

NEW FOREST NOTES JANUARY 2010

Quad bikes in the Forest

There always seems to be something new and unpleasant threatening the Forest and the latest annoyance is quad bikes. In an agricultural context they have been about for a good many years, but it is only in the last twelve months or so that they have started to become a nuisance in the Forest. The Forestry Commission has, very properly, decreed that their use will not be permitted other than by the keepers when extracting deer carcasses, but it was the wider use of these machines by Commission staff that started the rot. For example, they had been used to drive ponies out of the Inclosures, despite the fact that the Commission has within its own staff a number of skilled colt-hunters. After this some commoners, having seen the Commission using quad bikes, considered that they also could take them onto the Forest. More alarming still, they have begun to appear on pony drifts and there have also been reports of "fun biking" unrelated to any alleged agricultural activity.

The Verderers have made clear their full support for the Deputy Surveyor in banning the use of quad bikes on the Forest. The agisters have been instructed to make sure that nobody using quad bikes will be permitted on drifts. Quite apart from the noise, danger, pollution and damage to the Forest, the Verderers' insurance which covers properly authorized assistance (mounted and on foot) at drifts, does not extend to quad bikes or other machines.

Warwickslade troubles

The heavy rains of November severely tested the stream diversion works at Warwickslade. While abnormal quantities of water were in the system, it was not possible to make a proper assessment of the blocking and excavating works which were carried out last summer under dry conditions. However, by the beginning of December the flow had returned to normal winter levels and some significant problems were showing themselves, at least south of the A 35. I had been told that all major engineering there was completed and only some superficial restoration remained to be done.

The first and most obvious problem is that the Commission had deliberately thrown trees across the new stream course. They were supposed to be for "fish shelters", but to me they looked more as though they were intended to achieve exactly what they did achieve, and that is to create rigid foundations for the formation of debris dams. The Verderers accordingly demanded their removal and, while some were shifted, others were not, in the area between Brinkenwood Lawn and the A 35. At least three sets of such obstructions remain in place and by mid-December, a very serious dam had formed just north of the Lawn, filling the channel right back to the boundary of Vinney Ridge Inclosure. Two other dams were in an earlier stage of formation. The Verderers protested about this early in December, but no response has yet been received.

The next problem is that the levels of the drainage channel are obviously incorrect in at least two areas. Immediately downstream of the bridge at Brinkenwood Lawn there is a

steep fall in the stream bed, but the bed beneath the bridge itself has been constructed much too high up, causing water to back up into the channel across the Lawn. Below the bridge and as far as Poundhill Inclosure, the system seems to be working well with a free flow and no artificial obstructions. However, from the edge of Poundhill to near the cart bridge west of Queen Meadow, things have gone badly wrong. Ponds and sheets of water, with little visible flow have built up through the woodland resulting from an inadequate fall, while water races down a newly cut length of drain below this impeded area. The consequence of all this is a permanently saturated area of woodland and, in places, deep liquid clay from the filling of the former efficient stream system. Clearly the excess fall downstream needs to be re-distributed across the waterlogged area, not least to give some protection to the surrounding wood (two big trees have already gone over) and to ensure livestock safety.

Finally, a length of overgrown drain near the A 35, which the Verderers had required to be cleaned out as part of their approval of the scheme, has not been cleared. At several other points also, water is ponding on the lawns flanking the filled-in stream and must be drained off in accordance with the Verderers' conditions.

Dog racing exclusion zone

There are disturbing reports that the Forestry Commission recently hired out the tracks in one of its Inclosures, Parkhill, for the exclusive purpose of dog racing or rallying, a recreation in which I understand that the dogs pull small carts. Anyhow, commoners going about their lawful business were refused access, not by Forestry Commission staff, but by private stewards apparently working under authority of the licensee. One of my colleagues on the Verderers' Court who was seeking a mare which needed to be removed for welfare reasons was among those turned back. He was, I understand, not the only commoner affected.

