

New Forest Notes – January 1992

Horse problems

Perhaps the most sensitive and least discussed problem of New Forest management is of damage to, the to the Forests fabric from horse riding. The revelation in 1987 that six hundred and fifty acres of the Open Forest had effectively been laid waste by horse riding erosion and that this figure was rising by twenty-four acres a year was met by an embarrassed silence in influential Forest circles. Damage of a similar magnitude by motor cycles or visitors would certainly by now have been the target of determined and effective action. Why is it then, that after four years and with the scale of damage continuing to grow, nothing has been done?

The answer is that, outside the Forestry Commission, a large proportion of those involved in the Forests management or able to exert influence upon it, is involved in riding, owning, breeding or hunting horses and ponies on the Forest. Fortunes have been invested in expensive property simply as a base for these pastimes and there is a belief, perhaps understandable, that any sort of control of riding damage would be the first step in the loss of longstanding and cherished freedom for private riders to use the Forest. The Forestry Commission which bears the responsibility for maintaining the Forest and controlling recreational use appears paralysed by the relatively straight forward challenge of mountain bikes and shows no inclination to grasp the much thornier problem of riding damage.

It has long been maintained by private riders that erosion damage in the Forest is the responsibility of the riding stables and the hunts and that the contribution of the individual horse owner is insignificant. Certainly there is much truth in the first part of this argument. Groups of horses ploughing relentlessly around a restricted number of routes, day after day and from one year to the next, have caused dreadful damage to areas such as Hampton Ridge and its surroundings. One after another parallel paths form as the original routes become muddy or sharp flints are brought to the surface. This is not deliberate damage: it is merely the inevitable result of the rider endeavouring to protect his horses feet from natural hazards. Hunting damage is of a different and generally less permanent character. Soft woodland tracks receive a severe pounding from large numbers of fast moving horses on one occasion and then remain relatively undisturbed for some weeks or months.

The total lack of responsibility of private riders is, however more open to question. I know of no comparative figures for the numbers of privately owned horses as against those owned by commercial stables, but I suspect that the former are in a substantial majority over the Forest as a whole. The effect of private horses is, of course, much less concentrated, but it is very considerable. For example, in 1987 nearly sixty per cent of the available grazing land in Burley and nearly forty per cent in Minsted was devoted to horse keeping - most of it private. Even a tiny establishment of say two ponies exercised three times a week for a minimal five miles exerts a pressure of 1500 miles per year. A four horse household (and there are many) with more intensive use could well produce a pressure of 10,000 miles a year.

As an average horse -borne user of the Forest myself and a long time supporter of the "blame it all on the riding stables" camp, I have recently become increasingly worried at the signs of riding damage in all parts of the Forest. I wonder if we should not now be facing up to the fact that there is a serious problem and that, like it or not, all of us who ride have some responsibility. We could, of course, simply close our eyes to the problem, secure in the knowledge that the Forestry Commission will never dare to take action and that the Forest is a large place capable of absorbing an additional twenty four acres of damage a year for a long time yet. A sensible course would be an early implementation of the Review Group Recommendations which envisaged a licensing system for riding stables but no controls on private riders. Revenue from licences would be devoted to track repair and restoration of damaged areas. Suitable routes for the stables use could be dictated in the licences.

There are also many experimental measures which could be taken to discourage use of unsuitable paths and to improve robust tracks which have fallen into disuse. In designing and implementing such schemes, the Commission would need the co-operation and instruction of those who ride in the Forest regularly and who see the problems from a horseman's point of view rather than through the eyes of an office trained recreation specialist. Riders generally (not only on the Forest) have the not always fair reputation of being arrogant and selfish. Perhaps in the New Forest we have an opportunity of proving that this need not be true and, in any case, co-operation now is a good deal better than imposed conditions in the future.

