

New Forest Notes – January 1995

The end of the pannage pig?

Over the last few weeks it has been widely rumoured that we are to see an end to the centuries old tradition of pig keeping in the New Forest. Yet another crazy agricultural directive is threatened, this time banning the ringing of pigs. The extraordinary proposal is said to emanate from the government sponsored Farm Animal Welfare Council which is debating whether or not to prohibit the insertion of ring pigs' snouts, a process at present required by law for any field or garden to which they may gain access. Anyone who doubts the necessity of ringing, need only look at the ruined state of National Trust land at Bramshaw where, during many winters, unringed pigs have obliterated the turf over wide areas. It is an appalling sight, and such conditions obviously could not be tolerated over the Forest as a whole.

The Farm Animal Welfare Council has meddled in the New Forest's affairs before, banning the hot branding of cattle. It apparently had no objection to the hot branding of ponies, but it had to come to conclusion that the hot branding of cattle was obsolete in this country. Freeze branding accordingly had to be substituted, causing great expense and inconvenience, producing no significant welfare gain whatever so far as we could see, and providing highly effective on light coated animals. The Council's alleged intention to ban pig ringing, however, reaches new heights of folly.

The pig " with a ring at the end of his nose " is about as traditional feature of English farming as it is possible to imagine, familiar to the generations of Edward Lear enthusiasts and an essential feature of every children's picture book of animals. In the New Forest, moreover, the ringing of a pig " to the satisfaction of the Verderers" as demanded by the bylaws, is a passport to an idyllic porcine existence. Equipped with her ring, the sow and her piglets are granted the freedom of the Forest. They may wander at will, collect acorns and beech nuts, wallow in the mud, annoy motorists, sleep on comfortable bracken covered banks and generally behaves as nature intended. It is unthinkable that any so-called welfare committee should consider withdrawing this passport, condemning its holderto, at best, life in a tin shed on a windswept field surrounded by electric wire and, more probably, to some unspeakable factory farming system.

In response to these rumours, the Verderers have made enquires to the Ministry of Agriculture and have been told that the matter is still under discussion and that no decision has yet been reached. The Welfare Committee will, apparently issue a consultation paper before making

recommendations to the Ministers. Any such recommendation may or may not be accepted. All hope for the New Forest pig is not therefore lost.

Echoes of a Military Past

The surface of the New Forest is scarred by thousands of years of human activity, with many of the surviving remains being incomprehensible to even a field archaeologist. However, this year(1995) marks the centenary of the two events which left durable marks on the heaths and which, in the winter months when the bracken is at its lowest, can be found by anyone with good powers of observation and strong Wellington boots.

In 1895 the Forest saw the first and the largest of a long series of military manoeuvres. His Royal Highness the Duke of Connaught visited the Forest during August with the fifteen thousand troops, occasioning great excitement and a good deal of inconvenience throughout the district. Special compensation arrangements were made for Commoners in the affected areas, many of whose cattle had to be withdrawn from the Forest for the period of the manoeuvres. Exercises were carried out throughout much of the west and north, with camps established at Millersford Bottom, Gravel Pitt Hill, Rockford Common, Black Heath and Amberslade. Mounted men, recruited locally and paid eight shillings a day, cleared ponies and other stock in advance of fire. However, the most durable remains of the visit seem to be at the headquarters camp between Winding Stonard Wood and Bolderwood Hollies. Here there is a network of banks which has never been accurately plotted, but which is reputed to be the unrestored layout of the camp. Although the origin of these banks has yet to be proved, the location of the camps is well documented. A special Ordnance Survey map was published for manoeuvres showing these features, and a copy survives among the Verderers' papers in the Hampshire Record Office. Within the headquarters camp, a prominent holly clump still bears the name Slaughter, Hollies, recalling how a bullock purchased in Minstead was driven to the site and slaughtered to feed the troops.

This year's second military centenary is of the establishment of a Volunteer rifle range on the Forest at Long Bottom near Godshill. Here, until vandals started their evil work within, the last few years, the passage-of lime had had little effect upon the firing points, machinery for raising and lowering the targets and an attractive, brick observer's hut built into the side of Hampton Ridge. The erosive forces of modern youth have now smashed the brick arch above the hut entrance and disfigured the target machinery and adjacent walls with spray paint graffiti.

Today it is unlikely that any such military encroachment. would secure a foothold in the Forest and, even if it did, reinstatement conditions would be so stringent that no trace would remain on abandonment of the works. However, there could well be a justification for trying to preserve these small fragments of the Forest's military past by restoring the recent damage at Long Bottom. Unfortunately, such restoration alone is never enough for the instigating authorities who feel compelled to plaster their work with commemorative or explanatory plaques, such as those erected by the Forestry Commission on the Forest's airfields, at the Portuguese Fireplace and at the Schultze post box at Fritham. Perhaps it is better to allow, time and vandalism to do their worst than to spoil the mystery of encountering such unadorned relics of the past during a winter walk in the Forest.

How much damage do riders do?

During the next few months we are promised the publication of the long delayed report on riding in the New Forest. It is to be the latest in a long series of studies dealing, with various, aspects of this vexed subject. However, while the report will cover such matters as who and how many ride what horses and where, the really touchy subject of damage to the fabric of the Forest by ridden horses lies outside its scope.

One seldom hears any but the most extreme views on riding damage in the Forest. On one side it is claimed that riders reduce every path in the Forest to a condition resembling a Somme battlefield, while the opposing camp seems to suggest that horses float above the sodden winter Forest, leaving no trace of the passage while forestry vehicles and walkers' feet destroy the tracks and vegetation. Both claims are equally ridiculous. As one who, unavoidably and from within the restrictions of the commission's "riding code" contributes to the erosion problem, I am perfectly well aware that horses do a great deal of damage more than walkers in all but the most overrun honeypots, but usually less than forestry operations in the Inclosures. I am also certain that much of this damage could be eliminated by some very simple and inexpensive remedial works if only the Forestry Commission took the trouble to consult local riders in different parts of the Forest. Perhaps they already do so, but if they do, there is precious little result on the ground and I cannot recall ever having met. such a consultee.

As an example of how little work is required in some places to produce a major result, a valley called Cunniger is particularly useful. A path here carries heavy horse traffic from the north and for twenty years the original level and durable route has been blocked by two gorse bushes. As a consequence, riders (me included) have created four new parallel tracks cut deeply into the heather

clad hillside. These unofficial bypasses are as inconvenient to their users as they are damaging to the Forest and could be eliminated by no more than one hour's clearance work. No doubt every regular Forest rider could list half dozen such places where minimal work could produce significant improvements. But while such works remains undone, the Commission has spent large sums on imposing riding tracks, particularly one to a large riding school at Blissford. Traffic from this school was undoubtedly causing severe damage and, although I had some doubts about the work at first, the new route does appear to have been well used, despite some rather obvious design faults.

I have a great dislike of academic studies as a substitute for action, but the erosion problem from whatever cause, is reaching proportions where a detailed photographic record of eroding tracks is required in conjunction with remedial works . The record would need to be repeated perhaps every three years and would help to evaluate different methods of repair and to measure the rate of worsening elsewhere. There was a period or periods in the Forest's past when erosion of horse routes created huge sunken ways on a scale beyond anything we see today. However, in places the first stages of such a process are beginning to re-emerge . A selective photographic record of at least part of the Forest would cost a little time and money, but it is the sort of thing which ought to be financed by the British Society or by one of the scientific or amenity societies. In conjunction with minor repair and improvement works, it could achieve much more than expensive prestige " riding routes", however effective they may be within a limited area.