Now it seems to me to be absolutely wrong that the New Forest should be used for this sort of disruptive, organized and exclusive recreation. Of course such activities may be entirely inoffensive in the right place and that place must be on private estates where other legitimate users of the Forest are not interfered with. For example, Lord Normanton hosts motor rallies and other entertainments on his property and no doubt his circuits could accommodate dog racing. The trouble is that the New Forest is regarded as a cheap and convenient dumping ground for almost every sort of way-out entertainment (motor sport excepted) that is dreamed up. It is a process which the Forestry Commission seems actively to encourage, much to its shame and to the detriment of the Forest. Moreover, when recreational activities exclude people going about their day-to-day business, it is even more serious. Interestingly enough, even the essential welfare management of livestock through the annual pony drifts is not given the protection of temporary closure of areas. There are some very distorted values prevailing in aspects of Forest management.

A fresh programme of stream filling projects

The new year will see no let-up in the Forestry Commission's programme of stream filling and diversion projects. Indeed if, as seems likely, the Higher Level Stewardship

scheme boosts funding for such work, we could well see it accelerate. In December the Verderers approved, with conditions, the filling of three small streams through Alderhill Inclosure. They carry water from the Open Forest bogs along the southern flank of Hampton Ridge, down to Latchmore Brook. Such work, unless taken to extremes so as to flood the surroundings of the runnels, is not particularly objectionable. Very little of it is on the Open Forest at present, although Alderhill is due to be opened up under the Forest Design Plan. Those small portions which are on the open grazing are to be protected by conditions laid down by the Court.

The next project is far more controversial. In this the Commission alleges, and almost everyone else disputes, that Stonequarry Bottom is the “victim” of artificial drainage and must be restored. Here a delightful little brook winds its way through the heather with gravelly fords, little waterfalls, occasional yellow sandy-clay banks and some interesting historical features. The fact that one or two ancient dried-up meanders may be traced is certainly not evidence of artificial drainage. Altogether it is the very essence of an unspoilt Open Forest stream and manipulating it is wholly unjustified.

Further downstream on the same brook, beyond the Snake Road, the Commission plans a massive filling project in the vicinity of Ditchend Shade. Almost unimaginable quantities of filling material – clay and gravel – will have to be transported long distances across the Open Forest with immense opportunities for damage and disruption. In this area there is certainly some evidence of former drainage, but I think most people who are not scientific conservation specialists would probably prefer to see it left alone. Still, I am told that Natural England regards this stream as being in unfavourable condition because of its former drainage works, that the boxes must be ticked and that filling must take place. Interestingly, Natural England’s website which indicates favourable and unfavourable areas makes no mention (or at least none that I can see) of the horrid effects of drainage in this area. Perhaps the Commission has concluded that NE would have objected if it had thought about it and that as a consequence a small fortune ought to be spent in dealing with that presumed objection.

Burley New Inclosure

There is really no part of the New Forest that does not have some special interest, but it does have to be admitted that some parts are a lot more interesting than others. Burley New Inclosure probably comes fairly low on this scale. It was made in 1810 and is a little over 300 acres in extent. Most of it comprises a rather featureless clay plain with gentle undulations in places and more marked hills at its western end. Few of its original fine oaks still stand and all of the ancient ornamental woodland which formerly occupied its site has gone. Of all the Forest’s inclosures, I think it is (or was) the only one in which no historical or archaeological features had been recorded. It might therefore seem a strange choice of area for the National Park to commission an archaeological survey, but such a survey is now in progress and is already beginning to fill a significant gap in our knowledge of the Forest. The area was chosen because it is a semi-commercial plantation and it is in exactly these woods

that the physical evidence of the Forest's history is most at risk from heavy machinery. It also adjoins Burley Outer Rails and Oakley which were the subject of earlier surveys.

Today the Inclosure is known chiefly for housing (perhaps without statutory authority) workshops and yards run by the Forestry Commission and from which an unfortunate scatter of litter and rubbish spreads out into the adjacent woodland. There was once, also, a pretty cottage – illustrated in a woodcut by Mary Berridge in James Mays's "New Forest Book" – which seems to have been replaced by a rather ugly brick dwelling about the time of the last war. It must have been a "Glenbervie Cottage", so named after the Commissioner of Woods responsible for making timber inclosures during the Napoleonic period. It would be interesting to know exactly when the old cottage disappeared, if any photographs of it exist and if the characteristic engraved stone giving the inclosure date and acreage and which was included in all New Forest cottages of the period still survives.

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