

## **New Forest Notes - January 1991**

### **Grids and Fences**

The winter months when feed is shortest on the Forest test the ingenuity of Forest livestock and, on occasions, the patience of its owners. One Lyndhurst farmer has been suffering from the deficiencies of the village's fences against the Forest. His cattle, normally accustomed to fending for themselves in a quiet and safe part of the Forest at some distance from the home farm, have discovered the joys of an ill-fenced grass field. Having once tasted these delights, they cannot be induced to return to their original haunt or run and instead they hang about the edge of the village, probing its defences and waiting for their owner to provide expensive food. The importance to the Commoner of having his animals in a known and defined territory cannot be emphasized too strongly. Visitors often ask how Forest farmers ever find their stock in a common of over a hundred square miles. In fact most animals quickly establish a territory (called a "run") which may vary between 200 and 2000 acres in extent. Unless removed or seriously disturbed, they may spend a lifetime in that one area and can usually be found with a little patient searching. The disruption of a run is thus a serious matter for the Commoner.

Further difficulties have arisen for my Lyndhurst friend as his cows now occupy part of their time in testing the effectiveness of local cattle grids. Many years ago, when grids were first installed around the Forest, there was an outcry from those who said that the scheme was 'a waste of public money and that the grids would not work. Stories were spread of ponies walking across grids or even rolling over them. In fact the gridding scheme was an outstanding success, in almost completely eliminating accidents and damage to property outside the Forest. Unfortunately few private grids are built to the same standard as those on county council roads and Forest animals quickly discover shortcomings in design or construction. Various complaints from invaded property owners, risk of injury to the animal and great inconvenience for its owner are the result. The Verderers, who also often become entangled in such cases, have discovered an effective formula for resolving disputes as to the adequacy or otherwise of cattle grids in the New Forest. It is based on the excellent specification for grids on private roads and drives which is produced by the Ministry of Agriculture. If a property owner possesses a grid which conforms in all respects to the Ministry specification and a Forest pony regularly crosses it, the animal will be regarded as "mischievous" under the byelaws and its removal from the Forest can be ordered. If the grid falls below the specification, the householder is regarded as at fault and may well be liable for any injury to the animal concerned. In fact it is very rarely that an animal will persistently cross a Ministry standard grid and it is a pity that local contractors do not pay more regard to the specification which is published and readily available. Whether or not it provides for the hedgehog escape ramps which have been built into the more modern road grids, I cannot recall, but that is clearly an important addition to any well designed grid.

### **Mountain Bikes**

Under the Forestry Commission's byelaws it is an offence to take any vehicle (which includes bicycles) onto the Forest, offenders being liable to a fine on conviction. In fact the Forestry Commission has for many years permitted the riding of cycles (not motorcycles) on its gravel surfaced

roads, a concession which is no doubt appreciated by cyclists and one which, if exercised in a quiet and responsible manner, does not greatly disturb the Forest. Mountain bikes on the other hand perhaps, represent the single most serious and growing threat to both the fabric and peace of the New Forest. They are also a problem that the authorities have been singularly slow and ineffective in tackling.

Mountain bikes are designed to deal with 'off-road' conditions and are capable of penetrating all parts of the Forest except perhaps the deepest bogs and thickest woods. The sport of riding them is new and fast growing. In 1987, several members of the Review Group (myself included) had never heard of them, although we were warned of the coming danger by one member with experience of the national parks. The Review recommended that cross-country cycling should not be permitted. Now, however, on a fine weekend I should not be surprised if 1,000 or so such bikes operate illegally throughout the Forest.

Why do these bikes represent such a threat? After, all, what could be more harmless than a small family group riding quietly, along a dry, grassy path in summer? The problem is, of course, that of numbers and the style of riding adopted by many devotees of the sport. For them the rough terrain of the Forest is a challenge. The steep muddy paths and uncharted expanses of heather are there to be conquered, preferably in groups and at speed, often accompanied by shouts of delight. Even the smallest pony paths now carry deeply incised wheel tracks in which storm water finds a convenient channel leading on suitable soils, to incipient erosion gullies. Wholesale invasion of the heaths in spring, on top of existing recreational pressure, is unlikely to be conducive to the comfort of ground-nesting birds. Altogether this is a nettle that really has to be grasped while the problem remains reasonably manageable. A thousand bikes today may be 10,000 in five years time and we should have learned from the major effort which was necessary to correct uncontrolled motor access only 20 years ago.

### **Lascelles's Iron Plates**

I recently came across a party of walkers evidently fascinated (and mystified) by an iron tombstone set in the ground at the south east entrance to Pitts Wood Inclosure. This is one of a series of rare and interesting monuments erected by Deputy Surveyor Lascelles during his term of office (1880—1914). Whenever he reinclosed one of the timber plantations of the Forest, he had cast an iron plate in tombstone form giving a brief history of the wood, its acreage, the date and the initials of the reigning monarch. Sometimes plates were erected at more than one entrance (Pitts Wood has three) and no doubt some have disappeared over the years. Only those woods which were re-inclosed by Lascelles possess these plates and they include Aldridge Hill near Brockenhurst, Rhinefield Sandys and Salisbury Trench. It is sad that succeeding Deputy Surveyors did not follow his example as this exercise in practical local history has the dual merits of being completely unobtrusive, unlike much modern "interpretative" furniture, and adding greatly to the pleasure of those who take more than a passing interest in the woods.

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