

NEW FOREST NOTES JANUARY 2013

Why the home fires fail to burn

More than twenty years ago I wrote in these notes about the difficulties encountered by local people in purchasing firewood from the New Forest. In the intervening period the available resources have increased immeasurably, while the actual supply made available has dwindled to virtually nothing. A rain-lashed Christmas holiday period persuaded me to spend more time than usual dozing in front of a log stove, but it contained a very different fire from that which I enjoyed in the early 1990s. In those days I and my neighbours would buy a wind-blown beech tree in Studley Wood near Bramshaw Telegraph every year or so. The logs would be dried for twelve months before burning and the process would then repeat itself. At that time 20% of the tree had to be left to rot in the woods as food for beetles and as a home for fungi. An assessment of what constituted 20%, depended upon the friendliness of one's local keeper. Now all that is over and I must source firewood from my own woodland and hedgerows – mostly oak, chestnut, ash (of which there may soon be more than I would like) and hawthorn. Those not fortunate enough to have access to such resources must do without or pay the high prices of the log merchants, while thousands of tons of good firewood rot in all parts of the Forest.

In post war years at least, it was always the case that certain woods were regarded as "inviolable" where, as an experiment, trees were left to decay on the ground, but this policy was simply the first tightening of the ratchet. In 1999 the Forestry Commission issued a management plan for the "Ancient Ornamental Woodlands" of the Forest. It laid down much more restrictive rules, banning the purchase of firewood from all the larger areas of Open Forest woodland and imposing strict controls on the remainder. For example, in the north of the Forest, virtually nothing was left for small buyers except in Ironswell Wood and a few tiny scraps of woodland around Pitts Wood and at Bur Bushes.

The objective of all this was the same as the old 20% exclusion – to provide beetle food – whatever the effect on the appearance of the Forest or its convenience for users and grazing stock. The sale of firewood must have been a traditional part of management for hundreds of years, with only inaccessible trees allowed to go to waste by decay. If the rare species of the Forest could coexist happily with such a regime for centuries, why should they suddenly have become more at risk during a much slower rate of disposal and a much higher rate of natural production from trees killed by storm and drought in the 1980s and 1990s? Fortunately for the Forestry Commission, it was able to avoid answering this question by a simple piece of lateral thinking. It decided to invoke the great god of health and safety and simply banned those without training certificates from using chain saws on Crown land. Nearly all small farmers and a good many householders in the Forest own a chainsaw, and they are very stupid if they treat such machines with anything but the utmost caution. When I first bought one forty years ago it came with an instruction book which said "chainsaws make an excellent job of cutting wood and even better job of cutting flesh and bone" and that was a salutary warning. However, I doubt if more than a tiny fraction of users actually have formal training certificates. All those without were effectively banned from purchasing New Forest firewood.

This waste of firewood which is now apparent throughout the Forest is particularly sad in a time of austerity and of the now fashionable concept of “fuel poverty”. Not all Forest residents are immensely wealthy incomers or have access to supplies of wood from private land. So far as I can see, the current rules allow the removal of fallen trees which are a danger to stock, those blocking tracks and those damaging the grazing, but very little else.

The winter fires of the 19th Century

One hundred and fifty years ago, the New Forest authorities' provision of firewood was a great deal more liberal than that described above, although not from choice. In those days the commoners, or at least a good many of them, were entitled as of right, to a free allocation of fuel from the Forest. The right had been fought over for centuries, largely because of its supposed damage to the Forest, not through any deprivation of food for beetles, but because good timber was taken under the guise of fuelwood and because it encouraged stealing. In 1851 a procedure was finally put in place to settle the matter, and as part of the Register of Claims which followed, a list was prepared showing what each claimant was entitled to receive. For example, John Morant of Brockenhurst House was judged to have the right to fifteen loads of firewood in respect of his home and a total eighty eight loads over his estate . The more general allocation was one or two loads per house. All was to be taken from the Open Forest woodland and that remains the rule (perhaps sensibly disregarded by the Commission) to this day. Instead the surviving fuel rights are provided for from the tops of thinnings in the Inclosures. The Register provides that the allocation must be of “good fuelwood” or in other words the Commission is precluded from including Scots pine or other poor cheaper fuel. It also has to be burnt in the house to which the right attaches and may not be sold on by the recipient.

Today the fuel rights are much reduced in numbers and volume supplied due to a policy of the Office of Woods and later of the Forestry Commission to pay out the holders for their entitlements. There are probably significantly less than one hundred holders of the right remaining. The wood is stacked beside the rides and marked up for the owners to collect. I am not sure what constituted a “load”, but today's measure is a “cord” or in other words a stack of timber measuring eight feet by four feet by four feet.

Myotonia

Those of us who have anything to do with cattle know that the unfortunate beasts are subject to almost continuous assaults by a string of unpleasant diseases, whose names usually comprise obscure acronyms like BSE, BVD, and TB, and now the latest continental import – schmallenberg virus. New Forest ponies, on the other hand, are tough little creatures, largely resistant to unpleasant ailments when in their natural surroundings, except for the perennial outbreaks of strangles which usually affect only a small portion of the population. Now, however, even the ponies are under potential attack from a newly identified genetic disease called myotonia, formerly known only in goats and dogs, but now found in New Forest ponies in Holland. For anyone interested in the technical details of this illness, there is a very informative report in the New Forest Pony Breeding and Cattle Society's newsletter “The New Forester” for December 2012. In summary, the disease manifests itself

in foals, with the animals' muscles locking up on occasions, so that they fall over and lie rigid on the ground for some seconds. They may become stiff or walk with a stilted gait and are, in the Society's words, "basically useless".

Fortunately this does seem to be a threat which may be brought under control without too much difficulty. The affected line of stock (in Holland) seems to be limited and the priority is to test and where necessary eliminate any stallions who could perpetuate the problem here or abroad. To this end the Society has drawn up a thirteen point programme centred around the testing of all UK licensed New Forest stallions.

Since this is a genetic defect and not something that can be caught, the owner of a healthy New Forest riding pony would seem to have nothing to worry about. Only when breeding from affected stock is there a potential problem. So far as the Forest-run stallions are concerned, they should be sufficiently covered by the Society's precautionary tests and the Verderers have promised full co-operation in respect of those currently in subsidised grazing provided by the Court.

Camp site survey

Back in July 2010, the New Forest Association, with financial support from the Verderers, prepared a survey of all the infrastructure in the Forest's camp sites. It covered notice boards, bins, lavatories, huts, cables and all the other paraphernalia with which the Forest is disfigured within these sites. Its purpose was to ensure that new structures could not appear unobserved and unauthorized by the Verderers, as had been happening on a regular basis in the past. It will be remembered that some years ago the Forestry Commission suddenly leased the camps to a commercial organization without any notice to the Verderers and without any consultation. It was an extraordinary piece of sleight of hand which has led to endless problems of which stealth development is only one example.

The Association's plan unfortunately, had one big drawback in that to be effective, it had to be accepted by the Forestry Commission as a true record of what existed at the time of its preparation. That acceptance the Forestry Commission could not or would not give, because, it said, the plan was not in an acceptable form for incorporation in its GIS system. For more than a year the Association seemed unable to provide the required format, but that was eventually achieved at the end of 2012. The Commission should now be in a position to give a judgement on its acceptability, but will no doubt require a few months more of consideration time. What is the status of any stealth development between the production of the plan and its final acceptance, remains to be seen. Already hideous new pea-green slats advertising the camping company have been applied to the boards at camp entrances and I have concerns about the legality of some internal sign boards as well, particularly at Roundhill.

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