A New Market for Ponies

New Forest ponies have proved remarkably versatile over the years, their services ranging from use in the coal pits to cavalry mounts in the South African war. In depressed market conditions they have filled dog food cans and for many little girls they are a primary object of desire. In the last year or so, however, a new market has begun to grow up in which conservation minded land managers, particularly of neglected heathland, as environmentally vegetation mowers. In the Forest, of course, one official report after another has rammed home the truth that the Forest ponies are the "architects of the landscape," that they are responsible for the close cropped lawns, delicately shaped bushes, the browse line and the absence of scrub. In short they have created and maintained all those aspects of the Forests landscape which residents and visitors love without being able to explain why.

It is such subtle landscape influences which the new class of pony purchaser is anxious to introduce to various abandoned commons throughout southern England. Initially enquiries came from the North East of Hampshire and more recently New Forest ponies have been grazing National Trust land on the Isle of Wight. Now the Hindhead Commons Committee of the trust is to buy our ponies for the use for use in the Devils Punch Bowl in Surrey where the heathland has been ungrazed for many years. Costly machine control has failed adequate or visually satisfying results. The Committee is faced with the usual legal difficulties of erecting fencing on common land, but an initial twenty acre temporary enclosure has been formed and others are planned. Since the trust owns over 1,400 acres at Hindhead, there is considerable potential for further sales if the initial experiment is a success.

Holmsley Gravel Pit

The southern part of the Forest is to lose one of its most prominent but least agreeable landmarks with the closure and restoration of the Forestry Commission's Holmsley gravel pit. The pit was opened in the late 1960s to supply gravel for use in the Forest and it was established upon virgin heathland. That such by the Commission today would be virtually unthinkable demonstrates that some progress has been made over the last two decades. According to the Commission, the quality of gravel remaining unexploited within the planning permission is unacceptable and materials are now being brought in from commercial sources. The Holmsley gravel contains a high proportion of fine material which presumably makes it less hard wearing than more standard hoggin but produces an excellent "soft" riding surface on Forest roads.

Now that the pit is to be abandoned, appropriate reinstatement treatments are being considered, ranging from filling with foreign materials to a shaping of the existing pit to gentle curves and the reinstatement of vegetation on indigenous topsoil. Part of the works have already been restored on this latter principle with outstandingly good results. Whether by skill or accident, a better take of heather has been achieved than on any of the recently "restored" commercial workings on heathland in the Forest. The burying of this restoration (only achieved after many years) using contractors' waste soil or other less innocuous material would be a dreadful waste, while the time and heavy lorry movements necessary to fill such a large pit would be considerable. Altogether the shaping and careful restoration of the pit would seem by far the best solution, but far less attractive to the Commission bearing in mind the scarcity and value of landfill sites.

The closure of Holmsley raises questions as to the Forestry Commission's future gravel supplies. If materials are brought in from outside the Forest there will be no problem, but any further attempts at home quarrying would be serious. Those with long memories may recall that at the time the Holmsley pit was agreed, two other Forestry Commission sites were under consideration where the quality and depth of material was as good or better than that at Holmsley. The first was on Mount Hill at Linwood and the second at Tuff Hill at Redlynch. Both sites were then ejected on amenity grounds and it is hoped that neither proposal will be revived.

Gravel deposits in general represent a considerable long term threat to the New Forest. Deposits of "plateau gravel" were laid down in vast sheets across what is now the New Forest, by the giant Solent river before the present hills and valleys were created were created by later stream erosion. Remnants of these sheets survive on the hilltops and, where the thickness of the deposit is great enough, they represent a rich prize for any gravel operator able to acquire planning permission. Most of the poorer and thinner gravel beds are controlled by the Forestry Commission and are therefore not immediately at risk. However, the richest areas lie on the privately owned adjacent commons which are thought to be largely in the hands of the gravel companies. Gorley Hill was wrecked in the 1950s, a large part of Rockford Common and a small part of Ibsley Common were dug in the 1960s and 1970s. However, large reserves remain in both of these latter areas and the operators wait quietly in the hope of a loosening of the present tight planning policies. The hoggin (a binding gravel) which

these commons produce is a scarce and valuable resource which presence will again threaten the Forest as other reserves are worked out.

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