

New Forest Notes - January 1993

Closing the net on riding damage

Either by luck or judgement the Forestry Commission chose the right moment to launch its consultation paper 'Horse Riding in the New Forest'. It appeared just as the Forest was being gripped by national park fever and has so far received little notice or comment. Its conclusions seem to me to contain a good deal of common sense. There is for example, likely to be little opposition to the comprehensive array of ride maintenance measures discussed in the report. Similarly, monitoring and experimentation will raise a few hackles among Forest riders. Charging for licences to commercial riding establishments is more controversial, but the damage caused by such heavy users of the Forest is so blatant that even this is likely to go through without too much difficulty.

Where, the Commission's plans do start to fall apart is in the rather technical field of "liveries". A horse at livery is one kept for its owner by someone else in return for payment. In the average commercial riding establishments, most of the animals are likely to be owned by the proprietor and there will be no dispute that such premises will be liable for payment. However, allegedly to circumvent local authority licensing powers, ingenious arrangements have been made where share in horses are owned by a number of different people. Are such premises commercial riding establishments or merely fields containing privately owned horses? The Commission is evidently aware of the problem and has suggested alternative methods of charging based either on one rate for riding school horses and another for liveries, or on an annual fee based on the overall number of horses kept. However, there are shades of liveries also. The intention is, I suppose, not to charge the private owner who keeps a pony in a farmer's field, but what about the farmer who has given up agriculture and now makes a living taking in twenty or a hundred horses? At what point does this farmer become a commercial riding establishment?

The next stumbling block is likely to be the proposed "good behaviour" riding code. It is straightforward and reasonable, but its application is clearly going to be highly selective. It would be patently absurd to require the hunts to ride slowly in single file, avoiding soft wet ground, not disturbing stock, keeping away from walkers and not cutting corners! Their sport clearly requires otherwise. This makes no judgement on the merits or otherwise of hunting, but the private rider confined by the code is unlikely to feel co-operative when faced by a large hunting field galloping flat out over the saturated forest of this winter. Similarly, if the Commission will not enforce its byelaws against mountain bikes illegally on the Forest, the private horseman who is there quite lawfully may justly feel that he is being picked on by the code.

For all these difficulties I suspect that the Forestry Commission's proposals are likely to have an easy passage by comparison with the concurrent tightening of the screw by the New Forest District Council. The council is, perhaps in celebration of its new enforcement powers, starting to clamp down on the keeping, sheltering and stabling of recreational horses on land in and around the Forest. It is from such activities that much of the pressure of the Forest originates.

I suppose I have the horse keeper's instinctive dislike of any attempt by officialdom to tell me what to do with my land or how to manage my animals, but I do have to admit that the planners face appalling problems. Large tracts of formerly beautiful agricultural land have been split into leisure plots of an acre or so. These plots degenerate into squalid and ill-managed pony paddocks, decorated with shelters and stores of second-hand corrugated iron, littered with jumps, infested with weeds and frequently very poorly fenced with any original hedging barked to destruction by the equine inmates. It is this alarming and growing problem which the Council is attempting to tackle. It is a labyrinthine subject with, apparently, different rules on stables and shelters, sizes of plot, owner occupation or livery, brood mares or shod horses. Perhaps the most startling claim, new to me at least, is that the keeping of purely recreational horses on former agricultural land constitutes a change of use for planning purposes which requires permission. I am told by the Council that a ten year period of such grazing constitutes an established use so far as they are concerned, but many of the pony paddock leisure plots have a much shorter history than that. Perhaps some of those who happily advertise "house with pony paddock" are going to have to think again. Similarly, if the Council's new tough attitude is carried through, land with established use for recreational horses could come to command a significant premium in the New Forest.

New Forest visit to the Broads

Last month saw an intrepid band of New Foresters wading through the flooded reed beds and grazing marshes of the Norfolk Broads in pursuit of knowledge. The New Forest Section of the Hampshire Field Club has a tradition of Wellington boot study ranging from local field meetings to more ambitious trips such as this and based upon the promise what you can learn from written sources is likely to be rather less than half the story. The Broads administration has long been held up to us as a model of the management which should be applied to the New Forest and it was to test this idea that the trip was arranged. Over three days as guests of the Broads Authority (the national park administrators) and the Broads Society, the New Forest team studied every aspect of the area's problems and the ways in which they are being tackled. The trouble taken by our hosts was overwhelming with lectures discussions, field meetings and a couple of boat trips cramming every moment of our stay.

The outcome of such a comprehensive programme is difficult to summarize, but the team came away with the impression that the similarities between the New Forest and the Broads are remarkably few, even in the nature and extent of public pressure. Certainly a system which works well enough in controlling water-borne recreation in the flooded mediaeval peat diggings of East Anglia, seems to have little application to the woods and heaths of south west Hampshire.

The Lyndhurst Bypass

A good deal of quiet satisfaction has been expressed throughout the Forest following the publication of yet another bulky report on the traffic problems of Lyndhurst. The document describes an independent study of the subject prepared by consultants for the New Forest District Council and the Hampshire County Council. Much of it is taken up with recommended traffic management measures on the existing road network, and few of these are likely to have any marked effect on the Forest. However, the consultants have also reassessed the bypass options and their conclusions

have, in general, emphasized the difficulties and disadvantages of putting the road deep in the Forest (route 5A) while stressing the advantages of an inner route (route 6) which would be acceptable to the Verderers and other Forest bodies. The question which now faces the highway authority (and indeed the residents of Lyndhurst) is whether an inner bypass which, in the consultants' view is relatively cheap, efficient and easy to obtain, is worth pursuing in preference to yet another attempt to batter the Forest into submission on an outer route.

Dangerous Chemical?

Over the past few weeks, the Hampshire County Council has been dumping a chemical in the New Forest with potentially lethal consequences. Before I am accused of promoting a new vendetta against the council, I should say that the chemical is sodium chloride (common salt) and that the dumping comprises the normal spreading of that material on frozen road surfaces. Its dangerous properties lie not in pollution, but in its attraction to ponies and cattle. While driving across the Forest one very cold and dark night shortly after Christmas, I encountered ponies standing in the road and licking the tarmac in three different places. These motionless dark figures were quite as difficult to see as an animal crossing from one side to the other. It is, of course common to see cattle licking the roads in the winter, but this night time enthusiasm of ponies for salt is rather more unusual and presents an added hazard for motorists.

Many years ago salt licks were placed on the Forest for the use of the livestock, but the scheme had many problems and was abandoned. If accidents result from the current road salting programme, some revival of that provision might have to be considered.

Anthony Pasmore