issues like wildlife movements, fragmenting ponies' runs and so on, but we have fenced three roads so far without catastrophic consequences. It is, as I say, a question of balance. Either we accept that we must continue killing at about the present rate until the petrol runs out, or we must do something about it. I know there are deeply held views on both sides, but attitudes are changing. One farmer in the south of the Forest said to me last year: "I have been opposed to fencing all my life, but I am so sick of seeing my animals smashed to bits on the B 3054 that I am beginning to change my mind".

The problem would be a relatively easy one if it was simply a question of whether or not to fence the main killing zones, but without legislation, no more roads in the Forest can be fenced. Since legislation is more or less out of the question, we must settle back and accept the slaughter. One thing alone could alter that and it is almost too horrible to contemplate. A father driving a car full of children through the dark at sixty miles an hour might run into a herd of cows, causing the car to leave the road, turn over and catch fire, killing all the occupants. Then there would be action, but at a truly terrible price.

### **Warwickslade Cutting**

This year will see the disappearance of Warwickslade Cutting, the stream which runs from near Brockenhurst, under the A 35 and up to Holidays Hill and Knightwood Inclosures. It was made in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to provide drainage for the vast timber inclosures to the north and to enhance the commoners' grazing on the lawns beside it in this low-lying part of the

Forest. It was and remains (neglected side drains excepted) very effective in achieving both objectives. No doubt in the first few years after it was made it must have looked rather bare and artificial, but the mellowing effects of one and a half centuries have worked great magic. Today it is a delightful Forest stream with oak-lined margins and, in places, embryo meanders beginning to develop. On a recent visit, I was fascinated to be shown the spawning sites of sea trout, apparently known as "redds", within the gravel bed. Now it is to be filled-in at huge expense and the stream is to be realigned to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century course depicted on Driver's Map (1787). At their December committee, the Verderers approved the work, subject to various conditions which are designed largely to secure better side channel maintenance. Now the expenditure of vast sums of public money can go ahead. The disturbance of the Forest during the engineering works will be considerable. I have no doubt that some very pretty stretches of newly engineered stream will in due course appear, but the cost in Forest disruption will be high. We are told that the work is essential so that the Forestry Commission and Natural England are able to certify that this "unit" of the Forest is in satisfactory environmental condition.

I think that perhaps I was not the only person on the site visit before Christmas who felt uncomfortable at the strange set of priorities operating in public expenditure. While people are losing their houses and jobs for want of financial support, apparently endless sums of money are to be devoted to importing clay and tipping it into perfectly adequate (except in technical conservation terms) New Forest streams. Warwickslade is not alone. It is just an early phase in a vast programme of such work throughout the Forest. I am also sure that the old commoners of my father's time who fought so hard to secure proper drainage of the Forest would turn in their graves at the prospect of these schemes.

#### **Lyndhurst Golf Course**

Last month the Verderers approved the grant of a new lease for Lyndhurst Golf Course, but for a greatly reduced term of ten years, reflecting the problems which have been encountered with the course in the past. It had hardly helped the Club's case that several of the greens (open to grazing) were sprayed with weedkiller just as the application was made ! The approval was also subject to conditions covering such matters as the amount of urban clutter which disfigures the area and the management of pony drifts. This is one of those recreation facilities which gives rise to all sorts of conflicts with traditional uses of the Forest and not least with that of walking quietly out of Lyndhurst towards the north. The danger from flying golf balls makes that in particular a most uncomfortable experience. Altogether I think the Forest is looking at this as a sort of trial period upon which the long-term future of the site will be judged.

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